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## from the President's Pen

The terms literacy and equity are frequently bandied about in the headlines of the education press—and rightly so. Both are of great importance to state boards of education. Yet more often than not, they are examined in isolation when they are inextricably linked.

While reading scores have been fairly flat across all groups for some time, the data are clear that students of color, students living in poverty, students from marginalized communities, and those whose first language is not English perform much more poorly in reading than their more privileged peers. As Nell Duke so adeptly points out in the lead article, “Reading by Third Grade: How Policymakers Can Foster Early Literacy,” the United States has more pronounced learning gaps based on these factors than other industrialized nations.

Yes, the issue is complex and the solutions are hard, but the evidence is clear: All students are not receiving equitable opportunities to learn or the services they need to help them succeed. This is true not only for instruction in reading and literacy but in all subject areas. But because of its foundational role in paving the road to success across disciplines, we chose to focus in this edition on literacy.

So what can state boards of education do to move the needle on literacy? I’m glad you asked. First and foremost, state boards must build their knowledge about the equity context for that instruction. Understanding the historical pursuit of equity, understanding interventions that past state boards have attempted, and using that knowledge to build a vision, mission, and strategic plans to address systemic educational inequities are all

prerequisites. For this work, state board members need not be reading specialists or literacy gurus.

Second, state boards must learn how to apply an equity lens to their policy work, asking informed questions about education data and seeking out the disaggregated data needed to form a picture of inequities within their state education systems. This skill building involves members discussing equity issues with their own boards and asking probing questions of themselves and their leadership regarding the pursuit of equity. In addition, board members must be able and willing to lead conversations about equity with a variety of audiences in their state, including advocating for their board to reflect the students they serve.

Third and arguably most important, state boards will advance equity through policymaking by evaluating the impact of their policies on students of diverse backgrounds and using that knowledge to determine which policies can most effectively close learning gaps in their state. Engaging multiple voices that reflect diverse students in the deliberations around policymaking is the only way to do this work effectively.

State board members must become experts on equity if they are going to move the needle on literacy. They *must* ensure that the voices and needs of students of diverse backgrounds and circumstances inform all policies and practices their boards adopt. That is the only way that the nation can collectively deliver on the promise of an equitable education in which all students receive what they need to thrive in school, work, and life. ■