Approaching a New Policy Issue: Case Studies in Summer Learning

Every year, state boards of education address a wide range of issues through policy, from academic content standards and teacher evaluations to school leadership and supports for students in and outside the classroom. Each state board approaches the same issue somewhat differently based on the circumstances of the state, which can include the education goals set forth in the board’s strategic plan, current education initiatives in the state, the size of the state, its implementation of federal policy, and many other variables. However, the ideal process for approaching policymaking on education issues is largely the same for all boards (see textbox at right).

There are many insights into the policymaking process to be gained from observing state boards as they engage with different issues. Policymaking Perspectives is a new series of publications from the National Association of State Boards of Education (NASBE) that seeks to identify, synthesize, and disseminate such “lessons learned” from the experiences of state boards as they navigate the policymaking process.

The Context

This issue of Policymaking Perspectives is based on NASBE’s 2013–2014 workshops on summer learning that were conducted with the Delaware, Maine, Rhode Island, and West Virginia state boards of education. The workshops were supported through a grant from The Wallace Foundation and delivered in partnership with CNA, a nonprofit research organization. Many of the workshops included state and local superintendents, local board of education members, summer learning program providers, and principals and teachers interested in summer learning. (See descriptions of each state workshop beginning on page 4.)

The workshops gave board members the opportunity to learn about the negative impact that time out of school during the summer can have on student achievement, understand the role effective summer learning programs can play in preventing these losses, and explore how state-level education policy could support summer learning. The workshops were largely based on the content from a NASBE discussion guide on summer learning.

Lessons Learned on the Policymaking Process

Few state boards have taken policy action on the topic of summer learning. As a result, this issue of Policymaking Perspectives focuses on the lessons learned from the early stages of that policymaking process. Specifically, this is the time when boards are gathering and sharing information about an issue, building partnerships, getting feedback from stakeholders on the topic, and discussing how the state might address the issue through policy. The following lessons learned about the early stages of the policymaking process are based on insights from the four summer learning workshops referenced above.

Lesson 1. Utilize the Board’s Strategic Plan

Refer to the board’s strategic plan to consider how new policy will align with current goals and initiatives throughout the state’s education system.

A state board of education’s strategic plan is intended to guide policy action over a period of time...
by identifying education issues important to the state. Many strategic plans include broad goals for the state’s education system, the reasons the state should be focusing on specific areas, the policy strategies to be used to achieve these goals, and the expected outcomes. Referring frequently to the strategic plan can provide continuity among initiatives and keep a focus on the state’s direction for its education system.

One of the ways boards can align new policy initiatives to the strategic plan is to regularly relate discussions during meetings and workshops back to the plan’s goals, strategies, or outcomes.

- For example, in Delaware, the executive director of the state board introduced its summer learning workshop with a brief description of the vision for the education system as set forth in the board’s strategic plan. She then asked attendees to think about how summer learning could support the board’s vision in areas such as developing high-performing schools and fostering 21st-century skills in students.

- In Rhode Island, board members discussed how summer learning could be a strategy to address the achievement gap, an education priority within the state.

- In Maine, a core goal of the state is gradually implementing a competency-based model that advances students based on performance rather than by seat time. Because summer learning programs often use experiential and applied learning strategies, board members discussed the natural link between summer learning and competency-based learning that could enable students to advance in their studies year round.

Making these connections helps integrate the goals of a board’s strategic plan into all aspects of its practice. NASBE’s *Boardsmanship Review* titled “The Board’s Role in Implementing a Strategic Plan” provides additional guidance on other ways to incorporate a strategic plan into board practice. It is available at [www.nasbe.org/wp-content/uploads/Boards_Role_Implementing_Strat_Plan_07.06.pdf](http://www.nasbe.org/wp-content/uploads/Boards_Role_Implementing_Strat_Plan_07.06.pdf).

**Lesson 2. Foster Stakeholder Engagement**

Purposefully engage stakeholders in a variety of ways during the policymaking process.

District leaders, principals, teachers, higher education representatives, business people, parents, and students can all provide valuable feedback on topics that a board is considering. Feedback can come in a variety of forms. For example, a board may provide public comment periods on new policies, or it may proactively attend local school board meetings or conduct a “listening tour” around the state to understand local issues. Such actions can also be part of a two-way communication strategy that helps the public understand the board’s efforts. Whatever method a board uses to engage stakeholders, each communication strategy should identify why the board wants to engage that stakeholder group and how the information will be used to inform the policymaking process.

The workshops in Delaware, Rhode Island, and West Virginia offer examples of some of the strategies state boards can use to collaborate with individuals and groups to gain valuable feedback.
• In Delaware and Rhode Island, stakeholders had the opportunity to discuss summer learning issues with board members in small groups. Each group had a mix of board members, program leaders, principals, and teachers. The small size of both states allowed their boards to use the workshops as an opportunity to engage with stakeholders at an individual level.

