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Is there another domestic policy space more complicated than state education governance? In the face of the 50-plus ways of constructing state systems of public education in this country, the authors in this issue attempt to tease out what constitutes strong leadership and effective governance. It requires that the myriad leaders of the interlocking parts fix on common goals, work collaboratively to achieve them, seek data on outcomes, and commit to bringing more light than heat to conflicts that arise along the way. State boards of education are part of the mix to add stability to goal setting and ward off partisan attempts to whip saw the system this way then that. Easier said than done, say readers who can recall painful episodes where efforts to do good things on behalf of students fell flat.

Lawrence University’s Arnold Shober does yeoman’s work in gleaning from the varied landscape some hallmarks of effective state systems—and of state boards of education in particular. He concludes that “an effective board is driven by effective members, whatever its structure.”

Strategic planning is one way state boards and state agencies have sought to get all oars pulling in one direction. On the front end, such plans draw on diverse perspectives across their districts; on the back end, they drive policy agendas, data collection, budgeting, and staffing. Drawing on NASBE’s experience helping state boards craft effective processes, Paolo DeMaria and Abigail Potts lay out strategies for ensuring that a strategic plan has legs.

The best-laid plans at the state level rely on district-level implementation. It has long been an open question what state policymakers ought to do when districts’ efforts to improve their low-performing schools fail to bear fruit. Sometimes, states take charge. The University of Virginia’s Beth Schueler shares what she has learned in her study of state takeovers of school districts since the late 1980s. They usually don’t help, she writes, but sometimes they do.

Despite general agreement that state education policymaking should be grounded in evidence, it cannot truly be called a common practice, say Results for America’s Heather Boughton and Sara Kerr. They articulate what it takes to bake data analysis into board cultures.

Yet another layer to the crazy quilt of education governance is its intersection with agencies that support early care and education. Several states have been working toward a more streamlined approach, writes Foresight Law + Policy’s Elliot Regenstein. State boards should stay abreast of such policy changes so they are better equipped to play a constructive role in bridging the birth-preK and K-12 spaces.

Researchers Sara Dahill-Brown and Lesley Lavery examine the role that teacher unions played in district decisions during the pandemic. Although district and union leaders were at loggerheads in many places, the authors find that more union leaders reported collaborative, respectful relationships with their districts.

In the NASBE interview, three experienced state board chairs stress the importance of strategic focus, data, active listening, and respectful discourse. And North Carolina board’s Eric Davis issues a challenge for all state boards: “While we need to be a source of stability and certainty, we also have to have the courage to change.”
The 118th Congress will include over 80 new members and feature the youngest new class of legislators in 14 years. Like its predecessor, this congress will be closely divided between the parties. Republicans will control the House of Representatives (222-213), and Democrats will control the Senate (51-49). These narrow majorities and divided government will serve as a significant hurdle to any proposed education legislation and spending that does not garner bipartisan support. If they hope to win any victories before the next election, congressional leaders and the White House must therefore be strategic when they select education policy priorities for legislators to consider in 2023 and 2024.

Committee leaders are among the most important decision makers on Capitol Hill, and the 118th Congress will see notable committee leadership changes. These shifts include changes to the Senate and House education committees.

Chairwoman Patty Murray (D-WA) is leaving the Senate’s Health, Education, Labor, and Pensions (HELP) Committee for the top position on the Appropriations Committee, and the HELP Committee’s current ranking member, Richard Burr (R-NC), is retiring. For the new congress, Senator Bernie Sanders (D-VT) is in line to become HELP Committee chairman, and Senator Bill Cassidy (R-LA) will likely ascend to the top Republican post on the committee. Both senators are longtime members of the committee and would bring significant experience and perspectives to these posts. Based on his past education work, NASBE expects Senator Sanders to focus on college access and affordability, childcare quality and access, and post-pandemic learning recovery. Senator Cassidy has been a longtime champion for helping students with dyslexia.

