Building Partnerships with the State Department of Education

The state board and the state department of education should view themselves as partners in a single education policy leadership agency, each of whom boosts the effectiveness of the other. Typically, conflicts between state boards and departments arise over the blurred boundaries separating “policy” and “administration.”

Conflict is less likely to surface between the board and the department when the board directs long-range planning, policy review, and evaluation activities. State education departments should provide the necessary support, information, and analyses to back up these processes. The board enhances its effectiveness when it:

- Distinguishes between management and governance;
- Uses staff wisely;
- Has clearly articulated bylaws or policies on working with the department staff;
- Doesn’t overload the staff with extraneous issues or personal concerns; and
- Avoids issues that could create real or perceived conflicts.

Working with the Chief

Cultivating a strong and healthy working relationship with the chief state school officer is critical to sound policy development. The relationship between the board and the chief flourishes through open and honest exchanges. If the board hires and evaluates the chief, it must develop measurable goals for the chief to follow and annually evaluate her or him on progress toward achieving those goals. If the governor appoints the chief or if she or he is elected by the public, it is essential that the chief and the board meet early in the relationship. Such a meeting should take place before the first formal board meeting to discuss the board’s goals, the chief’s goals, issues of mutual concern, and operational styles. The board should address potential conflicts openly. Recognizing that political issues and loyalties are a reality when the board does not hire and evaluate the chief, the board and the chief must try to ensure that politics does not take precedence over good policies for education. The board chair can facilitate the initial interaction with the chief, but hearing the views of a newly elected or appointed chief is useful for the entire board. The chief will also welcome an opportunity to get to know the board on a personal and professional level.

A good board wants a good chief and a good chief wants a good board. The chief should make every attempt to:

- Support the goals and objectives of the board;
- Keep the board informed of emerging issues and concerns;
• Provide for the development of the board collectively and individually; and
• Demand that staff work diligently to support the board’s initiatives.

Working with the Department Staff

While the chief works for the board, the governor, or the populace that elected him or her, the department staff works for the chief. In some states the chief requires that all board requests to receive information from department staff be channeled through the chief’s office. In other states the chief may feel comfortable with board members dealing directly with staff. Whatever the case, the staff needs clear expectations from the board conveyed and supported by the chief. The board needs to feel that the staff is committed to the goals of the board. To develop a good working relationship with the state department of education staff the board should:

• Have a clearly defined policy on how issues are directed to staff;
• Avoid personnel and personal issues;
• Avoid issues that can be perceived as conflicts of interest;
• Avoid burdening the staff with work unrelated to the board’s goals; and
• Direct staff work toward the long range plan of the board.

At the center of the board-staff relationship is the expectation that staff will gather information, analyze and make recommendations to the board and provide alternatives. State department staff should be advisors to the board and should avoid self-serving support for positions and policies. A board should have clear expectations of the department staff:

• The board should expect accurate, focused, and timely information from the staff;
• The board should expect to be regularly informed on current and emerging issues; and
• Board material should be structured toward issues of policy and strategy.

State Board Executives

State board executives across the nation have a wide range of responsibilities, experience, and expertise in working with state boards. Despite the diversity of their responsibilities, they all provide useful and necessary support for boards. Most significantly, they can be a conduit to the chief and the department staff for board issues. In addition, executives frequently organize and direct the work of the board; they are responsible for getting new board members up to speed; and they are responsible for ensuring continuity and responsiveness to the board.

Whether it is the chief, the department staff, or the state board executive, it is the board’s responsibility to provide leadership in these relationships. The human equation will always be a factor in managing multiple issues and concerns, but good communication can help resolve even the thorniest issues.