Meeting Agendas for Effective Board Policymaking

State Boards of Education meet on a continuing schedule with an agenda that drives the content and outcomes of the sessions. To fulfill the board’s mission and achieve its goals, the state board chair and chief state school officer should construct meeting agendas that move the policy development and implementation responsibilities of the board forward.

Often the routine of setting agendas for state board meetings follows conventional practice developed over many years. But during this time, many boards have assumed new authorities. Several have engaged in strategic planning activities and developed high academic standards to improve education in their states. Yet boards have given little thought to realigning the agenda and the work of the board to conform with the board’s new strategic direction. To develop a functional agenda, chairs should focus on their board’s Purpose, Priorities, Productivity, and Roles & Responsibilities.

PURPOSE

The primary objectives of state board meetings are to:

- Advance the goals and strategic direction of the board;
- Explore and foster debate on critical education issues in the state;
- Provide for the development, review and assessment of state education policies;
- Comply with the legal responsibilities of the board as determined by statute and state constitution;
- Recognize the contributions of citizens and educators to the quality of education in the state.

The agenda should reflect continuity and purpose as it moves the board toward achieving the goals and improving education. Board members should understand at the outset of every meeting the purpose and objective of the meeting. In fact, as members review the agendas of upcoming meetings, they should be able to identify where each item falls within the noted objectives. At a glance, board members can determine if the meeting agenda is designed to use their time effectively, or to go through perfunctory exercises that have limited impact on school improvement.

PRIORITIES

Constructive board agendas are formulated to ensure that boards lead, not follow. Consequently, the board agenda should reflect the priorities of the board, not those of the staff. A substantial block of time should be set aside during the board’s time together (usually before the formal meeting) to study issues and to engage the
board in development activities that prepare members for informed decision making. Essential policy issues should be placed high on the agenda and the bulk of the board’s time should be allocated to these issues. In developing the agenda, the chair and chief should screen issues for their relevancy to the board’s long term agenda. Topics that the board should address on the agenda under the policy development requirement are determined by:

- Strategic priorities
- State or federal legislative action
- Predetermined policy review cycles
- Unanticipated policy issues brought to the board’s attention by members, staff, local policymakers or educators.

After essential policy issues are addressed, the board should focus on administrative requirements, and issues of liability. Most states have some responsibilities determined by rules and regulations. The board must attend to these issues, but they should be careful not to expend limited board time debating issues over which they have inconsequential authority. The board must also tend to issues required by its own operational policies and bylaws.

Most boards allow time on the agenda to recognize outstanding performance and contributions to education in the state. This is an important function of the board, but need not be on every agenda. The time allotted for these activities should be commensurate with the value the program adds to the board’s priorities.

**PRODUCTIVITY**

The chair has the primary responsibility for protecting and charting the use of the board’s time. To achieve this goal he or she must:

- Frame issues around governance not administration;
- Delegate routine business to committees and/or staff;
- Use committee meetings and study sessions for information exchange;
- Use a consent agenda.

The consent agenda is used as a tool for “responsible rubber stamping.” Protocol items, external matters that require board action, and routine ratifications required by law or bylaw are all appropriate for a consent agenda. The Board should have bylaws or an operational procedures manual that clearly outlines the issues appropriate for the consent agenda, the procedure for adding items to the consent agenda, and the process by which measures are removed from the consent agenda.

**ROLES AND RESPONSIBILITIES**

The State Board Chair has the important task of developing the agenda with the chief state school officer. While the chair must keep the board’s long term goals at the center of the agenda, all board members need to understand that their concerns on emerging issues are important to the board. A process should be in place for members to raise issues, have them placed on study session schedules, committee agendas or addressed in another agreed-upon fashion. The chair must oversee this process.

As the guardian of the agenda, the chair must control the allocation of time and eliminate excessive detail. Under no circumstances should informational reports be read to the Board.

Each Board member also has a responsibility to do his or her homework and support the operational policies and bylaws of the board.