Sharing Power: The Growth of Education Policy Boards

Task forces, external committees, and advisory boards have long been on the landscape of education policy development. However in recent years the growth and expansion of these bodies have, in some states, resulted in a dilution of state board of education authority and a confusion of what the board’s relationship should be to these various panels. How a state board relates to these bodies and works with them is determined by several factors:

- Who appoints the body?
- What are the responsibilities of the body?
- Is the body temporary or permanent?
- What is the state board’s official relationship to the body?

Background

Most state education committees and task forces beyond the state board of education are appointed by the legislature, the governor, or the state board itself. In addition, the growing interest of the business community in education issues in recent years has increased the number of ad hoc education committees in organizations such as the Chamber of Commerce and the Business Round Table. The establishment of an external committee, task force, or advisory body can be a tremendous asset to a state board of education, especially when the board determines there is a need to examine an issue in a context outside of customary board operations. Through appointed committees or task forces, the board can involve diverse populations in its work and satisfy a wide range of constituents who have an interest in participating in policy development regarding a particular topic. In Kentucky, support from a business group, the Pritchett Committee, informed the public and legislature about the importance of school reform and gave the state board of education added ammunition for its reform agenda. Moreover, given the voluntary nature of state board memberships, an advisory body can absorb some of the burden of time board members must commit to a thorough examination of an issue.

Who Appoints the Body?

A committee or advisory group appointed by the state board of education has the strongest connection to the board, and the board generally defines the relationship in the context of its own authority. Frequently, when the legislature establishes a committee or advisory group, it leaves the appointment of the members of such bodies to the state board of education. As with board-established committees and task forces, these groups are more likely to support and enhance the work of the board. Unfortunately, some bodies are created because of a fractious relationship between the board and the governor or the board and the legislature. Others, like some teacher licensure boards or independent standards boards, are established because of strong lobbying efforts by special interests groups. These bodies are by nature designed to circumvent or replace the work of the state board of education, or to send a message that the legislature or the governor is not satisfied with the work of the board. When such bodies are established, the board must determine if its performance prompted the action, or if the creation of the body reflects changing attitudes around education governance irrespective of the board’s work. Such a self-examination by the board will define how it should respond to the new body and integrate its work with this group’s issues.
What are the Responsibilities of the Body?

The most fundamental question a state board should ask at the establishment of a new task force, board, or committee is, What are the responsibilities and authority of the body? If the body has been created by the state board of education, the responsibilities should be clearly debated and delineated within the board. All members of the board should share a common understanding of the role and responsibilities of the body before it begins its work. Concurrently, the appointees of the group must also be clear on the body’s mission, its responsibility to the state board, and the state board’s expectations of the body’s work. The state board must be vigilant not to abdicate its policymaking authority to an advisory body. At the same time, the board must convey to the body that its work is valued and useful in the board’s policymaking responsibilities.

In the case of groups created by the legislature or appointed by the governor, the board should offer recommendations on the group’s responsibilities and convey to the governor or legislative leadership what areas of the fledging panel’s proposed domain are more appropriate to board authority. Boards should avoid a reactionary stance toward the creation of these groups. Rather, a board should find ways to support the interests of the governor and legislature in its own work, thereby reinforcing the work of the committee or task force.

Committees and task forces established or supported by the business community or by interest groups generally lack statutory or legislative authority but frequently have significant influence on the policymaking process. They often become de facto policymaking bodies that appear to show more initiative than the state board of education because they are not confined by state laws or regulatory responsibilities. The state board should convey its goals and objectives to these groups and invite them to share their concerns. This provides the board with an opportunity to build a positive and supportive ally, rather than a competitive adversary.

Is the Body Temporary or Permanent?

The power and authority of a body is directly related to the way in which it is appointed, the responsibilities it holds—and the duration of its existence. Permanent advisory boards tend to hold more authority than issue-specific task forces, study groups, or committees. Moreover, an entity of this kind often justifies its existence by seeking to expand its influence and authority. A board that creates auxiliary groups should be careful to limit their duration, lest the board surrender some of its authority and power to the body. When a permanent body is established, the state board of education should develop a strategy for working with the group that ensures complementary rather than competitive activities and agendas.

What is the Board’s Official Relationship to the Body?

Frequently, state education advisory groups and task forces are created without a clear articulation of what that body’s relationship is to the state board of education. As such panels and commissions are being developed, the board should advocate a precise relationship between the board and the body. This can be done by having a specified number of state board members serve on the task force or requiring that the work of the task force be ratified or approved by the state board. By doing this, the board can maintain awareness of what these groups are doing, present and incorporate the state board of education view point, form a voting bloc that protects the authority and integrity of the board, and promote the perception that these panels are augmenting the state board’s authority rather than replacing it.

Conclusion

The current interest in public education is not likely to disappear in the near future. Thus, the desire to be engaged in meaningful work that influences education is shared by a growing number of individuals and organizations. It is critical that state boards of education demonstrate effective, measurable leadership in education policymaking or face the possibility of diminished authority. It is equally important that state boards embrace wide and diverse views to ultimately strengthen the significance of lay leadership in public education.