Building Strong Relationships between the State and Local Boards of Education

The lay governance of the nation’s schools rests with ordinary citizens at the state and local level who normally run or accept appointments to their boards because of an enduring belief in public education and a sense of civic responsibility. The relationship between state and local boards of education is often perceived as contentious. In fact, state and local boards of education share a unique position in the governance of public education and often rely on their mutual values to promote educational improvement.

Although the responsibilities of state and local boards differ in some respects, the primary obligation of adopting a vision and mission to lead education in the state or the district is common among both bodies. In addition, a large number of state board members have previous experience as local board members and champion the role of the local board in the development of state education policy. As state and local boards continue with efforts to improve education and direct efforts to hold all students to high standards, it is essential that the individuals who serve on these bodies collectively use their commitment and enthusiasm to improve education.

There are a number of areas in which state and local boards can work together. They include:

- Communication
- Orientation
- Board Development
- Legislative Issues
- Media Relations

Communication

The exchange of accurate information between and among state and local board members is critical to achieving the goals of high standards and academic achievement for all students. Frequently communication between state and local boards is relegated to a staff function and lay leaders have little or no interaction. The Executive Director of the State School Boards’ Association and staff to the state board are often the most common source of communication between state and local boards. While these relationships are important, they can hinder the relationship among the members who serve if they are the only source of communication. States that have the most constructive relationship with local boards are those that have specific opportunities for state and local board members to meet and communicate. In those states, the Chair of the board and the President of the state school boards’ association meet and talk on a regular basis about common interests. Some chairs have periodic written communication to all district presidents. Others are using listserves and other forms of technology tools to interact. Whatever form it takes, state board members should have an opportunity to consistently talk one-on-one with local members.

Orientation

A large number of states and communities require orientation and training for new local board members. Although the same is not required of most state board members, NASBE strongly recommends a comprehensive
orientation program for all new board members. The issues confronted by both state and local members are extremely complex and it is misleading to suggest that anyone can assume these responsibilities without adequate orientation. At the very least the orientation sessions that are held for state and local board members should include a review of education governance and the appropriate roles and responsibilities of state and local board members. In addition to the issues specific to both bodies, an orientation for local and state board members could include a session on the relationship between state and local boards. All new local board members could be briefed on the state board’s goals and priorities and their implications for local boards. The orientation could include some time for state and local board members to get to know each other. Whatever form it takes, joint orientation activities will set the tone for a collegial working relationship among lay leaders.

**Board Development**

Continuous board development is another important practice for all boards and board members. Board development allows members to become knowledgeable about issues while cultivating boardsmanship skills. Board development is an excellent opportunity to augment state and local board relationships. When state boards hold study sessions on emerging educational issues and trends, they could invite several local board members to those sessions. This allows them to hear the same research, as well as hear the common questions and concerns raised around particular issues. Most state school boards’ associations hold annual conferences. Some invite state board members to those conferences, which have issue sessions as well as skill-development sessions. It would be time well spent if the state board and the issues confronted by the board were an annual topic on the conference agendas. State board members would be available for an open exchange with local board members. Such interaction is the foundation of constructive relationships between state and local boards.

**Legislative Issues**

State and local board members frequently express frustrations over actions taken by state legislatures that fail to recognize the agendas of these education governing bodies. State legislators, on the other hand, criticize the education community for failing to reach consensus on the important education issues confronted by the state. State and local boards that wish to exercise true leadership of public education should confer on legislative issues and identify those issues that are of common concern to both bodies. When possible, the state and local citizens who are responsible for education governance should present a shared agenda to the legislature and vigorously advocate that action be taken on that agenda.

**Media Relations**

No issue is more distressing to state and local board members than the way in which education issues are reported in the press. The need for thorough and accurate reporting on education issues such as standards, assessment results, and policy decisions is critical for public understanding of the issues. State and local board members can work with education writers, editorial boards, and public information officers of state and local education agencies to ensure accuracy. Moreover, state and local agencies can be sure that board members are not blind sided by information they read in the press before they have been adequately briefed.

Whatever form it takes, the relationship between state and local board members should be personalized, honest, and respectful. There is much more to be gained from goodwill among lay leaders than from suspicion and animosity caused by a lack of good communication and interaction.