Mission-Based Policymaking: A Way to Get Results

Most state boards of education have mission statements, but few have effective approaches for organizing the work of the board around the mission. Mission statements are often the result of a group exercise in which members create laudable verbiage on education goals for the children of their state. Excruciatingly painful hours are spent developing the statement, and yet few state boards try to align policy development with the stated mission. Mission statements are printed on board publications and stationery, but rarely referred to when making decisions. In fact, few boards look at the statements in the context of what they do monthly. Moreover, many boards only review the mission statement when there are enough new members on the board to reflect a change in philosophy. Interestingly, changes in the language of the statements rarely reflect the actual differences in the new board’s attitude about public education or their approach to policy development.

Why a Mission Statement?

The mission statement asserts the board’s reason for existing. For example, over the last four years, NASBE has operated with a mission to “strengthen state boards of education.” Thus, when we planned a conference, provided state-based technical assistance, or selected a topic for a study group, we asked the question, “How will this activity strengthen state boards?” If we could not succinctly answer that question, we revisited the appropriateness of the activity. As state boards develop, revise and execute their missions, they must be certain that the mission is appropriate and practical. They must be secure in their convictions that the mission is truly their reason for existing and operating.

Because the mission statement reflects why a board exists, the board must consider its unique role in governing public education when creating a mission statement. It must candidly ask itself if the mission could be achieved without a state board of education. If the answer is yes, the mission is not appropriate for the board. Using the NASBE example again, we know that other associations and individuals may engage in similar activities, but no other body or organization is uniquely committed to strengthening state boards of education throughout the nation. While many purposes articulated in board mission statements could be carried out by others within the states, it is probably true that no other body has the characteristics of lay leadership that are constitutionally or statutorily unique to state education policy boards.

Once a board develops the mission, it is important that all members of the board have a common appreciation and commitment to it. When a board collectively understands its mission, reminds itself of that mission during policy development, and asks how new policies will help to execute the mission, the singular agendas of individual board members are modified to broader goals. The fractious issues that often divide boards are addressed methodically with a guidepost mission that supports bringing compromise and closure to those issues.

Thus, effective boards develop and use mission statements to:

- Guide the Work of the Board;
- Remind the Public of the Legal and Moral Reasons for the Board’s Existence;
- Unite the Board around Common Purposes.
**Mission-Based Policymaking**

Mission statements should be short and concise. They should not contain the ambient factors for fulfilling the mission—they should simply state the board’s reasons for being. As boards establish education policies, they must ask themselves how those policies will help them discharge their mission. Board members should be familiar with the key elements of the mission statement and endeavor to make policies that are befitting the unique role of the board. While the board establishes goals that are directly related to the mission, it is the mission statement that is the foundation of the board’s actions.

Mission-based policymaking requires that a board be familiar with those policies that already exist to support the mission of the board and what timetable is used for reviewing and updating those policies. The board must also consider what additional policies are necessary to sustain the mission. The board uses the policymaking process to pursue its mission. By conveying the mission to the public and to its policymaking partners at the state level, the board advises the public about the rationale of its actions. Aligning its policies to its mission allows a board to take risks and to consistently evaluate the impact of its actions against the purposes of the board. The mission statement is the guiding beacon for board activity.

**Revisiting the Mission**

While the fundamental purposes of most boards do not change dramatically over short periods of time, the dynamic nature of education demands that the mission statement be revisited on a regularly scheduled timetable and adjusted accordingly. For example, as boards develop new academic standards for students, mission statements should convey the board’s purpose and role in assuring that all students have an opportunity to meet the standards. The mission of boards in 1998 is clearly different from the missions of 1978, as the emphasis of education has shifted from “seat time” to skill and knowledge-based competencies.

The importance of annual evaluations of a board’s progress toward achieving the goals it has established for itself provides an opportunity for the board to review its mission and assure that it is appropriate to its current role and functions. An annual review of the mission statement also allows newly elected or appointed board members to have input and develop their own proprietorship of the mission. The important thing for boards to remember is that changing the mission statement simply for the sake of change will not improve education. Changing the mission to reflect new visions and responsibilities and for soliciting input from new members should be the goal for revisiting mission statements.

**Conclusion**

Boards seeking ways to convey the value of their work to their partners in the state policymaking arena and those desiring identifiable results from the policies they enact should have a comprehensive approach to policymaking. That approach should be grounded in a mission statement that can serve as a barometer for gauging success. Mission-based policymaking is an efficient method that has demonstrated success when properly used. A clearly articulated mission is the foundation for attaining the kind of results boards continue to seek.