A Motion to Reconsider:
Education Governance at a Crossroads

The Report of the NASBE Study Group on Education Governance
October 1996

Executive Summary

The erosion of public confidence in America’s schools makes it imperative that state education governance structures and practices be examined periodically to determine their efficiency, representativeness, and effectiveness. Yesterday’s governance solutions can become today’s problems. But a top-down, bottom-up governance review can ensure that state boards are doing all they can to maximize their role in leading and supporting education reform for all children and youth.

Key Findings

Structural reform is not a panacea. The NASBE Study Group on Education Governance found that educational leadership and the quality of decision making are more important than the particular structure of a state board. Individual state demographics and educational needs are far too varied to identify any single preferred structure of educational governance. Experience shows that there are no “magic bullets” and that simplistic, abrupt governance “reforms” can have unintended consequences that create new difficulties, including administrative chaos and significant morale problems among dedicated educational staff.

What matters is quality of leadership. The Study Group found that effective education governance derives from both legal authority and intangible factors, such as the credibility and quality of board members and other key state leaders. The principal findings and recommendations of the Study Group’s work were discussed within an eight-point framework describing the attributes that any form of education governance should embody. These include:

1. A board that is dedicated to the task of education policymaking and oversight.

2. A professional administrator who reports to and takes direction from the education board.
3. A selection process for board members that ensures the board provides steady leadership, represents the general public, and is accountable to them.

4. A selection process that ensures each member of the board is a person of integrity who possesses leadership, decision making, and teamwork skills.

5. An operational process that ensures the education board actively leads with one voice in directions consistent with the goals of general purpose government.

6. A board that engages important stakeholders and the general public in continuous dialogue about education.

7. An organizing principle of granting as much autonomy as possible to the lowest possible level, as long as essential governance responsibilities are maintained through reliable methods of accountability.

8. An acceptance that the public education system shares responsibility to foster children’s overall development.