An Introduction to NASBE’s 2012 State Education Governance Chart

This month’s set of new resources for members includes the 2012 edition of NASBE’s state-by-state chart of education governance information. Four states—Nevada, Oklahoma, Oregon, and Vermont—made significant changes to their respective education governance structures over the past year, more than we typically see over a 12-month time period. The impetus behind such changes varies. Through decades of tracking state education governance, we at NASBE have observed that restructuring of authority and state processes occurs regardless of which political party controls the governorship or legislature in a state (though it is much less likely to happen if power at the state level is divided between the parties). We have also seen that changes often occur to get rid of a temporary political problem—where a governor and a state board or a governor and the chief state school officer are at odds, for example. Of course, states at times use a thoughtful, inclusive process in an attempt to find a better structure. On the other hand, changes are also instigated because of the perception that the system is broken and something must be done to fix it—with governance being one of the usual suspects for causing the problems. Education governance is also much easier to change than, say, the teaching and learning that goes on in classrooms across a state.

Following is a summary of the changes that occurred in the four states cited above.

Nevada: The state board of education is going from being a totally elected, 10-member board to a 7-member board that will have a mix of 4 elected and 3 appointed members. In addition, while the state superintendent was previously appointed by the state board, that individual will now be chosen by the governor from three nominees provided by the state board. The new chief has already been appointed, while the new board will be seated early in 2013.

Oklahoma: Controversies early in 2011 between the newly elected state superintendent and some state board members who were appointed by the previous governor caused the legislature to look at a number of proposals for changing or even eliminating the state board. In the end, the major change was to significantly alter the terms of the board members. Previously, the six-year terms were staggered. The length was changed to four years and set to run concurrently with the beginning of the governor’s term. In addition, board members now serve at the pleasure of the governor—that is, members can be replaced at any time. The elected superintendent, as in the past, serves as the chair of the board.

Oregon: A 2011 law eliminated both the K-12 and the higher education boards, replacing them with a P-20 body titled the Oregon Education Investment Board. The governor serves as chair, and designates an alternate chair. As in Oklahoma, the board members serve at the pleasure of the governor. The position of elected state superintendent will be eliminated after the term of the current chief state school officer expires in January 2015. In the new system, the board appoints a chief education officer.

Vermont: A law passed in April 2012 changes the selection process for the chief state school officer. Formerly the individual was a board appointee, with the title of education commissioner. Beginning in January 2013, the chief will be appointed by the governor from three nominees presented by the state board. The position will be titled secretary of education, the secretary will sit on the governor’s cabinet, and the education department will become a state agency.

NASBE’s Study Group on Education Governance

The release of the 2012 edition of the governance chart is perhaps a good time to revisit the results of NASBE’s two-year Study Group on Education Governance from the mid-1990s.
While some aspects of education, particularly those around standards, assessments, and technology, have changed significantly since this study group met, the members’ deliberations on governance remain very relevant. Following are the Study Group’s key findings from its report, *A Motion to Reconsider: Education Governance at a Crossroads*.

**Finding One:** Structural reform is not a panacea. The NASBE Study Group on Education Governance found that education leadership and the quality of decisionmaking 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 education 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 education staff.

**Finding Two:** 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:

- A board that is dedicated to the task of education policymaking and oversight.
- A professional administrator who reports to and takes direction from the education board.
- A selection process for board members that ensures the board provides steady leadership, represents the general public, and is accountable to them.
- A selection process that ensures each member of the board is a person of integrity who possesses leadership, decision making, and teamwork skills.
- An operational process that ensures the education board actively leads with one voice in directions consistent with the goals of general purpose government.
- A board that engages important stakeholders and the general public in continuous dialogue about education.
- 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.
- An acceptance that the public education system shares responsibility to foster children’s overall development.

Two final notes: first, the latest edition of the State Education Governance chart is always available on NASBE’s website. This digital edition is continually updated as we track governance changes around the country. Go to [nasbe.org/education-issue/education-governance/](http://nasbe.org/education-issue/education-governance/).

Second, the members of the Governance Study Group referenced above represented 18 states and vowed at their first meeting that everything about education governance, even the existence of state boards, would be on the table. That after two years the members still found boards to be central to a healthy education governance framework is significant. The chair of the study group was Bob Brown of the Minnesota State Board of Education. Ironically, only a few years later the Minnesota board was itself eliminated by the state legislature, a victim of some bad publicity, several board missteps, politics and legislative horse trading, and, I believe, the board being in some ways ahead of its time. The story of the Minnesota board’s demise can be found in an article from NASBE’s State Education Standard, also at [nasbe.org/education-issue/education-governance/](http://nasbe.org/education-issue/education-governance/).

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