

Boardsmanship Review

Working with the Governor

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By Kris Amundson

The relationship between a governor and the state board of education is different in every state. Lines of responsibility vary—from selecting board members to choosing a chief state school officer to laying out a policy agenda for the state—and governors and state boards both have a role to play in each process. States can make real advances in education policy when they work together, with the governor articulating broad goals for education and the state board developing the policy infrastructure to support those goals.

But such collaboration does not always come easily. Differences in policy, style, or even political party can lead to tension between the governor and the state board. If left unresolved, these issues can fuel power struggles, which in some states have resulted in the governor replacing most or all members of the sitting board.

Any effective state board can create and sustain a good working relationship with the governor. It does not matter if they have elected members, appointed members, or a combination of elected and appointed members.

UNDERSTANDING ROLES AND RESPONSIBILITIES

A productive relationship between state boards and their governors is based on a clear understanding of who does what. Though seemingly straightforward, boards and governors sometimes find themselves at odds on this point. Governors may expect that their appointed board will always support their positions, and boards may assume that governors will back their ongoing initiatives. In a working relationship, the state board is neither a rubber stamp for the governor's agenda nor an antagonistic challenger of it.

Governors, as the states' chief executive officers, take office with a number of advantages, formal and informal. The governor is ultimately responsible for the programs and services that benefit the citizens of the state. However, the governor should recognize that no other body in the state spends as much time and effort on education policy as the state board of education.

The citizen leaders who serve on state boards do so because they are committed to improving education for all students. While governors who once served on their state board understand the depth and breadth of the board's work, most new governors do not. Typically, governors and their advisers assume that the responsibility and workload of the board begins and ends with the board meeting. Few are aware of the voluminous reading, hours of deliberation, and multitude of invitations and expectations for board members to participate in local school activities.

Therefore, it's critical for the state board to ensure that the governor understands and values the work of the board. Similarly, the state board must institute a formal process in which the governor's views are presented and considered.

POWERS OF THE GOVERNOR

Whether or not governors have appointing authority for the board, they can influence its work in many ways:

- Propose education-related legislation. In most states, the state board cannot introduce legislation directly. Governors, however, can shape legislative agendas simply by introducing a bill.
- Sign executive orders. Not all policy is made by the legislature, and governors are increasingly using this power to shape education policy.

- Use budget power to promote or hinder a board initiative. A line-item veto can be an effective way to kill it.
- Appoint the chief state school officer.
- Appoint members of boards and commissions that must work with the state board.
- Create a board or commission that will bypass the roles and responsibilities of the state board.
- Use the "bully pulpit" to promote specific education policies.
- Attend—or not attend—education-related events. The presence of the governor can bring press and public attention to a state board program or initiative.
- Change the state board's power and authority. In some states, the governor and the board have worked together to expand the board's power and authority. In other states, governors have worked to curtail it.
- Publicly criticize the work of the board.

BUILDING A POSITIVE RELATIONSHIP

Achieving a positive relationship with the governor often requires the state board to do the following:

Convey the board's responsibilities, goals, and accomplishments to the governor and the governor's staff. State boards don't often make front-page news (and that's usually a

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Stephen Parker, intergovernmental affairs director at the National Governors Association, distills key advice on working with governors into 4 G's: three ways state boards ought to work with new governors and one way they shouldn't.

Governance. In all but five states, governors have statutory or constitutional authority over the state education system. State boards need to understand the governance structure in their states and get to know their governors before a policy disagreement arises, either by inviting them to join their meetings or briefing them and their staffs on board initiatives.

Goals. State boards can peruse governors' campaign and state of the state speeches and their budgets to find priorities that align with what the board is doing and then find ways to make common cause.

Glory. State boards should compile legacy documents on their work and accomplishments so that the public and their governor will understand what the board has done and why.

Gotcha. Do not play at this. Surprising the governor will neither advance education policies the state board desires nor improve the achievement of students in their states.

good thing). But particularly when there is a change of governors, it is critical that the board give the new administration a clear idea of the board's achievements. Share the results of the board's annual self-assessment, whether those results are positive or not so positive. Invite the governor to an event to kick off a new initiative. Be sure the governor's education policy staff is invited to board meetings and is on the distribution list for public agendas and other information.

Create a structure for your relationship with the governor and the governor's staff.

Don't rely on ad hoc meetings. Typically, the board chair (or designee) schedules regular

meetings and calls with the governor's education policy aide. These meetings should offer both parties the opportunity to be open and forthright. It is always better to air differences in private and ideally to work them out in private.

Commit to a policy of "no surprises." State boards and governors cannot expect to always agree on every education issue. However, they should not let controversial issues surface first in the news. A quick heads-up phone call or text about an issue that is about to become public can allow the governor time to prepare a thoughtful response. The most important words for a board chair who is faced with a difficult issue should always be, "I want you to hear this from me first."

Incorporate the governor's priorities into the state board's priorities when possible.

The board should listen carefully to the governor's annual state of the state address. This is typically where the governor will lay out a policy agenda for education. Often, there may be overlap between the issues the governor is raising and those that the board has already committed to address. If it's not possible to agree on everything, choose one or two areas to address collaboratively.

APPOINTING VERSUS NONAPPOINTING AUTHORITY

Governors in 32 states appoint all or a majority of state board members. In 6 states, the governor appoints only some members, with the rest chosen through other means.

This governance structure may seem likely to promote a smooth relationship, but that is not always the case. Governors sometimes usurp the board's authority, typically because the governors

- have political or philosophical differences with the board;
- believe that the board is moving too slowly;
- believe that governance of education should rest with the governor;
- lack clear understanding of how the board operates and develops policy; or

- do not understand the value and importance of citizen governance of education.

Many of these issues can be resolved by opening the lines of communication. It may also be helpful to involve key legislative leadership in some of these conversations, particularly if the board and the legislature work well together.

While the governor decides whom to appoint in many states, existing board members can provide critical information to inform those choices. The board may lack geographic representation, for instance. It may lack diversity. It may need members who can represent the interests of parents, educators, or community leaders.

The state board can help publicize the appointment process to ensure that a wide range of citizens are aware of how they might apply for the board. They can also brief individuals who are considering joining it. For example, if interested applicants believe that their service will constitute little more than one meeting a month, they are sure to be disillusioned.

If the governor does not appoint state board members, communication becomes even more critical. Both ought to reduce partisanship in board decisions, putting aside the distractions of party affiliation and instead focusing on finding the best solutions for students. That is the best way to get work done.

Even if the board and the governor can find only one or two issues on which they initially agree, working on those may lead to other areas of cooperation. It is vital that both sides respect the important role the other plays in education.

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