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from the President's Pen

Evaluating the State Chief

All state boards of education are not created equal. Twenty-six find their origins in the state constitution, 20 were created by state statute, and 4 states have no board of education at all. Some state board members are appointed, others are elected. The smallest has 5 members, the largest 26. Terms range from two to nine years. Some states have no regulation of who fills the seats at the board table while others specify who serves—teachers, business leaders, parents, students.

Even more widely varied than how a state board is assembled is its scope of authority, with a few being solely advisory and others totally independent. Regardless, all state boards have three primary levers: the powers of policy, convening, and questioning.

But dare I say the most important authority, given to 27 state boards, is selection of the chief state school officer. There is no more important relationship in state education governance, and the 27 boards who choose their chief have a head start in developing a strong one. Hiring the chief is arduous and time consuming but done well can fortify a unified vision, a strategic plan to deliver on that vision, actionable challenge goals for schools and districts, and reliable measures for the entire system.

A thorough, well-designed, well-executed evaluation process for the chief is an essential ingredient to this strong relationship. Many boards engage in a symbiotic, collaborative process to improve the system. Others have perfunctory evaluations. Worse yet, some have no formal process.

Kudos to the boards who take chief evaluation seriously and see it as an opportunity for self-reflection and growth. For the rest, here are some tips to get you started:

- Begin with common goal setting based on strategic priorities of the board and rooted in delivering equity and excellence for all students.
- Ensure there are regular conversations to monitor progress and make real-time adjustments to expectations.
- Have chiefs complete annual self-assessments reflective of the predetermined goals and measures. These will reflect education agency accomplishments and are best presented in written form and as part of a presentation for board conversation.
- Establish a committee to prepare an evaluation, based on the input of the full board via a survey or other means. A board may want to consider the chair and vice-chair as the evaluation committee.
- Involve the full board in the evaluation conversation, led by the chair. Hold the conference in closed session if state law allows. In some states, public disclosure of the evaluation results is required.
- Provide the evaluation instrument to the chief in advance of the actual evaluation conference. Otherwise, the board may appear to be in “gotcha” mode. After all, the purpose is to improve performance—not to alienate the one being evaluated.

When done correctly, a good evaluation is an evaluation of the board itself. A chief and board moving in tandem with common goals is the only way to deliver on the promise of a strategic plan. NASBE has worked with states to develop and deploy their chief evaluations and stands ready, willing, and able to help your state invest in this important process. ■