Effective Use of Board Committees

One of the most commonly asked questions on the structures of effective Boards is “what, if any, committees do we need to support the work of the Board?” It often seems like a good idea to use committees, but frequently the Board as a whole feels left out of some of the deliberative aspects of policymaking. Many theorists of good board practice oppose the use of committees, fearing that the principles of good boardmanship and board cohesiveness are compromised by committees. There is also common concern that the authority of the Board is diminished by delegating Board responsibilities to the committee or subcommittee level. Although it is true that there are no essential committees for Boards and the entire Board must have ownership of its work, there are circumstances that support the consideration of committees in managing the work of State Boards of Education.

Unlike many other nonprofit boards, State Boards of Education have multiple tasks and responsibilities. In addition, its members are geographically dispersed around the state and the volunteer time available for State Board service already exceeds what is common for most other kinds of boards. Moreover, in addition to working toward their own goals and objectives, the Board’s workload is often exacerbated by legislative mandates or gubernatorial directives that must be met over a short period of time. While it is critical for the full Board to maintain policy decisionmaking authority, it is possible to accelerate the work of the Board through the use of committees.

The purpose of committees is to divide the work of the Board in a manageable way. While there are no hard and fast rules regarding the necessity of committees or subcommittees for Boards, there are guiding principles that Boards should use when deciding whether or not to have committees. First and foremost, the only way a Board can use committees effectively is to first engage in meaningful strategic planning that identifies and affirms the values, vision, mission, and goals of the Board. Once having done that, subcommittees have a guiding plan to direct their work. To avoid compromising the integrity or the authority of the Board, there are other fundamental principles for establishing and maintaining committees that support the work of the Board.

Principles for Establishing and Maintaining Board Committees

- Limit the number of standing committees and create ad hoc committees only when the work of the board deems it necessary;
- Maintain the roles, responsibilities, and integrity of the full Board;
- Keep the Board aware of the work of the committee;
- Clearly delineate the role of the committee from the role of staff; and
- Align the work of the committee with the Board’s values, vision, mission, and goals.
Limit the Number of Standing Committees and Create Ad Hoc Committees Only When the Work of the Board Makes It Necessary

Permanent or standing committees have the greatest potential of becoming entrenched and threatening to Board authority. The members of these committees are most knowledgeable about the topic and develop a sense of ownership around the issues. To avoid vesting specific issues with the same individuals, a Board should limit the number of standing committees and establish a policy that limits the amount of time members serve on a standing committee. By definition, ad hoc committees are developed to address a specific task within a limited amount of time. Consequently, ad hoc committees should only be established when time or tasks prohibit the full Board from undertaking the issue in a comprehensive manner. Boards sometimes create ad hoc committees to address issues that have become stalemated at the full Board level.

Maintain the Roles, Responsibilities, and Integrity of the Full Board

Boards face a delicate balancing act between respecting the work of their colleagues and maintaining their responsibility as the deliberative body for state education policy. Although committee members generally have the greatest amount of detail on a committee’s issues, it is critical that the final policy decisions remain with the Board. Board members are encouraged to ask questions about the process used by the committee to guide its work and for the development of its recommendations. Committee members must avoid being personally vested to a point where they are not comfortable with requests by the full Board to reconsider an option or when the Board decides not to take some or all of the committee’s recommendations. Often committees will present the Board with two options, which allows the Board to truly own the final decision. However the committee process is used, it must ultimately be prepared to present a comprehensive rationale for its work and recommendations.

Keep the Board Aware of the Work of the Committee

The Board agenda should include committee updates to allow the full Board to have ongoing knowledge of the work of the committee. Some committees send their agendas to the entire Board in advance of their meeting and invite those members who are available and have a particular interest in the work of the committee to sit in on the committee meeting. If the committee is working on something that is especially controversial, it is also appropriate for the committee chair to talk with the Board chair on the best way to ensure Board awareness and involvement in the issue.

Clearly Delineate the Role of Committee from the Role of Staff

Often committee work drifts into areas of staff responsibility, and the committee must be sure that the focus of the work supports governance and policy development, not staff work. Moreover, the committee must be cautious not to expand its agenda, adding to staff workload beyond their ongoing responsibilities.

Align the Work of the Committee with the Board’s Values, Vision, Mission, and Goals

An effective State Board develops and uses its mission to guide its work, remind the public of the legal and moral reasons for its existence, and to unite around a common purpose. This remains true regardless of how a Board organizes work. When all Board members share a common understanding of the mission and goals of the body, the committee is simply a process for achieving the goals. Just as the full Board must align its work with its values, vision, mission, and goals, so too must all Board committees.