e-Boardsmanship:  
Rules for the Electronic Age

State boards of education are increasingly using technology to conduct the business of state education policy development. Electronic communication among board members, electronically delivered board materials, web-cast board meetings, and web-based public engagement activities are just a few of the changes that have infiltrated the work of state school boards. While new issues are likely to emerge in this rapidly changing field, this Review addresses many of the issues boards should be thinking about as they advance further into the age of doing business electronically.

Electronic Communication

The area of electronic communication generates the largest share of discussions concerning the use of technology in conducting the business of the board. Many state boards communicate individually and collectively by e-mail. Media interests in several states have raised questions about the legality of this process and sought resolution in the courts. The implications for using e-mail to conduct public meetings or to communicate concerns on issues before the board are significant and are directly linked to state open meeting (“sunshine”) laws. Several court rulings have determined that if a majority of board members exchange information on a public matter via e-mail, that constitutes a meeting. Furthermore, when an entire board is on a list serve and information is communicated through the list serve, a board member who responds or reacts to the information in a general reply message that goes to everyone has in fact communicated with the entire board. Consequently, the rules regarding advanced posting of public meetings and providing access to the meeting by the public have been violated. Boards should have clear policies on communicating through e-mail that have been reviewed by the board attorney before moving to electronic communications. Likewise, states that are permitted to convene through conference calls must also develop policies that are clearly communicated to the members and to the general public. Even when teleconferencing is permitted, it should be used sparingly by the board.

Going Paperless

In an effort to improve communication and efficiency, state and local boards are shifting to receiving agendas and supporting materials for board meetings electronically. This is often done through an intranet service that is linked to the state department or local education agency. To support this approach, members are provided with laptop or notebook computers and all materials and information are handled electronically. Members not only receive the information in advance, they bring the computers to board meetings to use for reference. Boards that manage their work this way frequently use an administered or targeted server with designated staff oversight to ensure that only approved material is posted or sent to the board. An extranet system can support the board system to allow access to certain materials to specific individuals, and an Internet service can be used to make information available to the public at large. Experts agree that PDF files (from Adobe Acrobat™) are acceptable for documents that will be downloaded
and printed, but they are not known for online readability. Both staff and board members should keep this fact in mind when transmitting reading materials electronically. As noted in the section on electronic communication, boards should ensure that practices used for developing board materials are consistent with state law.

Board Websites

Most boards across the country now have websites that have been developed for them by the state department of education. Some are pages within the department site, while others are links to the department sites. Irrespective of how the site is accessed, it is important that board members request that the site be regularly maintained. State board sites should include more than photographs and biographical information on members. With widespread use of the Internet, board websites can inform the public on the role of the state board of education in policy development, indicate the accomplishments of the board, and communicate the long-term vision, mission, and goals of the board for education in the state. The sites should contain substantive information on board actions and policies, information on how the public can contact the board, as well as postings of board agendas in advance of meetings and archives of board meeting minutes or summaries. What is most important, the sites should be timely, up to date, and easy to navigate.

Electronic Board Meeting

Several states have started or are moving toward “web-casting” their board meetings, essentially delivering board deliberations over the Internet. This process not only allows individuals, schools, and businesses from across the state to observe board meetings as they are happening, the meetings can be easily archived so they will be available for viewing at a time that is convenient to all segments of the public. When done effectively, web-casting can enlarge statewide observation of the work of the board and allow for public feedback. Information and documents can be downloaded for viewers’ use, and hearings and other methods of public engagement can be enhanced. A major challenge to boards that web-cast is to ensure that the board adjusts its work to make this technology work in its favor.

Recommendations for e-Boardsmanship

The way boards integrate technology into their operations is an evolving field, one that is bound to lead to some trial and error. Technology is rapidly changing, and it will be a challenge to boards to balance useful, genuinely cutting-edge approaches with ephemeral ideas. Boards should be vigilant in monitoring this area and err on the side of caution as they move into unchartered territory. As initial steps boards should:

• Develop standards and procedures for using technology in board deliberations. These procedures should be included in the board’s operations manual and should be regularly reviewed.

• Review state open meeting laws to ensure compliance. Some state laws expressly prohibit the use of e-mail, telephone, or video to conduct meetings at which members of the public are not physically present.

• Model good practices. The NASBE study group report on e-learning encourages state boards to take the lead on developing policies in this critical area. Boards should utilize technology in a way that ensures equity of access to board information and reflects effective use of technology.