Republican leadership of the House Education and Labor Committee remains undetermined at this writing, but there are two leading contenders: Representative Virginia Foxx (R-NC) and Representative Tim Walberg (R-MI). If Representative Foxx wins the gavel, we expect she will focus on reauthorizing the Higher Education Act, expanding parents’ rights in K-12 schools, and conducting oversight hearings, including regarding the American Rescue Plan Act’s education investments and the White House student loan forgiveness initiative. If Representative Walberg becomes chair, he also will likely focus on parents’ rights, while pursuing his strong interest in workforce policy. NASBE expects that Representative Bobby Scott (D-VA) will continue as the panel’s top Democrat. Representative Scott will most likely continue focusing on identifying federal strategies to support post-pandemic learning recovering and on supporting the White House higher education loan forgiveness initiative, among other areas.

Thanks to Foresight Law + Policy for this update.
According to sealofbiliteracy.org, all states but one have adopted a seal of biliteracy for inclusion on high school diplomas. When the Montana Board of Public Education adopted its seal in 2021, we were one of the last states to take the leap. There was much to consider: Should the Montana legislature lead the effort? Should we wait until federal funding was allocated? How can the Montana Board of Public Education ever support such a huge undertaking? Yet Montana has a large Native American and rural population of students who do not always have access to language programs. At the end of the day, the board decided that adopting the seal of biliteracy was too important to wait for all the stars to align.

The Montana Association of Language Teachers began advocating in November 2020 for Montana’s adoption of a seal, meeting with the state board and other education organizations. In July 2021, the board voted unanimously to approve the seal of biliteracy and asked that an advisory committee be formed to determine criteria for implementation. In August 2021, the Montana Seal of Biliteracy Advisory Committee conducted their first meeting with representatives from the language teachers association, higher education, K-12 schools, the Montana Office of Public Instruction, and American Indian language and cultural specialists.

The committee has since made recommendations to the board covering proficiency standards, pathway awards, award levels, criteria, application, award design, and timeline. The committee did not want to recreate the wheel, so they leaned on existing research and on policies and procedures that had proved successful in other states but also fit within the context of Montana’s local-control context.

Currently, the committee is working on implementation procedures with districts that choose to offer the seal to their students. For example, they are considering what tracking is needed to determine program success, following up with districts and with students who have received the seal, and how they might revise the program in response to what is learned during implementation.

There are many questions still to consider: How many students have achieved the seal and at what levels, how many districts have procedures for helping their students attain it, how many districts choose not to implement the program and why, which languages are most popular with students receiving seals and should less popular languages be promoted, and how many students complete their language learning online versus in their brick-and-mortar schools?

Although funding is uncertain and final details of implementation have yet to be determined, the committee and the board know that the seal is important for our students and marks their readiness to engage a globalized world. We owe it to them to recognize their academic successes in biliteracy.
Resolving Disputes without a Lawyer

Although we work within the structures set in state legislatures and constitutions, state education attorneys generally do not have much say about state education governance. We may become involved if legislative acts are challenged. For example, there may be litigation about the legislature’s ability to remove duties from an elected superintendent, e.g., Powers v. State, 318 P.3d 300, (Wyo. 2014). But more regularly, I am asked which state education authority has authority for program X or decision Y.

In Wyoming, an elected superintendent of public instruction is the chief state school officer and runs the Wyoming Department of Education. We also have an independent, gubernatorially appointed state board with one contract staff member. The legislature may assign duties to either entity, but ultimately, department staff will likely perform the necessary work.

In that environment, it is natural to ask—particularly if the superintendent and board disagree—who is in charge? Who gets to decide the many policy matters that form the fabric of state education governance? Sometimes, state officials ask the attorney to resolve that question.

There is not always a straightforward answer. I realized early in my legal career that a lawyer’s business is human conflict: preventing it if possible, resolving it if isn’t. Helping individuals navigate government systems like bankruptcy, for example, is an effort to resolve conflict between creditors and debtors.

