Since the mid-1980s, motivational speakers and writers have adapted and retold the story of the Star Thrower to illustrate the power of personal action to improve others’ lives. Author Loren Eiseley, scientist and poet, first published the story of the Star Thrower as part of a 16-page essay by the same name in 1969. The story describes the narrator walking along the beach early one morning in the predawn twilight when he sees a young man picking a starfish off the sand and throwing it into the sea. As the narrator approaches the young man, he asks what he is doing.

The young man looked up and replied, “Throwing starfish into the ocean.” “I guess I should have asked, why are you throwing starfish into the ocean?” “The sun is up, and the tide is going out. And if I don’t throw them in, they’ll die.” “But young man, don’t you realize that there are miles and miles of beach and starfish all along it. You can’t possibly make a difference!”

The young man listened politely, bent down, picked up another starfish, and threw it into the sea, past the breaking waves. “It made a difference for that one!” he replied.

Oftentimes, this story is held up as emblematic of educators’ role on the lives of their students—making a personal impact on each one. It is a poignant, powerful image and can be inspiring for teacher and school leaders. But the real powerful image for policy leaders is not the starfish but rather the ocean into which the starfish is hurled.

Just as starfish need a healthy, robust aquatic ecosystem to thrive, so students need and deserve a healthy, safe, effective environment to learn and grow. It is not the role of the state board of education to focus on each individual student but rather to focus on the learning conditions of the schools in which they learn.

Only by intentionally developing a comprehensive ecosystem of effective policies can a state board guarantee an environment that meets the needs of all students. All policies are thus rightly viewed as part of a greater ecosystem, working in tandem toward the goals of equity and excellence and not as isolated regulations with a singular purpose.

While this is always the goal and work of a state board, it is even more important to reaffirm this role now as we navigate the return to in-person schooling post-pandemic and grapple with the many equity issues at play in our society.

I implore all state boards to recommit to this systemic goal: to purposely look at all policy decisions as a means to create and sustain a healthy, safe, equitable, nurturing environment for all your starfish so they can thrive and grow for decades to come.