The Importance of Board Member Development

State boards of education are making policy in an era of unprecedented change, turbulence, and technological advancement. Increasing and enhancing boardsmanship skills and understanding education issues are essential and fundamental to good board service. Few people would argue that the pace at which the world is moving requires ongoing personal and professional growth and skill development. This is as true for state board members as it is for all other people seeking to do the best possible job in whatever circumstances they are in. Most state board members have experience as local school board members or members of nonprofit or corporate boards or have professional careers that serve them well as state board members. Regardless of their level of experience, however, state boards and state board members must continue to expand their knowledge of issues and hone their boardsmanship skills to effectively serve the diverse student constituencies in the nation’s schools.

Professional development for state board members permits them 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.

Examples of Board Member Development

There are several ways board members can obtain development. They include:

- State board study sessions;
- Conference attendance and participation;
- Task force or commission participation;
- Reports and other written materials; and
- Technology or internet-based development.

★ State Board Study Sessions—Effective state boards generally set aside time during the course of the year to increase their understanding of specific issues through study sessions. These sessions may be directly related to an issue the board is considering for policy development or emerging issues that may have future implications for the students of the state. Most board-based study sessions focus on issues as they relate to the particular state and frequently include presentations by state department of education staff or in-state experts.

Board members should urge presenters to state board study sessions to be succinct and to present in a format that allows for an easy exchange of questions and ideas. Boards should also allow for a period when members can
discuss the issue freely among themselves and brainstorm about ways the board might play an instrumental role in confronting the issue.

★ Conference Attendance—State, local, and national conferences provide a unique opportunity for board members to increase their understanding of a single issue or a variety of issues. Members network with other individuals who share their interest in education issues and hear from speakers that generally do not make presentations at state board meetings. Local and state conferences generally focus on issues within a given state, or on issues’ implications specifically for the students of that state. National conferences tend to be more generic, but provide a national perspective on issues that most state boards are addressing at home.

Board members should seek conference opportunities that will allow them to network with a diversity of individuals and hear from presenters that provide a mixture of perspectives and viewpoints. Amalgamating views can provide members with a preview of the broad viewpoints that parents, educational professionals, and community leaders will encourage the board to consider when developing its policies.

★ Task Forces, Commissions, and Study Groups—State, local, and national task forces can be time-consuming activities for busy board members, but working with such groups provides some of the best opportunities to increase one’s individual knowledge about an issue, share one’s views and expertise in a particular area, and influence state, national, and local policy. These opportunities are generally by invitation and carry the potential to exert state board influence beyond the formal actions of board service. Many governors use commissions and task forces to advise them and/or their state boards. It is important that the role of the board vis-à-vis state task forces and commissions is clearly delineated in a way that meets the governor’s needs as well as those of the board.

★ Reports, Education-related Magazines and Newspapers, and other Written Materials—a constant deluge of paper can be the bane of a board member’s life, but contained in those stacks of reports and materials is a wealth of valuable information and new thinking about education and education policymaking. Board members must be judicious and savvy in deciding what is important for them to read and make mental notes concerning which organizations and individuals are the best sources for reliable, unbiased information. It is also important to continually “clean house” by throwing away dated materials and/or reports that will never make it to the top of the stack.

★ Technology or Internet-based Development—Today’s technology allows for an exchange of ideas and information through audio and video tapes, interactive CD-ROMs, list serves and other Internet-based technologies. Rapidly evolving websites and distance learning opportunities are exploding, and board members should be discriminating in how they use and evaluate information received through technology. Like any other source of information, materials and data obtained over the Internet should be validated and studied for accuracy. The Internet is a great source for information, but there is also an abundance of questionable information online that unfortunately finds its way into legitimate debates on important issues.

Regardless of the mediums 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 as board members.