Quality and Stability in State Education Leadership

Newly enacted federal legislation calls for “annual yearly progress” for students over the next twelve years. The legislation underscores that school improvement is a long term process—and that it is a process that must include every student. As states begin to implement the requirements of this new law, quality and stability become an overarching requirement in state leadership to ensure that states enact sound policies, give policies adequate time for implementation, and integrate policy review and oversight procedures to determine the efficacy of those policies.

State Board Turnover

By virtue of overlapping and multiple terms, there is fairly strong stability on state boards of education. In recent years, however, the lengths of time individuals remain on boards has decreased substantially. The reasons for the decline vary. Frequently, board members are overwhelmed by the time and work commitment of what is essentially civic volunteerism and decline a second term or, in some instances, resign before the term is completed. At the same time, more attention has been paid to some state board elections in the thirteen states with elected bodies, resulting in increased turnover among elected board members. In addition, when new governors are elected, many do not reappoint individuals appointed by their predecessors, changing not only the composition of the board, but sometimes its philosophy and policy direction as well.*

State board of education stability is also not always protected by specified terms of service. Some governors have asked for, and received, the resignations of entire boards—irrespective of the status of their terms—and then appointed all new individuals to the board. Sometimes legislatures will reconstitute the state board, as has happened in Massachusetts, Ohio, Illinois, and Florida in recent years, leading to a partial or total set of new sitting board members. In other instances, legislatures or governors have developed commissions to do what is essentially board work, confounding local education agencies that may be trying to understand where authority truly lies for state-based policymaking. Uncounted conflicting messages and policies filter down to local districts, leaving them with little guidance to adequately implement state education policy and forcing them to choose between contradictory practices. Such actions have frequently led to a “this too shall pass” attitude among skeptical education professionals who have become resistant to newly enacted reform policies and strategies, leaving parents and students to question the validity and purpose of some state education policies. The implications of the new federal No Child Left Behind Act demand that a clear focus on where the state is going be regularly articulated and maintained, even when there are changes within the board.

Chief State School Officer Turnover

Over the last few years, several studies have examined the high turnover rate among superintendents at the local level. Although changes in leadership at the state level are not considered to be occurring as frequently as they are at the

* The National Governors’ Association is estimating that at least 20 and perhaps 25 new governors will take office after the 2002 elections, due to term limits, governors declining to run for another term, or hotly contested races that will lead to the unseating of an incumbent. Look for this to have a significant impact on state board member turnover in the next one to three years.
local level, the state superintendent turnover rate has increased in recent years, impacting agency stability and generating implications for state education reform. The increase is greatest among the ten states in which governors appoint the chief state school officers: the average tenure for governor-appointed chiefs is only 2.9 years. The frequent turnover not only affects the work of the state education agency, it impacts the board/chief relationship and the development of education policy as well.

Fifteen states elect the chief state school officer. Turnover is somewhat limited by virtue of a guaranteed term of office; here, too, however, there is evidence of an increase in the turnover rate, with an average tenure of 4.8 years (and one or two superintendents with exceptionally long tenures make even this average appear longer than is usually the case). An increase in state legislation implementing term limits requires that some chief state school officers be limited to two terms. The politicized nature of the position forces an individual to raise money and spend time campaigning to retain the position. In partisan contests for the position, an individual must sometimes pass party-muster to be reconsidered for the ballot at the conclusion of the term. Over the years, the relationship between elected chiefs and state boards of education has ranged from highly effective to combative, useless, and non-productive. When the relationship between the chief state school officer and the state board of education is reliant on personalities rather than a sound governance foundation, the variance in the relationship can leave a board powerless in its efforts to contribute to education reform.

Twenty-five states have superintendents who are hired and evaluated by the state board of education. There is still strong evidence of stability at the agency level under this structure, but over the last few years there has been an increase in turnover in this governance structure as well, with the average tenure at 4.2 years. While it is not possible to de-politicize education at the state level completely, the appointed superintendency avoids the practice of putting the position clearly in the middle of the political process. The board can, and should, establish a set of expectations for the commissioner or superintendent and measure his or her performance based on a set of predetermined criteria. Historically, governance structures with board appointed superintendents have lead to a greater stability of the system, a better working relationship with the state board of education, and more focused leadership at the department of education. Having a governance structure that facilitates stability as well as accountability is more likely to be focused on student outcomes.

In this era of standards-based reform and accountability, an examination of state capacity to provide stable leadership and guidance becomes a critical issue for state boards of education, chief state school officers, governors, and state legislatures. The board has the primary responsibility for staying the course on policy development, while the chief has the responsibility for policy implementation. Regardless of the method of selection of the chief state school officer, boards need to be advocates for quality and stability in state education leadership.

What Boards Should Do

★ State boards should advocate and support stability on the board and in the position of chief state school officer with the governor, to the legislature, and in the community.

★ Boards that hire and evaluate the chief state school officer should conduct an annual and constructive evaluation of the commissioner or superintendent to ensure that the board is providing the chief with the support and direction needed for educational leadership.

★ Boards should engage in a self-evaluation process to ensure that their work is focused on results that will demonstrate the value of stability and provide continuity as the board turns over.

★ Boards should develop constructive communication strategies to facilitate good working relationships with all state education policymakers, including the governor, the legislature, and the chief state school officer.