

Boardsmanship Review

New Member Orientation

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When state board of education members are asked to reflect on their first few months in office, most describe the experience using the same words: It was like taking a drink from a fire hose. Although state board members typically come to the job with a wealth of experience in education, government, and business, service on their state board of education is unique. A carefully planned orientation program can help board members move into their new role more quickly. That in turn allows the board as a whole to function effectively.

The board chair, the board executive/administrator, and the chief state school officer should ensure that new board members are brought onboard as quickly and efficiently as possible. Here are some of the topics that should be included in an effective new member orientation.

LEGAL FOUNDATIONS

State boards of education are, first and foremost, legal bodies. Many are created by the state constitution; all operate within the framework of the state's laws.

It is nearly impossible to promote and achieve an agenda for learning when a board is unenlightened as to the policy levers it has at its disposal. Boards must fully understand and use their authority to promote school improvement. This must be done in a systematic fashion that is evaluated and modified according to the changing needs of the state.

New board members often have a set of issues they want to advance during their term. It is important for the board chair to help new members understand what is within the board's authority to address. The chair can also school new members in the appropriate way to get their issues on the board's agenda in the future. If new board members want to

take actions that are outside their board's authority, they should understand why these items are best left to other entities for action.

All new state board of education members need a primer on the constitutional and/or statutory responsibilities of the board. The full board should devote some time to educating and reeducating itself on its roles, responsibilities, and authority at least once each year.

DEPARTMENT OPERATIONS

State departments of education have wide-ranging responsibilities. New board members need a basic understanding of how the department operates. Prior to the first meeting, a department staff member should meet with new members to outline the following:

- **Key Programs and Responsibilities of the Department** – From special education to school lunch, what are the most important programs administered by the department?
- **Who Does What?** – Who are the key personnel within the department? How is the department organized? How does a board member get information? (Some boards prefer that all requests to the department be routed through the chief state school officer or a specific designee. This is generally the preferred approach so that staff members are clear about how to prioritize board requests along with their other responsibilities. In other states, board members are free to contact department staff directly.)
- **Federal Programs** – How are federal programs supported (through grants or formula allocations)? What are the requirements for continued funding? When does the state board of education have a responsibility for oversight or signoff?

- **Accountability** – How does the state board of education determine whether students are meeting learning goals? How are schools evaluated? What can the board do to assist schools that are persistently low achieving?

- **Budget Development** – How does the department develop its budget, and how are the board's priorities reflected in the department's budget?

- **What Does It Mean?** – What are the most commonly used abbreviations and acronyms in the state?

NEW MEMBERS' BOARD RESPONSIBILITIES

Although the learning curve is steep, new members need to contribute to the work of their board right away. The board's executive director/administrator should ensure that new members know the following:

- **Board Staff** – Most states have an executive director or board administrator who handles board administrative responsibilities. Some states have additional staff. New board members should meet the staff, understand their roles, and clarify how they should ask for support and help.
- **Calendar** – When does the board meet for regularly scheduled meetings? How frequently are special meetings called? How much notice do board members receive

for these special meetings? Are there other meeting obligations for board members? How are board members reimbursed for expenses?

- **Committee Assignments** – Does the board use a committee structure? When do committees meet? Who makes assignments to those committees? How can members express their preference for work on a specific issue or committee?
- **Board Policies** – Does the board maintain a policy manual governing both the operational policies of the board and the major education issues on which the board has adopted policies? Does the board have a mission statement and a strategic plan? Is there a formal review cycle for policies and the strategic plan?
- **The Role of the Chair and of Committee Chairs** – Boards are made up of citizen volunteers, and they find different ways to share their workload. Understanding what information needs to go through the chair will help a new board member become a member of the team more quickly.
- **How to Handle the Workload** – How do board members access meeting documents – electronically or by paper? How can board members prioritize the huge amount of information that will arrive in their inbox every day? Do board members have separate official email accounts? Does the board provide technology to members? Who ensures the technology is working?
- **Initial and Continuing Professional Learning** – Professional learning on an ongoing basis is essential for all board members. New board members should receive a basic overview of state and national issues; training on how to work with the media and how to use (or not use) social media; trusted information sources; and opportunities for meeting and learning from other state board of education members.
- **NASBE** – Some boards designate a specific individual to serve as the liaison to NASBE. That person is responsible for sharing

information about NASBE activities as a regular part of the board meeting. If there is no designated liaison, a new member could take on this role in order to learn more about national issues.

BOARD OPERATIONS

While the board may have only one “official” meeting a month, board service usually requires significantly more time. The board chair should discuss time commitments as well as the following:

- **Agenda** – How is the agenda prepared? How do members get items added to the agenda?
- **Principles of Board Conduct** – What are the board’s principles of conduct in dealing with issues such as attendance, board/staff relations, and media relations and communications? Who speaks for the board? How does a member balance obligations to one region or constituency with responsibilities to all students?

Whatever format the orientation takes, the most important thing is to make new members feel a part of the board as soon as possible. It is a courtesy that the chief, the chair, and current board members can all extend to new members so they can join the board’s discussion and decision-making process with confidence and a sense of being part of a responsive, caring body.

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