• In West Virginia, the summer learning workshop was scheduled as part of a West Virginia School Boards Association meeting. The workshop was a first step in helping the state board understand the issues local boards were dealing with in summer learning. At the same time, the state board is aiming to be a model for local boards in terms of conducting meetings and engaging with stakeholders. Gayle Manchin, president of the state board of education (and a past president of NASBE), discussed the relationship the state board envisioned with local boards. She mentioned that the workshop was one of many opportunities for the state and local boards to collaborate.

Different strategies can elicit different kinds of information from stakeholders, such as what is going on in the state, expert opinion, or general concerns. Therefore, it is important for boards to have a variety of ways to gain feedback from stakeholder groups.

Lesson 3. Define Overarching Education Values and Principles

Connect discussions about particular topics with the board’s overarching principles, values, and strategies across the education system.

Throughout each workshop, there was a discussion of summer learning in the context of the state’s larger education system. These discussions gave board members the opportunity to reflect on what they had learned and to relate this to the principles and goals the boards have for education overall. For example, support for students when they are in the classroom might differ from support for students when they are outside the classroom, but most states have identified personalized support to students as something they value. Identifying a board’s foundational values and integrating them into all aspects of its policy work can help a board keep a consistent direction for education in the state.

• In Rhode Island, for example, the discussion about evaluations of summer learning programs evolved into discussions about the essential components any evaluation system might want to include. Workshop participants discussed the importance of having both quantitative and qualitative measures of such programs, such as student achievement scores along with descriptions of student engagement and social and emotional learning. While it might be difficult to apply some of these evaluation elements to any new policy, the Rhode Island participants concluded that having an evaluation system with multiple measures is an important principle. Robust evaluations provide a more complete picture of what is happening in programs, which is in line with the state board’s holistic view of the education system.

State boards are designed to provide policy stability and direction for a state’s education system as a whole. As boards craft new policies to support students and educators, it is important they understand what principles and values underlie their policymaking. Similar to a strategic plan, principles and values should guide a board’s actions across issues and over time; boards, therefore, should make sure they are clear about what their core beliefs are as they consider, develop, and re-evaluate policies.

Conclusion

Each state board of education addresses issues based on the needs and context of its state. As described here, the workshops gave four state boards the opportunity to take first steps in the policymaking process around summer learning, including finding out more about the issues to consider in summer learning and discussing what an appropriate state policy role might be to support students during the summer. A board’s strategic plan and underlying values and principles for education should help guide discussions on any topic in education. In addition, understanding the perspectives and concerns of stakeholders who could be affected by potential policy action can both enrich a discussion and build stronger ties with stakeholder groups. While each workshop was unique to the needs of the particular state, the lessons learned illustrated that the policymaking processes state boards across the country use are similar and can be applied to board practice in any state.
This section provides information from the series of workshops about summer learning hosted by NASBE and CNA in 2013 and 2014. Each example shows a board’s first steps in policymaking and program implementation related to summer learning, but offers themes and lessons applicable to a wide variety of other topics.

Delaware Workshop — Engaging stakeholders from across the state

The Delaware workshop, held in early December 2013, paired discussion of summer learning with a presentation on “deeper learning,” which is an area of emphasis for education in the state. Deeper learning requires students to move beyond comprehension and application of knowledge to analysis, synthesis, and creation of content. In addition to the board members in attendance, the workshop included a state chief academic officer, teachers, and summer learning program providers.

Challenges and considerations discussed at the workshop about summer learning included:

- Implementing summer learning programs, given the context in Delaware—Many workshop participants said that Delaware’s situation as a small state could be a strength when developing and implementing summer learning programs statewide. The close proximity of school districts to one another and to the state department of education, participants thought, could facilitate better collaboration and coordination among programs. In addition, the state could more easily disseminate information about quality summer learning programs. Given these circumstances, participants said, it might be possible for all programs in the state to integrate elements of effective practice.

- Understanding how to reorganize funding to support summer learning—Similar to discussions in the West Virginia workshop, funding was a concern for Delaware stakeholders. Among the first questions attendees asked were How much does it cost to implement a quality summer learning program? and Where can we get guidance on how to fund such programs? Despite noting the importance of summer learning, many attendees in the workshops viewed summer learning as an add-on needing money that would be “in addition to” current education funding.

- Learning more about examples of policy action and exemplary programs—Throughout the workshop, the facilitators polled attendees about their interests in order to customize the workshop discussions. The two most common responses were 1) to find out more about what other states and districts are doing to support summer learning through policy and 2) to learn about summer learning programs that have demonstrated excellence. Similar to what was said during the Maine and West Virginia workshops, stakeholders were interested in seeing existing models of how to approach summer learning through policy.

