Building Support for a Strong Board

State boards of education are made up largely of individuals who are not professional educators and who serve on their boards primarily as volunteers. Their work and level of commitment are not always as visible as that of other public servants, consequently the members of the board are frequently put in the position of advocating for support to adequately execute their roles and responsibilities. Although it would be desirable to have external support for the needs of the board, absent such support, boards have a duty to convey to the governor, the legislature, and the department of education their individual and collective needs to be effective policymakers. State boards of education need resources, development, and visibility to accomplish their goals. Some of the areas that benefit from active board advocacy include staffing needs, board and board member development, and representation on other education boards and commissions.

Staffing

Effective state boards of education have designated staff to assist them in their work. Most state and territorial education agencies denote specific staff members to serve their state and territorial boards of education. Although many go by the title of “state board of education executive,” there is wide variation in the titles, responsibilities, and job descriptions of these individuals. Those boards and board members who have access to a professional level staff person to undergird their work find such staff essential to making good decisions. Although some states have department staff who support the board as part of a comprehensive job description, designated staff assigned solely to the board can often more effectively support the board’s work and improve on what otherwise would be an amorphous or disjointed approach to responding to board needs. Examples of professional level work conducted by state board executives include:

- Developing, maintaining, and interpreting board policy and regulations;
- Planning and conducting orientation and in-service training for board members;
- Advising the chief state school officer or department staff of follow-up activities relative to board actions; and
- Conducting research and special projects for the board as a whole or, when appropriate, for individual members.

The state board executive plays a critical role in aligning the work of the education agency with the will of the board and in keeping the public apprized of state education policy development. As noted in Profile of a State Board of Education Executive, by the National Council of State Board of Education Executives (NCSBEE), “A generalist is probably more suited to the job than a specialist; however, knowledge of the field of education at the local, state, and federal levels is critical, as is the board executive’s willingness to keep abreast of current education issues.”

Board and Board Member Development

Increasing and enhancing boardmanship skills and understanding of education issues are essential and fundamental to good board service. A lack of time and resources are often cited as rationales for limiting
board and board member access to development opportunities. Such an approach is counterproductive given the fact that most board members are not professional educators and that many have full-time jobs apart from the board. The return on investing in board development is generally greater than the initial investment. Board and board member development strengthens the board as a unit and gives the individual board member the confidence that his or her decision making is well informed. Development allows boards and members to:

- Increase their knowledge and understanding of emerging education issues;
- Compare various states’ approaches to addressing similar issues and solving common problems;
- Expand their networking opportunities to exchange ideas and gain new perspectives on issues;
- Explore issues outside of the context of board meetings; and
- Mobilize the board with new strategies for promoting the board’s agenda.

Regardless of the means used, board members should insist upon ongoing professional development from a variety of sources. Informed policymakers are an asset to the chief state school officer, the governor, and the state, and their commitment should be rewarded with opportunities to increase their expertise.

**Board Representation on Education Boards, Commissions, and Advisory Panels**

State education commissions and boards should have state board of education representation to avoid duplication of efforts and seamless policy development. The system of education governance of the United States is one of the most complex in the world, with separate federal, state, and local roles and responsibilities. The system is further complicated by the continual creation of a variety of commissions, advisory boards, and roundtables that provide recommendations to education policymakers. In some instances, these bodies are created because of a lack of understanding of the roles, responsibilities, and authority of the state board of education. In others, it is a lack of confidence in the state board’s ability to move a specific agenda. In still other cases, it is a way to expand the dialogue to include a diversity of viewpoints that might not be reflected on the state board of education. Whether such bodies are established as a result of federal mandates or legislative or gubernatorial actions, the state board should advocate that it be represented on these bodies, or at least obtain a clear understanding of this new body’s relationship to the board. Board representation on and integration of the body’s work to the efforts of the state board of education help minimize the possibility of creating a contentious policymaking environment and build support for a common state education agenda.

As boards engage in the critical work of self-evaluation, it is important that they ask themselves, What are our expectations of the state in supporting the significant work done by the board? and What supports are needed for the board to be successful? No other body can define the needs of the board as succinctly and accurately as the board itself, and no other body will be aware of the board’s needs if it is not made aware of those needs by the board. State boards of education are an important element of education policymaking and governance in the United States. Their work should be supported and enhanced with the resources they need for effective policymaking.