Defining and Defending State Board Authority

As legislative sessions move into high gear, the role and authority of State Boards of Education are again the focus of debates among governors’ aides and legislative staffs. The tendency to attack governance and the role of the State Board of Education continues to be a favorite tactic of elected officials looking for strategies to show progress in school improvement or to deflect the public’s attention away from the more contentious issues in school reform. Unfortunately, shifting authority away from the Board, demanding the resignations of Board members, or abolishing the State Board of Education does little to improve teaching and learning. In fact, destabilizing the Board serves only to delay improvement and exacerbate the public’s suspicion that no one is really in charge of public education.

Throughout history, the link between citizen volunteerism and public education has been strong. In 1789, Alexander Hamilton helped organize the first New York citizen groups at the state level to administer public education. Later, Horace Mann, known as the father of public education, organized the first State Board of Education in the Commonwealth of Massachusetts. Building on the early work of these and other visionaries, State Boards of Education have become integral to the governance of public education. Board members serve with a strong sense of service and commitment to public education. They are willing to defend their role with little or no personal compensation or support for service on the Board.

State Board members display tremendous loyalty to the importance of lay governance. Thus, it is appropriate for these bodies to spend some time discussing how they confront the continuing erosion of their authority. Boards must examine these issues and incorporate support for the Board and its work into a legislative agenda and public awareness campaign. To support the philosophy of lay governance of public education there are several points that Boards and their members should reflect on when developing an effective Board strategy.

★ Understand the role, responsibilities and authority of the Board.
★ Clearly define the Board’s goals and strategies for achieving them.
★ Focus on results for students.
★ Convey to other policymakers and the public the goals, strategies and outcomes of State Board policies.

Understand the Role, Responsibility and Authority of the State Board of Education

Many Board members are uninformed about their true authority to govern education in their states. Our experience shows that State Boards rarely examine the constitutional and/or statutory responsibility of the institution as new members join the State Board of Education. As time passes, the institutional memories of members are lost and Boards underestimate their capacity to make effective improvement for schools. Too often, state departments of education staff are also unaware of Board authority or prefer to have the Board take its lead strictly from the department. Thus it is only when governors and legislators recommend changes or when Boards are on the verge of losing authority that they become aware of the true power they have. It is nearly impossible to promote and achieve an agenda for learning when a Board is unenlightened as to the policy levers it has at its disposal. Boards must fully understand and use their authority to promote school improvement. This must be done in a systematic fashion that is evaluated and modified according to changing needs of the state. At least
once a year, the Board should devote some time to educating and re-educating itself on its roles, responsibilities and authority.

Simultaneously, Boards must be keepers of the public trust. They must serve as unbiased brokers of educational decision making, using data and common sense in the process.

Clearly Define the Board Goals and Strategies for Achieving Them

Often Boards have mission and vision statements and strategic plans that are rarely reflected in the agenda and the ongoing operations of the Board. To ensure that they are working towards results Boards should:

- Develop and define their goals in relationship to the critical education issues faced by the state.
- Create Board agendas and meeting priorities that revolve around the Board’s goals.
- Review Board goals annually and transmit to the legislature and the governor progress toward meeting the goals.
- Develop a legislative agenda that reflects the statutory priorities of the Board for achieving the goals.
- Boards that hire and evaluate the chief state school officer should incorporate the findings of the annual evaluation of the chief in a progress report transmitted to the legislature and the governor.

Those governors who seek to have the authority to appoint the chief state school officer do so under the rubric of accountability. Their requests are valid when the Board cannot show that it has evaluated the performance of the department and the chief on previously established criteria. An orientation for new Board members should include a session on the Board’s goals, why the Board selected those goals and ways in which the new member can become an active supporter of the goals. Building support for the Board and its authority is more facile when the Board can point to progress on a stated set of goals.

Focus on Results for Students

Policymakers propose modifications in state governance when they believe the job is not being done. Boards must be keenly aware that their public image, how they conduct business and how they relate to one another is a reflection of where they place their priorities. When the work of the Board fails to target improving conditions of learning for all students, the merits of lay governance are lost. Conflicts are a natural and valuable part of policy development. The source of the conflict, however, should be on honest differences in ways to improve teaching and learning. They should not be based on personalities and external pressures from interest groups who have not shown a commitment to results for all students. A Board that relies on multiple data sources for making its decisions is more likely to be seen as a Board focused on results for students.

Convey to Other Policymakers and the Public the Goals, Strategies and Outcomes of State Board Policies

In spite of the rich history of lay leadership in public education, few people have the inclination to sing the praises of the State Board of Education. If the Board does not tell its story early and often, the trend of eroding Board authority will continue. It is up to the Board to tell the public and the education community why it exists, what it has done and what it will continue to do. The Board must also convey why independent lay governance is an important part of American education. At the heart of State Board actions is the commitment to providing equitable and adequate educational opportunities for all children. Boards provide stability and a long term vision for a results-oriented public education system. They are the voice of all citizens, and they are integral to the oversight of a system in the throws of constant change.