Maine Workshop — Developing a vision for summer learning

The Maine summer learning workshop was conducted as part of the Maine State Board of Education’s (MSBE) strategic planning retreat in August of 2013, during which the board prioritized issues to consider for the upcoming year. Since Maine is just beginning the policymaking process around summer learning, board members wanted to gather as much information about this topic as they could in order to understand what the policy role might be for the state.

Challenges and considerations discussed at the workshop about summer learning included:

- Establishing a vision for summer learning—One MSBE member noted that summer learning is not an area the board has acted on in the past. The board members were unsure what actions the state could or should take to support summer
learning. After participating in the workshop and gaining a better understanding of summer learning issues, one board member mentioned that one of the next steps should be to establish a vision for how summer learning fits into Maine’s education system, so the board could identify appropriate outcomes and goals for such an initiative.

- **Wanting to learn about policy action in other states**—Given the lack of previous policy action in Maine around summer learning, board members were very interested in learning as much as they could about policy actions in other states they might draw from. They were particularly interested in the details of how Rhode Island integrated support for summer learning into its basic education plan, an example of state-level policy action that facilitators provided in the Maine workshop. The members also asked whether any guidance was available to local districts on how to integrate summer learning into schools.

- **Using summer learning as a way to meet competency-based education goals**—One of Maine’s education goals is to move toward a competency-based model that advances students based on performance rather than by seat time. Given the experiential and applied learning strategies often used in summer learning programs, board members posed the question of how summer learning could advance Maine’s competency-based objectives. In particular, the board members discussed whether summer programs could integrate competency-based learning, so that students could continue to advance in their studies year round.

**Rhode Island Workshop — Scaling up summer learning in the state**

The Rhode Island State Board of Regents’ summer learning workshop was held in February 2014. Rhode Island is one of the few states that has taken policy action in this area, and it has a robust network of summer learning programs offered through a variety of partnerships across the state.

There were approximately 20 workshop attendees, including more than half the state board members, a representative from the Rhode Island Department of Education, summer learning program leaders, local school board members, principals, and teachers. Given this context and audience, much of the discussion during the workshop focused on improving existing summer learning programs and bringing these programs to scale across the state.

Challenges and considerations discussed at the workshop about summer learning included:

- **Developing quality summer learning programs throughout the state**—Rhode Island’s network of summer learning programs includes, for example, the Hasbro Summer Learning Initiative, which serves more than 1,500 students in 11 communities in Rhode Island each summer and is a public-private partnership between the state, the United Way, and the Rhode Island Afterschool Plus Alliance. Another program, the AfterZone Summer Scholars Camp, was developed by the Providence After School Alliance and supports more than 700 middle school students in Providence each summer.

Despite the prevalence of these programs, according to an Afterschool Alliance report only about one-third of Rhode Island students participate in summer learning programs.1 Further, it is uncertain whether all of the programs integrate elements of effective practice. Summer learning program coordinators noted that they want to expand their summer learning programs, but need support from the state to do so. They also want to make sure expansion incorporates elements of high-quality summer learning, so their programs can increase their positive impact on student outcomes.

- **Developing comprehensive evaluations for summer learning programs**—One recurring question that surfaced during the workshop was how to effectively evaluate summer learning programs in a comprehensive and balanced way. At their best, summer learning programs provide the opportunity for students to explore a variety of content areas through engaging, hands-on experiences. Workshop attendees were unsure, however, what qualitative and quantitative measures could assess outcomes while at the same time capturing the essence of these activities and practices.
Workshop facilitators noted that academic achievement was but one outcome that a summer learning evaluation system should want to measure. Other outcomes worth measuring include social and emotional growth and development of critical thinking and collaboration skills.

West Virginia Workshop — Collaborating with local school boards

The West Virginia summer learning workshop in November 2013 was a collaboration between the West Virginia State Board of Education and the West Virginia School Board Association. The primary goal of the workshop was to provide contemporary research on summer learning issues and begin a dialogue between the state board and local boards on the topic. The workshop had more than 100 attendees from across the state, including the president of the state board, district superintendents, and local school board members.

Challenges and considerations discussed at the workshop about summer learning included:

- **Understanding how to reorganize funding to support summer learning**—Funding for summer learning was the chief concern for many local board members. Many of the effective elements of summer learning programs, such as hiring certified teachers or evaluating programs, are hard to implement without state or federal funding. Local board members were interested in receiving guidance on how smaller districts could reallocate local funding to achieve outcomes similar to those seen by larger districts.

- **Communicating and collaborating with local summer learning programs**—There are many summer learning programs in place across West Virginia. Several board members noted that school boards need to become better informed about community-based summer learning programs that reside within their districts. By doing so, districts and these programs could find ways to partner around summer learning.

- **Learning more about examples of effective rural summer learning programs**—Local board members were interested in hearing about summer learning programs that implemented effective practices in different settings. Many of the examples provided during the workshop were large-scale programs in urban contexts; board members also wanted to hear about programs and strategies that succeeded in rural education settings similar to many places in West Virginia.


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