

Boardsmanship Review

Building Partnerships in the Education Community

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By Abigail Potts

State boards have an obligation to build relationships with education stakeholders and ensure their voices shape education policies. Under the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), states are required to engage stakeholders in “timely and meaningful consultation.” While it is a federal requirement, building strong relationships with diverse stakeholders is also essential to fulfilling your role as the citizens’ voice in education. Board members can leverage ESSA to not only bolster relationships with current partners but to seek out new ones, particularly among those who feel disconnected or who have not been historically engaged in a public education dialogue.

DIFFERENT FOLKS, DIFFERENT STROKES

If you are serious about folding meaningful input into your board’s policymaking, you must tailor interactions with your constituencies in a way that recognizes and values their unique contributions to the education process. Those charged with implementing the policies that your board enacts have very different concerns from those the policies affect—parents, business leaders, and employers, who view themselves as consumers of the system. Because of the diverse, divergent perspectives of stakeholders, boards must position themselves in a way that facilitates open, honest discussions. Your board can then lay the groundwork for pragmatic consensus building and broker positions that are acceptable to various interests without compromising the integrity of the policy.

Successful engagement creates a sense of buy-in and shared ownership of the state’s vision and strategic plan for education. Board-approved policies have run into implementation roadblocks when factions of the commu-

nity are not involved at the outset and learned about policies’ impacts only after the fact.

Ask about whether your board has operational policies on how they will engage education constituencies continually. Public meetings and hearings are important tools for receiving input, but they generally focus on specific issues and require stakeholders to monitor state notices. Creating an environment of mutual understanding of responsibilities and concerns requires more substantive, sustained interaction in a less formal setting. A progressive board understands that meaningful engagement also means that its members are visiting school communities regularly and listening to their concerns and ideas to improve education.

Consider the full range of stakeholders throughout the state with vested interests in the education system:

- parents
- students
- teachers
- school leaders
- community-based organizations
- local school boards
- district superintendents
- early childhood educators
- charter school leaders
- civil rights organizations
- governors
- legislators
- postsecondary administrators
- businesses
- philanthropic and grant-making organizations

Your board should demonstrate an understanding of each group’s unique role within the sphere of public education. Local school boards have experiences and responsibilities that are most similar to those of state boards. As the lay education policymakers at the state and local level, these two groups are the public’s voice on issues of excellence and equity. Both develop strategic plans and mission-based policy. To promote a unified approach to goal setting, your state board could host an annual session on strategic planning for local boards that would benefit both. Such sessions can help local boards understand what you envision for all students while allowing them to customize according to community mores.

Most state boards honor their state teachers and principals of the year at an annual ceremony. Some boards have taken this a step further, using these experts’ skills and experiences to help the board think through issues of professional learning and teacher preparation programs. A few states have created teacher advisory boards or panels comprising former teachers of the year or other distinguished professionals. These panels serve as resources to state boards when they deliberate on teacher-related issues.

Most state boards have time allotted for study sessions to increase their understanding of an issue. A board could invite key leaders of

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the education or business community to hear speakers on an issue that the board expects to include on a future policy agenda. By allowing these leaders to learn more about an issue of importance to the state board, raise questions with experts, and have a common understanding of the data, the board is building support before the issue is translated into policy recommendations.

The turnover in superintendents across the nation is reaching critical levels. While many spend less than three years in their posts, they are often the point people for making change happen. They also try to serve multiple masters: teachers, principals, board members, parents, and business leaders. Your board can help education leaders in the state: Work with local superintendents to identify their needs, their frustrations, and their hopes. At the same time, define what the state board can do to support them.

ENGAGING PARENTS AND STUDENTS

Parents often feel that education policymakers undervalue their opinions, particularly at the state level. Your board must be sensitive to those who are active in parent-teacher organizations as well as to those who are less involved in their schools. Identifying and recognizing other established groups that include large numbers of parents, such as civic and church groups, can reinforce the board's commitment to inclusiveness and encourage all parents to take a more active role in schools.

Several state boards have student members who make significant contributions to the board's deliberations. Frequently, these students are elected through an elaborate process that involves hundreds of students across the state. You should consider including these student conventions on the board agenda or seek to have board representation at the meeting to further students' understanding of the importance of the board and its work. Your board should also identify meaningful ways to foster relationships with students who are not active in school politics or student councils. These students are sometimes less aware of the purposes behind

state board actions and would benefit from interaction with the board.

Although this Boardsmanship Review has touched on only a few of the relationships between state boards and other groups, productive relationships share common ingredients. The fundamental elements of good working partnerships are ongoing evaluations of those important relationships at the state and local level, a process for meaningful interactions, and a demonstration that the board is listening. What is most important to remember is that the quality of your policies will come to reflect the quality of your relationships with the community.

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