Sometimes conflict is inevitable, and sometimes an attorney’s bag of tools and tricks to resolve conflicts is not up to the task. Where public officials are facing uncertain legislative mandates, the resolution is both simple and profound. The entities in conflict must figure out a way to resolve their disagreements on their own. While seldom explicitly articulated, lawmakers assume and depend on the idea that public officials will resolve disputes themselves, trusting that dialogue and compromise will be effective and that the work they assign to executive branch agencies will get done.

In my little corner of the country, this trust is largely well placed, I’m happy to say. As with any body comprising individuals who hold varying opinions, the officials I work with have learned to move forward with the work the legislature has assigned them—and without an attorney’s help.

As a nonelected, nonappointed, nonpolicymaker observing the education governing process, I have learned a valuable lesson. No matter the governance structure, individuals can resolve questions of who is responsible for certain tasks even where there is no clear legal answer. They can do so whether they are elected or appointed, and whether the board or the state chief is in the policy driver seat. Naturally, achieving this result requires honesty, humility, and sometimes even vulnerability and sacrifice.

Resolving disputes about how to make collective decisions requires careful attention to relationships and a willingness to work together. Governance structures cannot resolve all these disputes, nor can lawyers or courts.
“Bert really wanted to be governor,” one long-time education department official told me. “And the state superintendent job gave him statewide exposure.” Herbert Grover, Wisconsin’s long-time elected state superintendent, had his share of run-ins over education policy with the state’s long-time governor, Tommy Thompson. Though he was not always successful, Grover’s electoral prowess kept Thompson from abolishing the state superintendent’s policymaking powers until Grover’s less politically savvy successor came into office.¹

Grover wasn’t an outlier in Wisconsin. Tony Evers, who trudged up through the ranks from school, district, regional, and state administration, was elected state superintendent in 2009 and then successfully ran for governor in 2018 and again in 2022.

Did the statewide election of Grover and Evers improve their effectiveness as leaders of their state education systems? Wisconsin is one of four states without a state board of education—Minnesota, New Mexico, and North Dakota are the others—so perhaps there is a natural temptation for state education leaders to eye the governor’s mansion.² Not only do they oversee a central state policy area, but unlike a board, they can command individual media attention. Superintendent Grover, for example, prodigiously answered correspondence, staged photo-ops across the state, and issued streams of press releases about his activities.

Although this singular focus is harder for a board to maintain, politics is also never far from a state board. Controversies over COVID-19 restrictions are but one example. The Kansas state board courted controversy over science standards and overhauled them five times between 1999 and 2012, Colorado struggled over inclusiveness in its civics and history standards in 2019, and Maryland’s new Accountability and Implementation Board sparring with its department of education over academic and fiscal failures.³

American states have created a wide range of structures for state-level governance of education: from Wisconsin’s single nonpartisan superintendent to Ohio’s ungainly part-elected, part-appointed, part-nonpartisan 19-member board.⁴ Each faces common challenges—learning standards, accountability systems, licensure, testing, funding, personalities. Yet there are many differences: Political and legal traditions have made the august-sounding New York Board of Regents largely symbolic, while the Texas State Board of Education wields power over details of curriculum, charter schools, and school finance.⁵ Colorado, California, and Florida’s boards are often in the news, while others seem remote from the public eye.

Is any particular type of state board more effective than another? It is hard to define an “effective” board without knowing what it should do, and expectations vary from state to state about their place in American education policy.⁶ Should they lead and direct policy, or should they follow the lead of school districts? Should the governor, as a state-level politician, be a key player or not? Should they seek public input? Should they “control the narrative” to advance some desired policy goal with the press?

