The significance of the federal government’s role in supporting education is one that is frequently debated among state education policymakers. State board members faced with mandated federal programs frequently raise concerns ranging from a) the inadequate resources appropriated to pay for the programs to b) the appropriateness of the federal role in a nation that delegates education to the states to c) the fact that only seven percent of the funds that are spent on education nationally are appropriated through the U.S. Department of Education budget.

Regardless of the views one holds on these issues, two things are certain: the federal government currently spends thirteen billion dollars on elementary and secondary education and the six authorities that account for 95 percent of the department’s expenditures are targeted to areas that are of concern to state boards of education. Further, the leadership role played by the U.S. Department of Education can help to inform the general public about the needs of schools and students throughout the nation. For example, NASBE’s frequent surveys of state board members continue to indicate that the following issues are the core areas receiving the primary attention of state boards:

- Standards
- Assessments
- Accountability
- Safety
- Teaching
- Early Childhood Education

These issues are also focus areas for federal spending, and the way in which the federal government appropriates funding for education provides an opportunity for state boards to leverage those dollars to achieve the goals they have established for the schools in their states. Moreover, federal funds can be used to build capacity of state education agency staff and board members alike. Effective state boards look for ways to promote educational improvement through their budget decisions and recommendations. When boards are developing budgets or budget recommendations, depending on state authority, they should ask at least the following questions with respect to federal education funds:

- What federal dollars are available to support the programmatic priorities of the board?
- Which staff positions within our agency are supported with federal dollars?
- What activities supported and sponsored by the federal government can the board access for its own growth and development?
- What information is available from federal research efforts that can be useful in our deliberations?
What federal dollars are available to support the programmatic priorities of the board?

Although only an average of four percent of federal education funds is retained at the state level, those program funds should be directly aligned to the goals of the board and the state education agency. Over the last several years, the demand for greater flexibility in the use of federal funds has been heard, and it is possible to better leverage federal funds for state priorities.

The creation and implementation of high academic standards has consumed state boards of education and the nation at large. Boards that are concerned with the ability of poor and low-income children to meet high standards should be especially vigilant to ensure that Title I programs and funds are an integral part of their strategy for supporting those students. Title I of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA), receives the largest percentage of federal dollars for elementary and secondary education. In 1994, the focus of Title I shifted from remediation to standards and achievement and states should be interested to learn what, if any, impact this shift has had on improving the performance of low-income students. (For more information on the effects of Title I, see NASBE’s Policy Update for May 1999, “Evaluations of Title I.”)

Goals 2000 is the most prominent federal effort to assist states in the standards-based reform movement, and it has the most flexibility. State departments of education have been using these funds to support the development of standards and assessments, to provide staff and technical assistance to local school districts, and in the creation of accountability systems. In addition, Safe and Drug Free Schools funds are a resource for programs targeting school safety, and Title II of the Higher Education Act and the Eisenhower Professional Development program provide funding for the improvement of teaching.

Which staff positions within our agency are supported with federal dollars?

One of the most significant uses of federal dollars is the support state education agencies receive to help fund key staff positions. These positions not only manage the federal programs at the state level, they also help the agencies support the work of local districts and provide technical assistance to them. During the budget development process, many state board members are unaware that supporting and encouraging a different structure within the department can sometimes cushion unpopular budget decisions. When state level leaders bemoan the intrusion of federal dollars, they are often unaware of how significant those funds are for maintaining agency capacity.

What activities supported and sponsored by the federal government can the board access for its own growth and development?

Many board members are unaware that federal funds can sometimes be used to support their own professional development. For example, when NASBE conducted its study group on special education, some board members had their participation supported with federal funds. Goals 2000 funds were used for participation in NASBE’s Accountability Study Group. The premise of this support was the belief that supporting the development of board members increases their knowledge and strengthens the policymaking process. Staff and board members alike can also attend hearings and conferences that are directly related to the intent of federal programs.

What information is available from federal research efforts that can be useful in our deliberations?

The area where there is the most consensus on the appropriate federal role is education research. Whether it is the use of National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) results to understand how the nation’s schools are performing in reading and mathematics or locating information on best practices through the Educational Resources Information Center (ERIC) and the national labs, the research function of the federal government is a valuable tool for education policymakers. The advent of the world wide web has made the information more accessible and usable and board members should not hesitate to take advantage of this information.