

# Boardsmanship Review

## Defining and Defending State Board Authority

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Attacking the role of the state board of education continues to be a favorite tactic of elected officials who are frustrated by stagnant student outcomes or board policies with which they disagree. Yet shifting authority away from the board or abolishing the state board of education altogether will do little to improve teaching and learning. In fact, destabilizing the board serves only to exacerbate a contentious leadership dynamic that will delay progress in education further.

State boards should not wait for such a crisis to define and defend their role. Instead, board members should act early and often to articulate the board's vital role in achieving excellence and equity for all students. A savvy board develops and executes a strategy to keep the constantly changing landscape of education constituents informed of the board's work, its goals, and its progress toward those goals. Both new and veteran members should be able to explain that the state board is integral to citizen governance of public education and brings intrinsic value to policymaking. While each state board has a unique context of state governance and policy authority, there are fundamental value propositions that all state boards share:

**Boards serve as the stable center of education governance.** State boards are often the most stable among a rotating cast of state education policymakers and therefore have a primary role to play in steering any statewide education agenda to fruition.

**Boards empower and amplify the citizen voice in education policy.** Citizen leaders serving on state boards are uniquely positioned to engage multiple voices in policymaking and are empowered to act boldly with and for students, educators, and families.

**Boards act as an unbiased broker in policymaking.** Board members serve with little or no personal compensation or support for their service, allowing them to challenge the status quo impartially and to focus resolutely on whether policies are in the best interests of students.

**Boards champion the needs of students who do not yet have the education they deserve.** Board members serve as the advocates for all students, including those who may not yet have found a strong voice in policymaking, and they have a vested interest in ensuring that all students receive what they need to thrive.

Given the vital role boards play in preserving citizen governance in education policy, it is appropriate that they spend time discussing how they would confront the possible erosion of their important authority. Boards can easily incorporate support for the board and its work into their routine operations and interactions with elected officials and the public. To help craft a strategy, board members can reflect on the following: awareness of their authority, cultivation of partners, focus on strategic goals, elevation of student voices, and communications.

### **CLAIM ROLES, RESPONSIBILITY, AND AUTHORITY**

Members rarely examine the constitutional and/or statutory responsibility of their board when they join it. As time passes, institutional memories are lost, and boards underestimate their capacity to make positive change for students. Too often, state education agency staff are either unaware of board authority or prefer the board to take its lead strictly from the state chief and agency staff. Thus when governors or legislators seek to change governance structures or authority,

many boards learn what true power they have only when they are on the verge of losing it. It is nearly impossible to promote and achieve an agenda for learning when a board is unenlightened as to the policy levers at its disposal. At least once a year, the board should devote time to educating and reeducating itself on its roles, responsibilities, and authority.

### **CULTIVATE EDUCATION PARTNERS**

All too often, boards that act in isolation to challenge the status quo provoke external attack by elected leaders. Yet as the citizen voice in education, boards are well positioned to forge the deep, broad support that their education policies need in order to survive in changing political landscapes and create long-lasting, positive change for students. Boards can create wide support among governmental entities and public constituents for their policy agenda and their role in education in several ways:

- **Participating in state commissions.** Board members likely are represented on key state commissions, including P-20 councils, workforce boards, and special committees. Boards should cultivate these partnerships across state government and collaborate on achieving common education goals. Participation in state commissions also gives board members an opportunity to clarify the role of the state board and its value-add to the policymaking process.

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- **Setting a vision for education.** Done well, authentic engagement on a strategic plan creates a sense of shared responsibility among education partners and the conditions for continued progress in the midst of partisan leadership changes. By cultivating deep, broad support for a unified vision for education, a state board's continued forward progress to achieve its vision for education can endure partisan shifts in the governor's office.
- **Leveraging convening power.** Invite elected officials, education partners, and constituents to board meetings and/or work sessions to discuss progress and explore ways to address challenges in achieving the state's goals for students. Board members should get to know the elected leadership of state education organizations and develop regular communication strategies, keeping these in place even during times of disagreements.

Board members can take other simple steps. A member should only rarely show up alone to a meeting with the state legislature's education committee chair. They should bring education partners to the table whenever possible to convey that the policy agenda is not just about what the board wants. Members can best showcase how the board works—not in isolation, but in coordination with many—by preserving the board's important role in a constantly shifting political environment.

### LEAD FROM STRATEGIC GOALS

Wise boards invest time and resources in crafting a vision, mission, and strategic goals that will shape state education policy for years to come. Yet that hard work will not manifest in educational progress if the strategic plan sits on a shelf. The agendas of effective boards clearly reflect their vision, mission, and strategic goals. Tying agenda items to goals shows constituents that the board is actively working to achieve a shared vision. It is a powerful way to garner institutional support for the board. Boards can take these steps:

- Prominently post the board's vision and strategic goals on the board website.

- Link each posted agenda item and meeting priority to one or more of the board's strategic goals.
- Review board goals annually and share progress toward meeting the goals.
- Develop a legislative agenda that reflects the statutory priorities of the board for achieving the goals.
- Boards that hire and evaluate the chief state school officer should link the annual evaluation of the chief to the board's strategic plan.

An orientation for new board members should include a session on the board's goals, why the board selected those goals, and ways in which the new member can become an active supporter of the goals. It is easier to build support for the board and its authority when its members can point constituents to progress on a stated set of goals.

### PUT STUDENTS AT THE CENTER

Policymakers propose modifications in state governance when they believe the job is not being done. Boards must be keenly aware that their public image, how they conduct business, and how they relate to one another is a reflection of their priorities. Effective boards match their rhetorical commitment to students with board operations and actions that prioritize students. Boards that rely on evidence and data from multiple sources, deeply consider the intended and unintended consequences for students from diverse backgrounds and circumstances, and most important, actively seek out feedback from students themselves exemplify putting students at the center and fulfill their role as a champion for all students in state education policymaking.

Focusing on students does not mean board members always agree. Conflicts are a natural, valuable part of policy development. The source of the conflict, however, should be honest differences in how to improve teaching and learning. Conflicts based mostly on partisan politics, personalities, or external pressure from groups without a commit-

ment to all students do not belong on board agendas. When the work of the board fails to target improved learning environments for all students, the public will fail to see the merits of citizen governance in education. The public's trust in boards rests on their ability to set aside political expediency and do what is right for kids.

### SHARE RESULTS EARLY, OFTEN, AND PUBLICLY

Despite the rich history of citizen leadership in public education, few members of the public are inclined to sing the praises of the state board of education. It is up to the board to tell the public and the education community why it exists, what it has done, and what it will continue to do.

Most boards gather for an annual retreat to evaluate the previous year's accomplishments and discuss the coming year's priorities. These reflections on progress should not be isolated to a single event but shared generously with legislators and governors, whether through an annual report or a formal presentation to key stakeholders. Sharing and celebrating successes demonstrates the board's ability to deliver.

Yet boards should not hide poor results. Boards that transparently disclose course corrections to address areas needing improvement cultivate credibility, demonstrate the board's commitment to equity and excellence in education for all children, and impress upon the public that the board's steady hand is integral to oversight of a system that is in the throes of constant change.

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