A State Board Check List for the New Year

Across the nation, state boards of education are pursuing aggressive agendas to ensure that all students achieve to high standards. One of the continuing challenges faced by boards is the constantly changing landscape of education partners and constituents that must be informed of the board’s work, its goals, and its progress toward achieving those goals.

As the year begins, virtually every board continues to confront changes in the operational environment under which it makes policy. Whether these changes spring from new board members, a new governor, or other alterations in the education environment, a savvy board develops a strategy and time table for interacting with new associates and enhancing the professional growth of the board. To boost the likelihood of ongoing effectiveness, boards should consider the following.

✔ ✔ ✔ ✔ ✔ Provide an Orientation for New State Board Members

A comprehensive orientation for newly elected or appointed board members is important to build confidence, trust, and understanding within the board. New individuals bring expertise and commitment to their service on the board, but they are often unfamiliar with the board’s accomplishments, aspirations, and procedures. The labyrinth of state education policy development and the roles of various participants frequently leave new members struggling to comprehend the most effective use of their time and position. A new member needs to know:

- **Responsibilities**—A new member needs to know his or her meeting responsibilities, including the regular meeting schedule, participation in hearings, community visits, and accepting invitations to speak and appear at education functions. An effective state board maintains a comprehensive policy manual that addresses the operations of the board and the issues on which the board has adopted policies.

- **What the Board Believes**—A new member should be made aware of the board’s vision, mission, goals, and strategies for achieving results. The chair should meet informally with new members on these and other issues that may be of concern. Members should also be made aware of how the board’s agenda is developed and how new and emerging issues are addressed by the board.

- **Who Does What**—A new member needs to know who the key personnel within the state education agency (SEA) are, how the SEA is organized, and where and how a board member gets information. Members need to know how the SEA operates and how federal programs fit into the scheme of the board’s goals and the SEA’s operations.

✔ ✔ ✔ ✔ ✔ Conduct a Work Session on Federal Programs

With the passage and implementation of the No Child Left Behind Act, the relationship between state and federal roles in education has blurred. The implications of the law are now more apparent to state policymakers and decisions on policy issues before state boards are influenced and impacted by this law and other federal initiatives. A valuable session on federal programs includes:

- A list of federal programs scheduled for reauthorization, with time for the board to articulate what changes would be helpful in the law; and

- Development of a strategy for communicating to Congress the board’s views on existing and potential legislation.

✔ ✔ ✔ ✔ ✔ Build a Solid Working Relationship with the Governor

The governor is the most visible political figure in the state and he or she is likely to have a vision for education and a legislative package for achieving that vision. Whether the governor is new or not, and whether the board is
appointed by the governor or not, building bridges and reaching consensus whenever possible can aid the board and the governor in achieving their educational goals. Most governors have an education aide, and regular interactions with this individual can influence the relationship between the board and the governor. The board should:

- Develop a structured liaison relationship with the governor’s office;
- Ascertain the governor’s priorities and determine how those priorities can be achieved and complemented by the work of the board; and
- Keep the governor and his or her staff informed about the work of the board and the ongoing issues being confronted by the board.

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**Build a Relationship with the Legislature**

In 2006, 44 state legislatures will be in session, creating a need for most boards to reach out to members and leaders of both parties to secure the support needed to address their concerns. The National Conference of State Legislatures is predicting that healthcare and education will continue to dominate the agendas of state legislatures. Many state budgets are stronger than in the past few years, so this could be a year for seeking additional funding for board priorities. With 84 percent of legislative seats expiring at the end of 2006, many legislators will view this session as either a last opportunity to promote their issues or a chance to establish a campaign agenda. Boards are in a good position to inform legislative debates and upcoming elections. To do this they must:

- Identify the legislative priorities of the board;
- Meet with and brief key legislators on issues of concern;
- Develop a strategy for sustained communication with key legislators and their staff;
- Transmit information regarding the board’s ongoing initiatives, policies, and activities to legislators;
- Become familiar with the legislative priorities of the education committees; and
- Participate in legislative hearings.

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**Engage the Education Community**

All state boards require a plan for engaging the education community in their work. In addition to the traditional practices of hearings, committees, and focus groups, board members should get to know the changing leadership of state education associations. Most board members are familiar with the staffs of these organizations, but do not know the elected leadership, which generally changes on an annual basis. These individuals represent the membership of their respective organizations and bring a perspective that is sometimes different from the association staffs. The board should plan for meaningful interaction with these stakeholders.

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**Provide for Board Development**

Effective boards and board members use every opportunity to grow individually and collectively. To ensure board development:

- Plan and implement an annual planning retreat;
- Hold board work or study sessions on current and emerging issues; and
- Provide for members’ participation in state and national conferences to become more familiar with issues and allow for collaborative and networking opportunities with other board members.

**Conclusion**

Inherent in all of these suggestions is the importance of planning, communication, and implementation. As the new year begins, boards should commit to operating from a strategic design that can move the board forward in its mission and goals. Once committing to a plan, the board must communicate the details of the plan to education stakeholders and policymakers to build a foundation for support. Finally, the board must provide the oversight and evaluative components of implementation that bring the goals to fruition.