

from the President's Pen



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Five Big Lessons from the NASBE Legislative Conference

NASBE members spent a fascinating two days in Washington, DC, where they discussed a wide range of policy issues with some of the nation's leading education experts. From the first session—an insider's look at how federal policy gets made—to the Hill conversations with Sen. Johnny Isakson from Georgia and Rep. Bobby Scott from Virginia, we covered a lot of ground!

But there were some big themes that emerged. Here are five key takeaways:

1. This is a unique moment. Roberto Rodríguez, who was a member of the White House Domestic Policy Council in the Obama administration, emphasized that this is a unique and opportune time for states that want to lead on issues of excellence and equity. The Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) has given states enormous authority, so they should use it. Otherwise, warns John Bailey, a Domestic Policy Council adviser in the George W. Bush administration, there may be less flexibility in future. “The next reauthorization of ESEA is already being written,” he said.

2. Don't play small ball. As we met in DC, teams were gearing up for the NCAA basketball tournament. When better to remember that there are big issues on the horizon! Whether it be resource equity, teacher quality, or principal leadership, state boards of education should not be afraid to accept major challenges. These are not issues that will be resolved in a single year or a single budget cycle. But state boards are uniquely positioned to take the long

view. Our session on preparing today's students for tomorrow's jobs laid out new research on the skills students will need for tomorrow's workforce. And as Stephen Parker from the National Governors Association pointed out, “Every governor wants to be a jobs governor, but you can't do that unless you are also an education governor.”

3. Boards cannot do this work alone.

During the development of state ESSA plans, state boards learned the value of reaching out to stakeholders for insights. Now that the plans are filed, boards can build upon those relationships. When parents, business leaders, teachers, and students all agree on a policy approach, it is more likely to be successful.

4. “Education is not a partisan issue. It's the people's issue.” Sen. Isakson, himself a former chair of the Georgia State Board of Education, offered that advice to board members who are addressing tough issues at every meeting. State boards remain one of the only policymaking bodies in the country where members focus less on the politics and more on the policy.

5. State boards need to keep equity at the heart of everything they do. Panelists underscored this point in nearly every session. Come up with a list of key equity questions, just as the Washington State Board of Education is doing. Make them part of your strategic plan, as the Mississippi State Board of Education has done. Even write them on your name tags so you will keep them constantly in mind! Then ask those questions as you consider every issue on your agenda. ■