In its 1986 report, *The Challenge of Leadership*, NASBE recommended that state boards of education use policy review cycles to systematically evaluate the effectiveness and appropriateness of their policies. Now, as state boards adopt reform strategies to improve public education, the significance of policy review cycles has been elevated from simply being good board practice to being a critical component of accountability and evaluation of state education policies. Effective boards use public policy review cycles to provide a comprehensive examination of the goals and objectives of a board’s policies. Policy reviews examine both the effectiveness of the board’s policies and their unintended consequences.

A primary responsibility of a governing board is to engage in results-oriented, strategic planning and evaluation of the system it governs. Therefore, board policies and practices should relate to the board’s established mission and goals. The board’s decision-making process should incorporate policy reviews as one of many resources that inform debate and stimulate change. Following the adoption of new polices, rules, and regulations aligned to its goals, a board should provide for policy review cycles to assess the progress of those goals through enacted policy.

Boards that do not use policy review cycles often find it difficult to coordinate policies and show results. Moreover, outside parties that fail to understand the purposes of the board’s work frequently undermine the board’s efforts if they find it difficult to follow the board’s logic. Developing a review cycle to examine all policies puts the board’s oversight responsibilities on a manageable schedule. It also puts the public on notice that the board is not simply content to pass a policy and hope for the best.

Few would argue that time is a significant antagonist of school reform. Parents, the public, the business community and elected officials want immediate results from newly enacted policies. Whether it is the development of standards or the implementation of new assessments, the need to produce immediate results frequently subverts policy intentions before the board can evaluate their effectiveness. While there is no silver bullet for increasing the public’s patience, established policy review cycles represent a commitment to the public that the board will regularly examine all policies.

A good policy review is a candid and comprehensive public analysis of a board policy. Its purposes are:

- To improve the overall quality of education and state education policy decisions;
- To encourage deliberate, comprehensive reviews of all policy domains;
- To build a consensus among key constituencies that will ensure support for adopted policies and protect against premature policy reversals; and
- To provide information for budget planning, new regulations, and legislative priorities.

Thorough evaluations and clearly articulated timetables for reviewing state policies and their consequences provide a number of additional benefits, including:
Informing the public about the length of time it could take to produce system-wide improvement in education;
Providing the assurance that the board is making decisions based on data-driven information;
Creating a scheduled forum for opponents and proponents to present their views on the impact of the policies of the board; and
Conveying the message that no policy is forever.

The Policy Review Process

Many states use sunset legislation as a guideline for tracking the progression and impact of board policies. Whatever stimulus a board uses to regularly review its rules, regulations and policies, the board should allot adequate time to make the process meaningful. A functional policy review cycle is more than an analysis conducted by so-called “policy wonks.” It is an opportunity to learn from the past and plan for the future. The following guidelines will help a board manage both a policy review process and the necessary public engagement that such an effort requires.

- Maintain a schedule of policy reviews on every major domain the board governs. This keeps the public aware of the board’s planning cycle and allows new board members to understand where specific issues fit in the sequence of the board’s work.
- During the development stage of a new policy, request an impact analysis of the proposed policy on existing policy. By doing so the board avoids redundancy and averts conflicts and confusion down the road.
- As the board passes or changes its policies, it should establish a time line for reviewing/modifying the policy. Ensure that adequate time for implementation and evaluation are provided for the policy before it is scheduled for review.
- Appoint a committee of the board twelve to eighteen months before the review process begins to design and oversee the process. Announce the policy that the board will review and the criteria that will govern the process. Direct staff to collect and analyze relevant material to inform the process.
- Create a process for public input of the policy and the review. Ensure that every segment of the statewide community has an opportunity to express their views and experiences with the policy.
- Develop and publicize proposed changes to the policy and present those recommendations to the public for future suggestions and recommendations.

After the board has gone through this process several times, there will be elements of the review cycle that will evolve to fit the culture and environment of the state. As long as the process is understood and anticipated, the public will be on notice that education policymaking is a dynamic and evolving process in the state.