At almost every level of education, experts emphasize the importance of teamwork: Teachers working with other teachers. Students working in groups. Principals mentoring principals. Schools partnering with businesses and community organizations. A natural extension of these efforts then is for state agencies to seek partnerships with other agencies and groups. The current economic climate that has brought cuts in state and federal aid for education only serves to accentuate the need for joint projects and cost-sharing. State boards are in an ideal position to adopt policies and take other actions that encourage or direct officials and project officers in their education departments to actively pursue partnerships with their peers working in other agencies.

This Policy Update examines several reasons that interagency partnerships need board support as illustrated by examples where such ventures have paid off at the state level and are simply required for participation in a federal program.

While it may seem obvious that every partnership should have a goal, in reality goals are often too broad or too fuzzy, and don’t provide enough direction to the partners. At the same time, patience is vital, as not every partnership pays immediate dividends. For example, in West Virginia’s recently approved Common Ground Partnership the goal is to cut the dropout rate statewide; for now there are no concrete plans on how to achieve that goal. What makes this plan unique is its expanse, as more than just two partners are involved. Rather, the State Board of Education approved this initiative that connects it to not only the state education department, but also to the Higher Education Policy Commission Department of Defense Joint Forces in West Virginia, the West Virginia Wing Civil Air Patrol, Operation Military Kids, and the West Virginia Congress of Parents and Teachers, Inc. Each organization or agency has representatives to the partnership who can bring ideas to the collective and, respectively, bring them back to their own boards.

“For the first time, we have all been working together,” said State Board of Education member Priscilla Haden. “(The partnership) has helped to open communications among us.”

Sometimes partnerships are required just to get programs funded. Such is the case with the U.S. Department of Education’s Promise Neighborhoods grant competition. Joe Conaty at the Department explained that different kinds of grants require different types of partnerships. In the case of Promise Neighborhoods, requirements for interagency partnerships and building “communities of practice” are sprinkled throughout the program’s Federal Register notice. Such unions must be designed to support a continuum of solutions for improved learning that stretches from schools to their surrounding neighborhoods. The Teacher Incentive Fund grants attached to the 2009 stimulus package carried similar mandates for broad-based buy-in among state agencies and external organizations, including teachers’ unions and local school boards.

Conaty also explained that usually when partnerships are required for federal grant eligibility, those call for interagency relationships. Sometimes after grants are awarded, as in the case of the Race to the Top competition, interstate cooperation is encouraged, but not required.

From Idea to Execution

As previously stated, partnerships need to be supported across the spectrum of education issues, and the arenas of early childhood education and student health and health education especially lend themselves to interagency collaboration. Three examples of successful state collaborations are provided below. Not coincidentally, these state partnerships were also linked to efforts undertaken as part of their receipt of NASBE grants and the technical assistance they received to further this work.

Georgia, for instance, used NASBE’s Early Childhood Network when it started to develop its now-renowned early childhood education system. According state board Chair Wanda Barrs, leaders in several areas of state governance understood that they needed to move beyond their own silos and approach the development of an aligned pre-k–grade 3 system holistically. The coming together of agencies was necessitated by a state law that created the Department of Early Care and Learning (DECAL) to coordinate and operate the state pre-k program.
To facilitate the coordination of efforts required, then-Gov. Sonny Perdue established the Alliance of Education Agency Heads. This brought together the chiefs from the state Education Department, the Student Finance Commission, the Board of Regents from higher ed., the Technical and Adult Education Department, DECAL, the Professional Standards Commission, and a representative from the governor’s staff.

Georgia state board member Larry Winter, who participated in early organization meetings, noted how staff members from DECAL and the education department had no idea what their peers were doing before they came together. “There is a culture of collaboration in Georgia education agencies now—and collaboration is more than just a word, it’s a philosophy of how to best serve the students of Georgia,” Barrs said in a 2008 interview in NASBE’s State Education Standard. (For more of the interview and other early childhood articles in the Standard, go to http://bit.ly/vKmT0C.)

The collaboration between Kentucky’s Health and Education departments starts at the top, according to health education personnel in each department. Jamie Sparks, director of the Coordinated School Health Project at the Department of Education, and Victoria Greenwell, administrator of Coordinated School Health in the Health Department, said the bonds between them are enhanced by the cooperative relationship between their respective agency chiefs. That rapport recently resulted in a joint letter from the commissioners encouraging all the state’s schools to adopt tobacco-free health policies.

In any hierarchical organization, the culture is naturally set by its leaders and filters through the ranks. Likewise, Sparks and Greenwell said any policy goals they cooperatively want to realize must first be modeled by them for project officers at the county and local levels. Crucial to this comity is their understanding of what expertise and experience each brings to the table.

Sparks explained that the sheer level of bureaucracy facing local administrators and teachers looking “up” the hierarchy can be daunting, but the shared vision for health education and guiding policies resonates with those officials. “The way we look at education in Kentucky is different from most states. We place a lot of emphasis early in the process to include public health in what we do.”

The longstanding partnership between Michigan’s Department of Community Health (DCH) and the Department of Education (DOE) also exemplifies what can be accomplished by developing strong interagency relationships. According to Shannon Carney Oleksyk, the Childhood Obesity Team leader at DCH, the partnership was cemented with shared work on the health education curriculum in the 1980s.

Since then, it has only gained strength. In fact, the agencies routinely jointly seek grants, including the Community Transformation Grant from the federal Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, said Kyle Guerrant, supervisor of the DOE’s Coordinated School Health & Safety Programs Unit. Further, the partnership includes united examination of staff capacity to meet common ground.

Of particular note was their joint work on nutrition standards, which were adopted by the state board of education. Using federal stimulus funds, the developed a team and launched a pilot program in three school districts to help them comprehensively implement the standards when and wherever food is offered and/or sold. “I think we all realize we wouldn’t have had the level of success or reach we enjoy if we didn’t pool our resources,” Guerrant said.

As Oleksyk explained, the standards training trickled into community and family education and developed a movement toward better nutrition in the districts. Taking things another step, the team also better learned how local officials work to overcome challenges they faced and ultimately made it cost-neutral for the districts to implement the standards.

Guerrant stressed that having the state board’s support has been critical. “We have been very fortunate to have the support of our state board of education members. I think they have done a good job in being engaged, and in their willingness to share their resources.”

Oleksyk added that flexibility is vitally important when developing partnerships, as well as a rapport that allows partners to push each other when necessary. Further, partnerships cannot simply be thought of as occurring at the state level. Rather, she said, partnerships need to be thought through to the local level.

“We’ve learned as we share information with other states about working collaboratively,” she said. “I am always surprised [agencies] don’t (partner) more. Schools then receive a unified message.”