Developing an Effective Information System for Policymakers

Few people would argue against the belief that informed decision making is a critical element of effective boardsmanship. However, when it comes to developing an efficient information system for policymakers, not many states have guidelines on how and what to provide for members on the myriad of issues that come before the board. The majority of individuals serving on state boards of education are not educators, nor do they have related professional backgrounds or expertise to rely on when making decisions that affect the tens of thousands of students in their states. Thus, the information they receive must be thorough, comprehensible, and well organized, and provide enough detail to promote the best policy resolution for the greatest number of students.

The information board members receive on the issues is intended to augment decision making, but it can also impede this process. Frequently members are confronted with exorbitant amounts of information by staff who want to ensure that members have adequate data when making decisions. The quality and value of the information can vary widely, a situation that is often a source of frustration to both staff and members. Members often complain that the volume of materials received overwhelms them or is presented in a way that does not cultivate the vigorous debate they believe is essential to good policymaking. Additionally, concerns over the lead time members have to digest large volumes of information sometimes drives staff to provide too much or too little information to ensure an issue has a place holder on the board agenda. Staff must balance the need to provide comprehensive data on momentous issues and adequate information on subordinate issues, while responding to individual members’ request for information. They must do this in a way that is useful to board members and is done in a timely fashion.

Although there is no hard set of rules on developing an effective information system for policymakers, guidelines can be developed by boards that align the information provided to board members with the substance of the issues.

An effective information system for policymakers incorporates the following categories:

★ Information provided for policy development and decision making;
★ Information provided for policy oversight;
★ Information supporting statutory or constitutional responsibilities; and
★ Information on emerging issues.

An established information system can outline the kind of data and analysis board members can expect to receive in each of these categories and aid staff in preparing board materials.

★ Information for Policy Development. The most significant activity that boards engage in is the development of state education policy. Consequently, the information that undergirds the policymaking process is generally detailed and placed in the historical context of where the state has been and needs to go. It includes national and state trends, is data-rich, and establishes the base of the policy the board will develop. The information should be comprehensive, balanced, and functional. It should ultimately support comprehensive board action.
Information for Oversight. Policies that are adopted and implemented by the board contain the impetus for the information the board will need to provide oversight on its policies’ effectiveness. Boards that utilize policy review cycles can use previously agreed upon criteria for policy review in developing the prototype of information necessary for policy oversight. The information allows for monitoring policy performance and guides the board in any adjustments that might be necessary.

Information for Functional Obligations. Boards have a number of constitutional, statutory, or regulatory obligations they must comply with. Many of these issues are placed on a consent agenda because of their perfunctory nature. Although this area generally does not require the depth and breadth of information that policymaking requires, sufficient information should be available to the board to ensure credibility and responsibility in decision making.

Information on Emerging Issues. Highly effective boards are kept abreast of emerging issues across the state and across the nation. Information on emerging issues provided to board members should be enlightening, but not so detailed that it adds greatly to the overall workload of the board. Members can be provided with a resource guide for additional information that they can pursue on their own.

When boards and their staff consider guidelines for an effective information system within each of these areas, they may consider several common criteria to direct the development of the guidelines, including relevancy, balance, and timeliness.

The Relevancy of Information. There is a great deal of information available on most issues state boards are confronting. While some information may be interesting, it may not be central to the question the board is considering. The more cursory the information, the more likely the board will be to deviate in its discussion. Staff must ensure that the information that is being provided to board members is the best information available on the issue, informs the discussion, and is directly related to the issue, to the state, and to the students the policy is directed toward. It should support the meaningful participation of all board members in the decision making process and add value to policy discussion.

Balance in the Amount of Information. The more significant the issue, the more information the board will probably need to inform its decision—but again, relevancy should drive the amount of information a board receives on a particular issue. When the board is provided with a substantial amount of information, a digest or executive summary can serve as a roadmap for board members to guide them in the evaluation of the information they receive. During the period when board members are being initially informed about an issue, it is important to provide a diversity of perspectives to ensure that the resulting discussion and policy are well informed. Most important, board members should be given an opportunity to seek clarification on the information and, when appropriate, request an interpretation of the information.

The Timing of the Information. Most states have a specific number of days between when board materials are sent to members and the board meeting. When there is a large amount of information that must be shared with the board on a particular issue, adequate time must be provided to board members to read and prepare for the meeting. That could mean sending some materials ahead of the regular board mailing. Board members should not be given extensive materials at a meeting and be expected to act upon that information immediately.

Although department staff members make every effort to effectively manage board information that flows from the agency, they have no control over special interests, educators, parents, and the public who regularly provide additional information to assist the board in its work. The staff can assist board members in helping them understand the sources of information and the history behind the vast array of interests affecting public education.