And who should they be? Are they supposed to be representative assemblies, drawn from a wide range of walks of life and demographics? Are they spokespersons for education generally or public education specifically? Are they to be drawn from the ranks of educators, policy experts, or the general public?⁷ None of these questions can be answered definitively for all state boards, in part because state laws and constitutions grant (or withhold) a variety of their powers and in
Marks of Effectiveness

Despite the difficulties state boards experience in leading state education systems, the broader research on corporate and nonprofit boards suggests that boards of all stripes can be effective agenda setters and policy leaders. Effective boards share common traits: 1) a focus on outcomes rather than process; 2) a commitment to build relationships with other decision makers in the legislature and executive branches; 3) an ability to capitalize on the legal, financial, and domain talent of individual members; and 4) loyalty to policy goals, if not the processes, of the board.9

Outcome Focused. When they focus on outcomes, state boards can put some distinct advantages to use. They can set an outcome-based agenda for state education so long as they do not become entangled in the day-to-day implementation. How much emphasis will social and emotional learning have compared with college and career preparation? How much local discretion will there be in policy implementation?

State boards' power in virtually every state relies on trust, and state boards, which rarely have current teachers and school leaders as voting members, cannot afford to be seen as distant meddlers. Research is quite strong that teachers and other front-line staff are likely to ignore direction they perceive to be out of step with their own estimation of what is valuable for their work.10 Further, an outcome focus helps build teamwork across state education through networks, even as approaches toward those ends may differ.11

Relationship Focused. Building relationships with legislators, governors, and especially the SEA ought to be central to state board work. In the corporate sector, a working relationship with the CEO is a clear indicator of board influence.12 When the governor seeks a different direction for education than the board, the governance arrangement can temper or redirect gubernatorial ambitions.13 In the case of North Carolina, with its appointed board and separately elected state superintendent, the division of authority has sparked fireworks over who should direct education. When filing a lawsuit over the arrangement, the state superintendent said, “I had nothing to say...
about who was hired, not hired, what would be our priorities, what would be our strategic plan to carry out the policies of the state board. I was [reduced] to being a person who was, to use the governor’s words, an ‘ambassador’ for public education.”14 While North Carolina is still seeking clarity on this issue, the ongoing legal spat among the board, governor, and superintendent is detrimental to the governor’s, superintendent’s, and the board’s effectiveness.

Relationships with the SEA are often key: It has keys to the information central to academic outcomes, finances, and legal responsibilities. If the board has a poor relationship with the SEA, it will likely be a bit player. The long-running Ohio school finance case, DeRolph v. Ohio, made this point nicely. A trial court in 1993 found the state’s school financing unconstitutional and ordered the state board and the SEA to submit plans to the legislature for more equitable funding of its school districts. The state board voted not to appeal the ruling, but the attorney general appealed anyway. In the appeals process that followed, which concluded in 2003, the governor, SEA, and state superintendent were central to the case and the state board was largely ignored.15 The Ohio Department of Education had the data on school finance, so the state board was readily sidelined. In contrast, the Texas and Florida boards have extensive personal and political relationships with the governors of their states.16 The policy direction of these boards have indisputably had great influence on their states’ school choice policy, accountability design, and curriculum.

Leveraging Talent. Effective boards also are able to leverage talent from a diverse array of member backgrounds. State board members are generally not representative demographically of the state population or of the student population, just as other elected and appointed bodies are not, but they do come from education, business, finance, and nonprofit backgrounds. While this composition may not translate to a “public voice” on state education policy, the variety of backgrounds does offer education policymakers multiple perspectives and an “in” for building relationships outside the world of educational practice—something particularly helpful when a board works in contentious political environments or when rhetoric around public education is linked with partisan goals. Good working relationships are potent for effective board governance.17

Board Loyalty. Effective boards build a degree of loyalty to the board’s mission and the organization. The reverse is illustrative, as infighting and acrimony undermine relationships, board vision, and the willingness of talent to join the board in the first place. Ideally, however, the board’s vision for education is broadly shared. One Colorado state board member noted that even though the board has a split partisan membership, “every now and again, you see differences in our approaches, but there is a strong commitment to improving outcomes.”18 Oklahoma Gov. Brian Stitt, who appoints the state board, was even more explicit: “We certainly want our appointees to think the way we do and to encourage all the things that we’re talking about.”19 Stitt has removed members who do not. Whether one agrees with Governor Stitt or the Colorado state board’s direction, these boards cultivate a sense of loyalty to a cause greater than just board membership. But gubernatorial appointment is not the only path to effectiveness: A unified board with public support is well positioned to prevail against changes in the governor’s office or legislators.

