Soliciting Public Input

The drive to establish high standards for all students has generated more public interest in the education policymaking process in recent years than at any other time in history. Public input in the deliberative policy and rulemaking processes has gained immense importance as parents, business leaders and other interested parties have expressed a desire to be more engaged in the procedures. Moreover, state-board approved policies have run into implementation roadblocks when factions of the community became aware of the potential impact of the policies after the fact.

Clearly there is no magic bullet to guarantee public and political support for the policies created by the State Board of Education. However, failure to provide for broad public engagement has the potential to negate hundreds of hours of work, thought and deliberation. Providing for public participation in policy development is a constructive feature of good policymaking and can be achieved in several ways:

• Advisory Committees
• Public Hearings & Comment Sessions
• Media and Technology Strategies
• Public Awareness Campaigns

Advisory Committees

Often Boards see the value of soliciting input on a particular issue through advisory committees. Such committees are generally chaired or co-chaired by a member of the state board of education and include education stakeholders from various interest groups and diverse parts of the state. Using advisory committees allows for extensive information gathering and for increasing the knowledge of the committee members about a particular issue. They also broaden the support for the recommendations that come from the committee and ultimately impact board policy. In addition to advisory committees, some boards are now including staff and other non-board members on standing committees of the board to help inform the work of the board committees and to build consensus.

Public Hearings & Comment Sessions

Public hearings and comment sessions are the most traditional forms of engaging the public in the deliberation of the board’s work. Such a process is most welcomed by those who have learned to seek influence with the board through formal petition. Following are guidelines and options Boards should consider when using this format:

★ Hold the hearing at a time and place that is convenient to the audience, not to administrators and the Board.

★ Provide guidelines for the forum well in advance of the meeting date. Announce them in public sessions and provide copies of the guidelines to the media and to groups that would be interested in participating at this level. Adhere to these guidelines completely and fairly.

★ Strictly limit the amount of time allotted for each speaker and set specific time limits for the entire forum or hearing.
Ensure that state board members do not engage in a debate with the speakers. Individual board members should not use the forums an opportunity to convey their own opinions on the issue. It is a time to listen. However, public insults do not belong in a public forum and do not have to be tolerated.

If conducting the hearing or forum in conjunction with the regular Board meeting, hold the hearing prior to the general board meeting when attendance by press, board members and others is likely to be the highest. Having lunch between the public forum and the beginning of the official board meeting is a good way to defuse tension when dealing with a tough issue.

If the topic is to result in widespread policy changes, consider holding multiple forums around the state. If the entire Board cannot attend, make sure to include more than one member and appropriate staff.

Limit the number of representatives from any one group allowed to speak at a public hearing.

Limit public comment to the specific issue currently being considered by the Board. Provide for time limits by each speaker and consider allowing a pre-determined number of slots for pro and con comments on an issue. Allow comments on a first-come, first-served basis.

Ensure that all speakers, as well as those who do not get a chance to speak, have an opportunity to file complete written comments with the Board.

**Media and Technology Strategies**

Current technological forums are available to solicit public input on issues and many Boards are using them today. Some of the available mediums include web sites and other Internet sources. Consider the following when using technology and the media to promote public engagement:

Post the proposed policy change on the Internet and provide an opportunity and forum for feedback.

Use local cable television stations and radio shows to describe the work of the Board and the goals of the recommended policy. Let the audiences know how they can help inform the work of the Board.

Meet with the editorial boards of local newspapers and ask for the paper to provide an insert on the board’s work or the proposed policy. Ask that a comment or response card be included that contains the address of the Department of Education.

Whatever format is used by the Board, convey to the public that the Board has heard its concerns. Issue media alerts, press releases, and formal statements on how the Board’s position was influenced by the public’s involvement in the issue.

**Public Awareness Campaign**

Even after the board has held hearings, solicited comments through the worldwide web and issued written statements, it is still important to have a strategy for informing the public about the final policy. Developing cogent materials that can be distributed in schools, doctors’ offices, grocery stores and malls will keep the ultimate purposes of the policy before the public.