

Boardsmanship Review

State Boards: Critical Link to Quality Public Education

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Control over education through citizen volunteer governing boards is an American tradition that dates to the early 19th century. The first citizen groups were organized on the state level to administer public schools, and these state boards of education soon became integral to the governance of education in America. State mandates provided not only for compulsory teaching but also for school building, supervision, school attendance, and certification of teachers. In the years after World War I, state board independence from direct political pressure and from the political rhythms of gubernatorial and legislative elections was firmly established. In state constitutions and state statutes, the missions of boards were articulated through clear and unequivocal duties and responsibilities.

Today, in 47 states and three territories, state boards provide citizen voice and leadership to state education policy decisions.

State boards are being increasingly given new responsibilities. In virtually every state, the state board of education (SBE) has these responsibilities:

- develop a state system of accountability.

KEY ROLES OF STATE BOARDS OF EDUCATION

SBE members come to the office in a variety of ways. Some states elect board members. In others, members are appointed by the governor, the legislature, or even local school boards. (A description of how each state board's governance model is here: www.nasbe.org/wp-content/uploads/Governance-matrix-February-2015.pdf.)

While each state board is unique, all advocate for a quality education for all children, serve as a liaison between educators and other stakeholders, seek consensus, and make policy.

Advocate for Education. The state board serves as the primary advocate for a quality education for all children and youth in the state. As such, the board seeks to promote excellence in the education of all students and advocates equality of access to educational opportunity. Because the actions of state legislatures and Congress can affect the quality of education, board members provide information about how best to meet the needs of students in their state. The board articulates the needs of the education system to the state's public and private constituencies and helps ensure continued, broad citizen support for education.

Liaison. The state board serves as a bridge between educators and others who care about education policy. It listens to the concerns of the general public, elected officials, business leaders, civil rights organizations, philanthro-

pies, and civic groups about what students need to know and be able to do. At the same time, the board listens to educators to learn more about the needs of the education system so members can advocate for those needs. This bridge-building role helps ensure continued citizen support for education.

Effective state boards use their power to convene as one way to fulfill this role. They bring together diverse stakeholders who represent a range of perspectives on a topic, often from different organizations. Out of these convenings should come a commitment to action among all the groups at the table.

Consensus Builder. The state board encourages communication and works for consensus among all those who seek to influence state education policies and helps formulate long-range policy goals and plans. Hearing from a wide range of diverse perspectives can help the state board craft policy that addresses the needs of all students. Although concurrence may not always be possible, a commitment to consensus building ensures that all citizens will be heard.

Policymaker. The state board is responsible for policies that promote educational quality throughout the state. In this capacity, the board defines the fundamental mission of the

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BOX 1. EMBEDDED IN DELAWARE'S MISSION

One example of a commitment to consensus building is in the mission statement and guiding principles adopted by the Delaware State Board of Education.

MISSION STATEMENT

In collaboration with community and stakeholders, the Delaware State Board of Education serves as the primary voice for Delaware citizens on education policy to create a world class education system for every student.

GUIDING PRINCIPLES

- Further our thriving democratic society with opportunities for an excellent and equitable education for all students.
- Enrich education policymaking with the inclusion of diverse perspectives that represent the breadth and depth of Delaware's citizens.
- Utilize research-based viewpoints to inform decisions in the best interest of all students.
- Advocate for the development of the whole child through learning, teaching, and community engagement.

(emphasis added)

state's education system and develops the system's long-range goals. Policies should accomplish the following:

- clearly define the priorities and goals of the state's education system;
- allow districts and schools the flexibility to respond to the unique needs of their students;
- define roles and responsibilities, spelling out who is responsible for what; and
- include measurable outcomes.

Once policies are developed, the board has a responsibility to evaluate and revise them. Successful boards have a regular schedule for policy review.

No matter what their individual mandates, state boards have always been regarded as critical to ensuring the prominence of education as a state function. The responsibilities of state boards reflect two deeply held American educational values: the lay governance of education and the separation of educational policymaking from partisan politics. While others in the policymaking process tend to reflect specific concerns and more political perspectives, the state board is intended to serve as an unbiased broker of education decision making, focusing on the big picture, articulating the long-term vision and needs of public education, and making policy based on the best interests of the public and the young people of America.

Kristen Amundson is NASBE's president and CEO. This report is a revised edition of "State Boards: Critical Link to Quality Public Education," Policy Update 15, no. 1 (January 2007).

BOX 2: FROM LISTENING TO LEADERSHIP

The Kansas State Board of Education developed a new vision for the state's schools by asking citizens for their advice. More than 2,000 Kansans were part of the planning process.

Citizens defined a successful graduate of the state's K-12 system as one who has the academic and cognitive preparation and the technical skills and employability to succeed in postsecondary education or to attain an industry- or workforce-recognized certification without the need for remediation. To achieve this level of success for all students, the state board is committed to

- redesigning curriculum;
- developing new roles for school counselors; and
- coordinating with businesses and community organizations in a more integrated way.