

National Association of State Boards of Education

➔ Involving Teachers in State Education Governance

By Jordan Koch

Teachers like me across the nation transformed physical classrooms into digital ones almost overnight. We quickly learned to use new tools, altered curriculum, and supported students without access to technology. We problem-solved to meet student and community needs. As the pandemic—the largest educational disruption in recent memory—rages into a new school year, the need persists for teacher voice at all levels, specifically in state governance.

State boards of education can advocate to include current teachers as members. Whether it is through a voting member, nonvoting member, or teacher advisory committee, direct educator voice is critical in

state board decision making, both now and after the pandemic subsides. It is important to note that most state boards do have former teachers as voting members, and they add a wealth of classroom knowledge to their board deliberations. However, current practitioners provide a unique perspective, as they will implement enacted policies and directly experience the educational challenges associated with those policies.

Policy decisions affect teachers deeply, yet they are rarely involved in the conversations that shape those policies. Only 23 percent of educators feel like state leaders reach out to them monthly regarding policy decisions.¹ Yet teachers are ready to be part of the education policy conversation. Ninety-five percent say they wish there were more opportunities to influence policy. Engaging teachers in policy discussions allows for

varying perspectives, more buy-in, and decisions that are valid, inclusive, and holistic. School leaders find that collaborating with teachers on decisions can foster better schools, captivate educators, and improve student achievement.²

Teachers ought to feel valued, and the feeling of being valued is rooted in being involved. Most state boards now include teachers in standards writing and approval. I have observed that teachers are more inclined to trust standards adoptions decisions and offer little pushback because they know current teachers participated in the process.

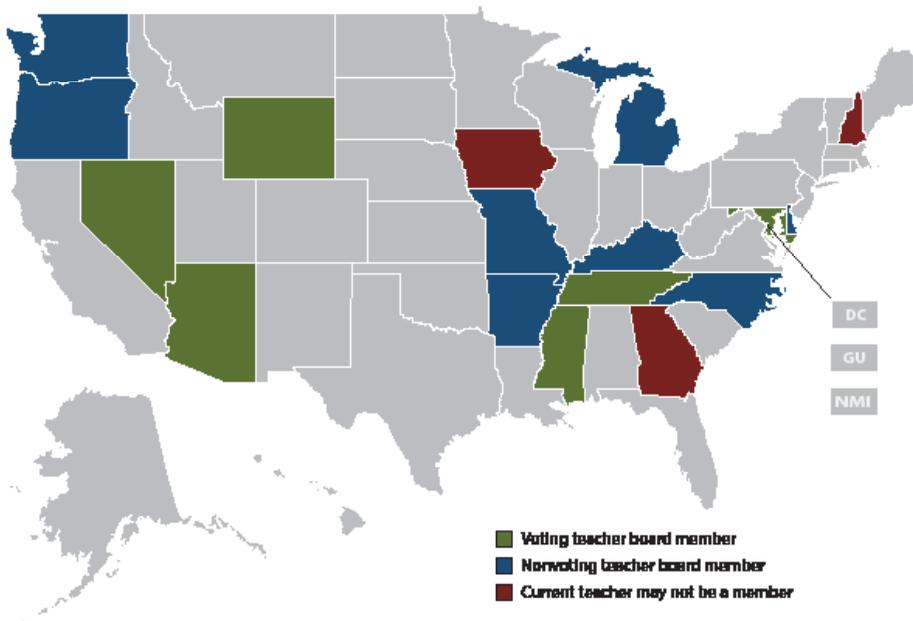
STATE BOARDS WITH TEACHER MEMBERS

Based on survey responses from 41 state boards combined with analysis of state statutes in the other nine states, I determined that six state boards require a voting member who is a current teacher and eight require a nonvoting member or a teacher who attends and reports at every board meeting. In line with state statute, these members come to the state board in an assortment of ways: appointed by the governor from a slate of names, selected by virtue of being named state teacher of the year, or through statewide election. **Maryland**, which recently added a voting teacher board member, is elected by Maryland teachers.

