The Board’s Role in Implementing a Strategic Plan

In recent years, state boards of education have come to recognize the importance of strategic planning in determining the direction of education policymaking at the state level. Strategic planning is a successive process for identifying, evaluating, and implementing long-term objectives and quantifiable goals for an organization. While the process appears logical and efficient at first reflection, boards have quickly come to realize that their reliance on multiple layers of partners for implementation can seriously alter their plan or impede progress.

Questions often raised revolve around the need for a board strategic plan if the education agency has a plan. Although it is perfectly acceptable to have one strategic plan, an agency-developed and driven plan sometimes excludes important work for a board—particularly in terms of the board’s ability to engage multiple stakeholders in developing a broad consensus around its vision for education in the state. In addition, the board is frequently less engaged in the tactical aspects of an agency-driven plan. But regardless of whether there is one plan or two complementary plans, it is essential that state board members have a meaningful role in the creation, implementation, and evaluation of their state’s education plan.

As state boards embarked on strategic planning, they began to comprehend their unique position in developing strategies for promoting and improving public education in their states. While many organizations have total control over their strategic plans, state boards of education engage in strategic planning activities that require them to combine constitutional and legislative objectives with the priorities and goals established by the board. They do this as part-time volunteers, sometimes with limited staff, and often in an environment that is politicized by competing agendas. It is no wonder that state board follow-up on strategic planning initiatives often falls through the cracks.

Thus, while most boards invest significant time in identifying a vision, a mission, and goals for education, they are less successful in their efforts to drive the implementation of specific strategies for achieving the goals. There are several factors that influence the implementation phase of strategic planning and affect a board’s ability to stay on course. Boards that seek to use a strategic planning process to design and propel their work find there are common elements for “follow through” that are critical to success. Those elements include:

- Sub-strategies with measurable goals;
- Use of a timetable;
- Clear direction to staff;
- Collaboration with key constituencies;
- Alignment of the board’s agenda to strategies and goals;
- Allocation of resources to strategies and goals; and
- Evaluation.

Sub-Strategies with Measurable Goals

Because most of the major tactics for implementing a strategic plan require explicit staff responsibilities, boards sometimes neglect to clearly define their own roles in the implementation process. Boards need sub-strategies, with measurable goals, for which they are responsible. These sub-strategies complement the major strategies that are designed to drive change in the state. When staff is confronted with day-to-day job responsibilities or conflicting agendas, the board’s
strategic plan sometimes disintegrates. When the board identifies its distinct role in implementing a strategic plan, staff and board members are able to focus on their own unique areas of accountability, and measuring success becomes more manageable.

Use of a Timetable

Many state boards and staff recognize the value of developing and following a twelve-month calendar to guide the work of the board and the department. The calendar determines the feasibility of the plan and allows for midterm adjustments as necessary. With a time line, there is no question of the board’s expectations for itself and the appropriate staff. Once a board has identified its goals, staff should be instructed to develop a calendar that reflects when the board meets and identifies tasks that must be completed for accurately measuring the goals. The timetable or calendar also allows the staff to insert those actions the board must take because of state statutes.

Clear Direction to Staff

Once the board has clearly defined its own obligations for strategic planning follow-up, it must clearly convey directions to the staff. Frequently, the board expects staff to support a new strategic direction without clearly identifying what the staff can and should eliminate from previous approaches to discharge board strategies. Distinct directions let the staff know that there will not only be a change in direction, but a change in the board and staff’s work style.

Collaboration with Constituencies

We have noted the unique circumstances of trying to implement a strategic plan while outside forces develop competing or complementary plans. Boards must involve multiple constituencies, including the legislature and the governor’s office, in the information gathering phase of strategic planning. Once that work is completed, the board must continuously communicate with education stakeholders about the progress of the board in achieving its short- and long-term goals. Beyond communication, the board must guarantee meaningful input in the implementation and evaluation of the plan.

Alignment of Agenda to Strategies and Goals

The board’s agenda is the primary vehicle for doing its work. Once a board has agreed upon its strategic plan, it is critical that the agenda be structured to reflect the priorities of the board and to accomplish the goals. Any outsider should be able to pick up the board agenda and identify its goals and priorities. Some state boards are so committed to alignment that their agendas identify the goal or board responsibility to which that agenda item is linked. This ensures that the majority of the board’s time is spent on board identified goals.

Allocation of Resources to Strategies and Goals

A critical component of effective strategic planning is resource allocation. The board must ensure that an adequate number of staff members are in place to implement the plan. Budget development and approval should reflect the board’s goals and priorities. When the board does not have the authority to approve the budget, it should use its position as a bully pulpit to advocate sufficient resources to the legislature and the department. The best way to ensure failure is to neglect to provide adequate resources for implementation.

Evaluation

The term “measurable goals” dictates that goals should not only be measurable, but implies that the board will aggressively assess its progress toward achieving the goals. While many boards have annual planning retreats, some do not take the time to examine the status of the goals established in the previous year. The reason is often a lack of a strong paper trail that reminds veteran members and instructs new ones on the goals established in the previous year. Boards should require that anyone who facilitates a board strategic planning session or planning retreat supply them with sufficient follow-up data and a strategy for providing future evaluations.