

## from the Director's Desktop



**Kristen Amundson**  
Executive Director

### *The Power of Community*

The first lesson is sometimes the hardest. New state board of education members often begin their service with great ideas and enthusiasm. They'll change policy. They'll affect what students learn. They'll make things better.

And, of course, they *can* do all those things. They just can't do them alone.

As an individual, a state board member has no more authority than any other citizen in the state. But when members are acting as part of the board, they can make policy decisions and influence education in their state.

We find that lesson applies to many other aspects of service on a state board of education. There is power in community.

At our recent Annual Conference in Baltimore, our record-breaking crowd told us they loved our sessions, but they also found tremendous value in the conversations they had over meals and in the halls. It's great to hear from a state board member in another state about an initiative they tried that was a wild success.

Hearing about what did not work can also be helpful. State board members are willing to share their "bark-off" stories: We did X, but we'd never do it again.

There's power in community on other levels as well, and the reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) offers a case in point. For the last several years, education groups have tried to persuade members of Congress that this version of the bill, which became law in 2001, was outdated.

There were several efforts at reauthorization over the years. But if a bill could

get through the House, it would die in the Senate. If it got the support of conservatives, then liberals would oppose it.

Which brings us to 2015. When Senators Lamar Alexander (R-TN) and Patty Murray (D-WA) outlined their plan to tackle ESEA reauthorization again, they were met with more than a little skepticism. Some of that skepticism might have come from me.

But they kept at it. And as it became clear that a bipartisan deal might actually be in the works, something even more astonishing occurred among the education groups. We put aside our differences and decided not to let the perfect be the enemy of the good. After all, we reasoned, if Congress could work together, surely we could, too.

So over the last few months, education groups representing teachers, superintendents, and school board members at the state and local levels, combined with parents and other groups of educators, delivered a common message. The bill, we all agreed, was not perfect. But passing it was so important that we were willing to support compromise wording.

Now we know the story has a happy ending. With passage of the 2015 Every Student Succeeds Act, we created powerful change by working together. We nudged our paralyzed national capital into acting for our children's good. And if we can do that, there's no telling what else we might achieve together. ■