The governor appoints a teacher to Wyoming's board as a voting member. In addition, **Wyoming** teachers frequently submit public comments when boards are considering approval of content learning standards.

Ryan Fuhrman, the current Wyoming State Board chairperson and teacher representative, agrees that teacher perspective and voting privileges are essential. "When you're not voting, your voice is diminished," Fuhrman said. Fuhrman said he encourages other members of the board to honor the teacher's viewpoint. When asked about advice he would give other state boards, he said, "They need to understand that intention is not enough. Results from policy happen in

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the classroom. If [state boards] are leaving out the teacher perspective, then they are reducing the effectiveness of the policy. You have to have the voice of the practitioner.”

TEACHER ADVISORY BOARDS

There are many ways to engage teachers, especially if state statute limits the ability to have a teacher board member, as is the case in Georgia, Iowa, and New Hampshire.³ Some states seek public comment from teachers, and others partner with state teacher unions.

However, teacher advisory boards may be the most effective. Teacher advisory boards gather ideas from a large group of educators rather than relying on a single teacher board member to represent them. Nevertheless, rarely is there a direct relationship between state boards and these committees. Typically, the state chief or another appointed staff member leads the committee, thus funneling the information gleaned from committee discussion through an intermediary.

In **Missouri**, state statute requires the governor to appoint a teacher representative, who serves in the same capacity as other board members but without a vote. But in addition to having a board-appointed teacher, Missouri has a 25-member teacher advisory board, led by the state chief, to raise concerns facing their schools and community. The information compiled there drives decision making at the state education agency and state board. With the benefit of a teacher member and an advisory board, state boards should be able to create and implement better, more effective policies.

CORONAVIRUS RESPONSE

The coronavirus pandemic illuminated existing ills in the American educational system, the lack of teacher voice at all levels of decision making being a key one. A few state boards employed current systems for supporting teachers and gathering their feedback. During the pandemic, the **Utah** state board set the bar high for leveraging teacher voice. The board leveraged its teacher focus group, via Qualtrics survey tools, to assess the state’s coronavirus response. Having staff contact teachers

and channel suggestions to the board is another strategy the board uses. They use a calling tree to inform teachers of changes made to better accommodate their needs. Technology, such as video chats and Twitter conversations, also help the board acquire teacher feedback.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR BOARDS

Question current systems that gain teacher feedback. Are you speaking to one educator, such as a board member, or do you have a teacher advisory committee that represents a variety of educators? Are you relying on your own experience as a past or retired educator to drive your decision making? Is there a direct line of contact to the board other than public comment, or does all teacher feedback first go through the state’s department of education? What does this communication look like during an emergency, such as a pandemic?

Form a teacher advisory committee. Use your convening authority to gather teachers for a monthly meeting. Select a state board member to chair and facilitate the committee. Select a diverse slate of educators with varied experience, backgrounds, and from varied school settings. The committee should have a direct line to the board. Question them about state-board enacted policies and how they would affect students. Ask about return-to-school and equity concerns.

Advocate for policy to include a teacher as a voting or nonvoting board member.

Adding a teacher to the board communicates their value publicly and shows that supporting teachers is a priority. Seventy-three percent of teachers do not feel “very valued.”⁴ The state’s perception of teachers begins with the example the board sets. Collaborating with other state policymakers will be necessary to craft, create, or update relevant statutes to make this happen.

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NOTES

1 Educators for Excellence, “Voices from the Classroom: A Survey of America’s Educators,” 2020, https://e4e.org/sites/default/files/voices_from_the_classroom_2020.pdf.

2 Derrick Meador, “Transform Your School with Collaborative Decision Making,” ThoughtCo blog, Feb. 11, 2020, [thoughtco.com/transforming-your-school-collaborative-decision-making-4063907](https://www.thoughtco.com/transforming-your-school-collaborative-decision-making-4063907).

3 Such states have typically sought to avoid potential conflicts of interest posed by having teachers weigh in on decisions that affect the terms of their own employment or because they use other means of engaging teachers in decision making.

4 Educators for Excellence, “Voices from the Classroom.”