



Robert Hull
President/CEO

from the President's Pen

Are You Ready?

As I sat at my desk in NASBE offices in late January sketching out initial thoughts for this column, my mind went to the frequent use of the word “readiness” in education policy—readiness of youngsters to attend school for the first time, readiness of preadolescents to tackle abstract concepts such as algebra and advanced coursework such as AP courses, readiness of high school graduates to meet the challenges of civic life, higher education, and the workplace.

Almost without exception, our use of this term puts the burden of getting *ready* squarely on the shoulders of students, teachers, principals, and in some cases parents. But that is the reverse of how we as state leaders should think about readiness. Instead, we should be asking ourselves how ready the education enterprise is to receive, support, encourage, and serve students. After all, isn't that our job—to be responsive to the needs, strengths, abilities, talents, likes, and dislikes of students and not the other way around? I submit that we should be more focused on being ready for students than on students' readiness for us. Perhaps it's not the noun readiness that matters so much as who is responsible for acting and who is the subject of the action.

Fast forward to today—late March. Here I am, isolated in my home office rather than at NASBE headquarters as I put the finishing touches on “The President's Pen.” The need to flip the conversation on readiness is unchanged. What has changed is the context.

How ready were our schools and systems to act quickly and adeptly in the face of a global pandemic? How ready were we to shift to virtual classrooms,

distance learning, and a dispersed workforce? How ready was our infrastructure to bear the load of massive internet traffic for both learning and commerce? How ready were we to meet the needs of teachers and support personnel in the face of a totally disrupted work structure?

The answers to those questions are varied. We've done better on some scores and in some places than others. Like you, I applaud the heroic efforts of educators, parents, and communities to move adeptly and change course in short order. But we must also stop to reckon with our shortcomings—what were we not ready for and how can we do better next time? Unfortunately, there will be a next time.

The number one challenge that state boards of education face is this: How will we create a new reality when the COVID-19 crisis ends? What are we doing now to prepare for that? What is our next step?

What a shame it will be if, in the aftermath of this crisis, we fail to seize the opportunity to prepare. Let's take advantage of this pause in delivering education conventionally to consider how we might reassemble the pieces in a better, more efficient, more equitable manner as we exit the crisis and enter a different world.

Readiness—an old word with new and greater meaning in our present reality. Ready or not, here it comes. ■