Who Controls the Board Agenda?

As the board agenda goes, so goes the work of the Board. A major concern of newly elected or appointed state board members is the control of the board agenda. The easy answer to the question of who controls the board agenda is that the Board controls the overall focus of the agenda. The board chair and chief state school officer work together to develop the specific items related to that focus.

Every agenda must address the statutory and regulatory responsibilities of the Board. In addition, many boards set aside some time to allow for public comment and to pay tribute to outstanding individuals and programs that have demonstrated exemplary accomplishments. Beyond these areas however, there should be a common understanding among the members of the board that the agenda is a primary tool for accomplishing the goals of the board. The agenda should reflect those goals and strategies for achieving them in a meaningful way and should reflect a cycle of work that leads back to the mission of the board. Boards should have a clearly defined process for developing the agenda with specific criteria for adding items unrelated to the board’s objectives to the agenda. The board must be adamant in adhering to this process if it is to avoid an equivocal approach to policymaking.

Although states approach their work in a variety of ways, there are commonalities among good board agendas. An efficient and effective board agenda will have the following characteristics:

- It is directly related to the board’s mission and goals;
- It includes new information for board members;
- It includes consent agenda items;
- It makes good use of board members’ time.

Agendas encumbered by issues unrelated to the major education issues of the state or the strategic direction of the board are a source of frustration to members. So too is the amount of time set aside for staff reports that do not engage the board in meaningful discussions. Among the most frequently asked questions at the NASBE New State Board Members’ Institute is how to reduce the number of staff presentations read to members, without offending staff.

While it is important that the board is aware of the work of the department, the need to use board members’ time efficiently requires a different approach to sharing information. Major reports presented to the board by department staff should include an executive summary. Staff should highlight the most significant aspects of the report to the board. Most of the time allotted to the report can then be used for an information exchange between board members and staff. Boards that follow this approach find the procedure more stimulating and valuable for both board members and staff. Likewise, the use of a consent agenda to move the board through routine items allow a board to meet its obligations without losing valuable time on mundane issues.

Understanding control of the board agenda requires that all members are familiar with and able to answer the following questions:
• What are the short and long term goals of the board?
• When is the next evaluation and review of the board’s progress toward the goals?
• What is the board’s process for addressing new and emerging issues?

Every board agenda should be directly related to the mission and goals the board has established for itself. Knowledge of the board’s short and long term goals helps new and experienced board members evaluate the appropriateness of the agenda and raise questions when unrelated items are placed on the agenda. This approach defines why and how a board is structured and adds constraint to members who have personal agendas that could derail the work of the board.

Boards that do not have an established strategic direction reflected in the board’s work and agenda find that they are less able to identify their accomplishments over a given period. A board that uses an annual evaluation and review of the board’s progress toward its goals informs all education stakeholders that the board has a strategic direction for achieving the mission and they will not divert from that mission. It is during the board evaluation and planning retreat that members can raise new issues and use a consensus decision making process for modifying and adding elements to the work of the board. This approach does not mean that boards should not have a process for addressing new and emerging issues that come to the attention of the board. In fact, productive boards have regular study sessions and policy reviews that support the growth and development of the board. As a body, the board can use information and data to decide the necessity of adding to the board work outside the cycle.

The board chair and the superintendent or commissioner have a responsibility to ensure that board members are comfortable with the process used to develop the agenda. It is important that members do not feel that individuals, rather than the mission of the board, are driving the agenda. The chair and the chief should be careful to avoid building an agenda in a certain way simply because that is how it has always been done. Every member of the board should be able to review the agenda and identify those items that are moving the board and the system forward.