New Member Orientation

Effective policymaking is supported and nourished in an atmosphere where board members can use their skills and expertise in an effective and practical manner. No matter their position, experience or expertise, state board members run for office or accept an appointment to the board because they believe they can make a difference in their states. But whatever the diverse talents they bring to the state board of education, individuals who step into a new circumstance can benefit from development opportunities to help them effectively apply their skills to the new environment. When the educational fortunes of the state’s children are at stake, efficient and practical plans for board development are invaluable.

Although state board members generally come from among the most experienced professionals in the state, the creation and oversight of state education policies is usually atypical of any other experience. The corporate board room and the local school board have significant differences from service on the state board of education. Chief State School Officers and Board Chairs have an obligation to ensure that state board members have solid development opportunities to grow and flourish in their role as state policymakers. A well-thought-out orientation plan for new members is a vital step for sustaining a dynamic state board of education. A comprehensive orientation for new board members is essential for creating a working atmosphere that is rewarding to all board members and beneficial to the students they serve.

Department Operations

Providing opportunities for new members to become familiar with their responsibilities, the way the board operates and the operations of the department of education can help a board maintain a level of continuity while it moves forward. It gives a new member expectations for the meetings and the preceding preparations. It can also be a time saver for the member’s first few meetings. Although an orientation program will probably not tell a new member everything he or she needs to know, it will help to ease the anxiety of trying to play catch up with the rest of the board.

When a new member is elected or appointed to the board, a department staff member should meet with the new member and outline the following:

- **Who Does What** — Who are the key personnel within the department, how is the department organized, where and how does a board member get information?
- **Federal Programs** — How they are funded (formula or grant), what are the benefits to the state, what are the requirements for continued funding?
- **Budget Development** — How does the department develop its budget, how are the board’s priorities reflected in the department’s budget?
- **Legal Obligations** — What are the constitutional and/or statutory obligations of the state board?
- **What Does it Mean** — What are the commonly used abbreviations and acronyms in the state for programs and educational organizations?
The New Member’s Board Responsibilities

Most states have an executive to the board. The state board executive or other appropriate staff persons should meet with the new member to discuss:

★ Meeting Dates, Etc. — When does the board meet, what is the nature of the meetings? Are there other meeting obligations that board members have, which are required and which are optional? How are board members reimbursed for expenses?

★ Committee Assignments — Does the board use a committee structure? Are there other task forces or work groups that could affect the members’ work schedules? Is there a vehicle by which a new board member can express his or her preference in working on a specific committee or task force?

★ Policy Manual — Does the board maintain a policy manual on the operational policies of the board and on the major education issues on which the board has policies? What are the board’s mission statement, its vision and its goals? When and how the board decided key polices on major issues? Is there a formal schedule for policy audits and review cycles?

★ Paper, Paper, Paper — How does the board member prioritize the mounds of paper he or she will regularly receive? Can the member expect executive summaries of major reports from the department and other educational interests? What is the appropriate use of staff in responding to constituent requests?

★ Initial and Continuing Professional Development — Professional development for board members is critical for informed policymaking and communicating with the public. New board members should receive an overview of the current state and national education issues; training in relating to the media and the public; a listing of good resources for board members (such as NASBE, the Regional Lab, ERIC, and the most useful education magazines and publications); and opportunities for travel to conferences and other educational events.

Board Operations

Rarely does a board member fully comprehend the time commitment of board service before taking office. The chair of the board or another member should meet with the new board member to familiarize the member with board operations from a member’s perspective. A review of the following topics will prevent misunderstandings at future meetings.

★ Agenda — How is the board agenda developed and what is the appropriate way to have an item included on the agenda? How does a new member ensure that his or her concerns and issues are important to the chair and colleagues? What is the vehicle for having those views brought before the full board?

★ Principles of Board Conduct — What are the board’s principles of conduct in dealing with issues of attendance, board/staff relations and media relations and communications? Who speaks for the Board? How does a member balance obligations to various constituencies against the needs of all students?

Whatever format the new member’s orientation takes, the most important thing is to make a new member feel a part of the Board as soon as possible. It is a courtesy that the chief, the chair and current board members can all extend to new members to allow them to join the board’s discussion and decision-making process with confidence and a sense of being a part of a responsive, caring body.