Comparison of Governance Structures

There are 50 unique governing arrangements overseeing America’s “ten thousand democracies”—the local school districts.20 Can different governance arrangements empower—or thwart—state board effectiveness? Ignoring some nuance, I see four major types: no state board; elected, partisan boards; elected, nonpartisan boards; and appointed boards. On top of this layer is a state superintendent or commissioner, who may be elected, appointed by the governor, or appointed by the state board.

Of these, the salutary division is between election and appointment of board members (and superintendents) because the resulting politics drives decision making in different ways. Elected boards are accountable to voters, about two-thirds of which no longer have children in school or never did. Elected boards give all voters an opportunity to vet the direction that state education policy is taking. After all, those
bureaucrats, because those government officials can serve for decades. Bureaucracy becomes the repository of technical knowledge and policy learning that state boards must rely on when making their decisions. Absent state board members with similar tenure (or expertise), the bureaucracy constrains the board’s ability to enact its own agenda. And ultimately, elected board members are accountable to voters and not to each other—which can be a recipe for fragmentation and paralysis.

In contrast, appointed boards are typically accountable to the governor—as Oklahoma Governor Stitt’s insistence that board members “think the way we do” so clearly shows. Because of its outsized importance for voters and the budget, education is an attractive policy area for governors. Southern governors vaulted education into the spotlight in the 1970s, attention that went national in the 1980s through the work of the National Governors Association. Governors tied economic development to academic educational progress and pressed successfully for increasing time in school, statewide learning standards, and aligned statewide assessment. These goals culminated in the Common Core State Standards in the 2010s. Many governors argued that voters held them accountable for the state of education and were unapologetic in using state board appointments to advance their agendas. Thus in the early 1990s Ohio Gov. George Voinovich won the right to appoint members to the state board after a damning audit of state education. A similar process occurred in Maryland after the legislature called for a full-scale reset of education funding. Governors George W. Bush of Texas and Jeb Bush of Florida deliberately appointed state board members who strongly supported assessment and workforce development, a pattern that has continued into the administration of Florida Gov. Ron DeSantis.

Unlike elected state board members, appointees are selected based on the degree to which they share the governor’s (or legislators’) view of education policy. Perhaps more important, they already have access to the governor. The governor may not always take great interest in board affairs, but board members can call on the influence of the governor when it matters. Former Gov. Christine Gregoire of Washington sought to consolidate that state’s multiple voters will fund one of state governments’ largest expenditures—almost 47 percent of all education revenue, to the tune of $351 billion.

Elected board members are keenly aware of voter perceptions. When Alabama Gov. Kay Ivey sought in 2020 to replace that state’s elected board with an appointed one, critics argued that the proposed model would politicize education. “With an elected board, you have a voice through your vote,” one state board member said. Alabama voters opted to keep its elected board.

Elected board members win their own seats and build their own constituencies. As one Ohio state board member wrote the governor: “As an elected official, it is my responsibility to speak on behalf of those who elected me, not to be an echo of the Board...[T]he discussion [at a board retreat] of speaking with one voice included the absurd notion that...the nineteen-member State Board of Education [is] just one big happy family,” she wrote.

Such statements highlight the friction of elected office, in which boards seek to set a unified agenda but also represent diverse constituencies. Especially in board races not held “on cycle” with other elections, unions can be particularly important in ensuring that board members are attentive to their policy preferences. Union election efforts, in addition to teachers’ own interests, also help explain why elected state boards have larger numbers of former teachers and educators versus both on-cycle boards and appointed boards. Voters may also believe that educators have unique insights into education policy that those with other backgrounds do not.

Nevertheless, elected board members need to demonstrate to voters that they are “doing something” and that the state board is critical to doing it. In this, board candidates mirror other candidates for office. Like legislators, governors, and presidents, board members seek to set agendas to address campaign issues once they are elected.

But elected boards face challenges to effectiveness from member turnover and the inherent difficulties of building bridges to other parts of state government. Voters can be fickle at the state level. State legislatures are notoriously filled with short-termers, and state boards are not exempt. Turnover undermines links made to other officials, especially state education...
education boards and commissions into a cabinet-level department, explicitly so that education would have a seat in her (and her successors’) cabinet. Although that effort failed, Washington State’s superintendent of public instruction argued that such a change would ensure that his office wasn’t “just some other elected official down the street.”

Finally, appointed members are likely to bring more diverse professional backgrounds to the table than do elected board members. Appointees frequently have business or bureaucratic experience that boards can usefully draw upon, while elected members tend to be current or former educators or legislators.

Reformers from the 1910s and 1920s were insistent that education be above partisanship, and, in line with their successes in communications, banking regulation, and public works, they stripped partisanship from many education posts. But in doing so, they took away many voters’ only information about state board candidates. And as much as one might wish otherwise, voters tend to select candidates by party label rather than policy positions.

There are two main implications for partisan state boards. First, partisan board members have more visible education policy goals and strategies. Voters expect partisan board members to adopt the rhetoric of their preferred party, whether that be about masks in schools, curriculum changes, or relations with teachers’ unions—even if a board member runs a low-profile campaign (if any at all). For an electorate with limited connections to education, partisanship ensures voters have some way to evaluate the policy direction of a state board.

Second, partisan ties provide the strongest glue among board members, the governor, and the legislature. Appointment of members by a governor guarantees a connection to the governor’s office, but shared partisanship with key legislators can shore up support around possibly controversial legislation. In short, elected partisans can duplicate some of the benefits of gubernatorially appointed members.

Do any of these forms have an impact on student achievement? Despite the considerable distance between state boards of education and the classroom, there is some suggestive evidence that board form may at least tilt schools and local boards to focus on achievement versus other priorities. State boards with greater democratic input—those with elected board members or an elected state chief—tend to oversee education in states with smaller NAEP achievement gaps between richer and poorer students and generally have higher NAEP scores overall. But these are only tentative results, and state boards have multiple priorities, of which academic achievement is only one.

Conclusion

Despite the special challenges of public governance, state boards can effectively serve as beacons of policy. As with many things in education, there are many ways to achieve success, and state boards—elected or appointed, partisan or not—are no exception. An effective board is driven by effective members whatever its structure, and effective members are committed to a shared agenda and the larger project of providing direction for a state’s education system.

The experience of boards over the last 40 years yields some takeaways regarding their structure. First, appointed boards can take on bigger, longer-term projects because members do not need to spend time on the electoral part of the job. To some extent, they have the backing of the governor already and may only need to contend with the legislature. No small order, to be sure, but it is a head start over other board forms. Second, elected boards can be very effective if they have natural links to the legislature or governor, likely through a shared party. In fact, a partisan elected board can work around a governor if the board majority is the same as the state legislature’s. The flip side carries great risks: A board that Democrats dominate will find its work ignored or countermanded by a Republican-dominated legislature and vice versa. The weakest of these forms is an elected, nonpartisan board. This board has no natural links to the governor, legislature, the public, or each other. These boards will have more work to do to overcome the disadvantages of this structure.

Some board governance structures encourage effectiveness, but all boards can take steps to improve. Boards should heed observations drawn from the nongovernmental world: First, effective boards present a unified vision for
Effective boards keep lines of communication open with the governor’s office and the SEA. This is especially the case for the nonpartisan, elected boards that lack the natural coherence that partisanship and appointment provide. It may be that some board members need to shift their policy emphases to find agreement, but some common ground can move the board—and by extension, state education policy—in a positive direction. This may be as simple as releasing a joint statement about the overall goals for the board.

Second, effective boards keep lines of communication open with the governor’s office and the SEA. No matter the state, the governor’s interest in education is a key barometer of legislative success, and the SEA is the long-term repository of expertise. This holds true even if the board and the governor are at odds; it is politically advantageous for a governor to show something to voters that can be accomplished with the board’s cooperation.

Third, effective boards capitalize on the expertise of their members. This may mean that board priorities shift as new appointments and new elections bring members to the board, but emphasizing reading instruction, capital projects, or public communications—whatever expertise the sitting members bring—can build public confidence in the board’s expertise and enhance the personal commitment of members to the board’s work. There is no one-size-fits-all strategy, but experience shows that state boards can offer effective governance amid the tumult of modern American education.

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2North Dakota has a State Board of Public School Education, although in practice its authority is limited to the creation and dissolution of public school districts and property transfers.


11Carver, *Boards That Make a Difference*.


14Shober, *Splintered Accountability*.


16Meltzer, “Two New Seats, High Stakes.”


27Shober, *Splintered Accountability*.


Savvy boards can increase the odds their plans will live, breathe, and have measurable impact.

Paolo DeMaria and Abigail Potts
Values. Articulating values can create a shared understanding of the core beliefs that shape the strategic plan. Value statements can help the reader of the plan understand the mind-set of those who wrote it. For example, one value might be “We focus on what is best for students.” Maine’s strategic plan sets out principles that guide the board’s work, including “ensuring the voices of the public are heard in the educational policy development and debates.” The state of Washington’s plan lists its values: equity; student-focused education; strategic action; dynamic and future-focused innovation; collaboration, caring, and inclusion; and integrity.

Analysis. Strategic plans often present the latest data and state of play that animates the plan. These may include data on student outcomes and well-being, staffing, initiatives, and resources. Insights from workforce development, business communities, and higher education systems may also contribute important contextual information. Connecticut’s 2016 five-year comprehensive plan was developed after a thorough review of data on access and opportunity, which drove the plan’s equity focus.

Framework. Some states will put forth a framework for the plan. States have used “pillars,” “domains,” “elements,” and other similar vocabulary to help audiences understand how they organized the strategies in the plan. For example, the “Alabama Achieves” plan addresses five overarching strategic priorities to support local schools and school systems: academic growth and achievement; college, career, and workforce; safe and supportive learning environments; customer-friendly services; and highly effective educators.

The Elements

The structure of a strategic plan ought to match the needs and context of the organization. Thus, every state strategic plan will rightfully be different. States may select and include components from those listed below to best reflect their unique state context, knowing that not every plan needs all the components.

Vision. Most strategic plans will include a statement of vision intended to be the ultimate aspirational objective. The extent to which the plan applies to the board, the state agency, or the state education system should be reflected in the framing of the vision.

Mission. The mission statement is a clear statement of the purpose of the state board. When a board creates a strategic plan, a mission statement makes sense. A statewide strategic plan, developed in concert with the governor, state education agency, or state legislature may have less need for a mission statement and rely more on the vision statement.

A well-developed plan is the bedrock beneath other board and state education agency actions.
 Implementation and monitoring. Strategic plans often include discussions of how the plan will be implemented, assign high-level roles and responsibilities, and describe processes for monitoring progress. The best plans often stall due to poor implementation. Setting clear expectations for implementation management is essential.

The Process

There are many ways to develop a successful strategic plan, and the circumstances and context of the board and the state will shape the exact approach. Generally, boards should consider the following steps at the outset.

Get organized. Defining a clear process for plan development is an important first step. The entire board should engage in oversight as well as final approval. Some states have established a steering committee that can engage more regularly and monitor the work more closely. A smaller group can also help shape how the plan is framed for consideration by the full board.

Implementation and monitoring. Strategic plans often include discussions of how the plan will be implemented, assign high-level roles and responsibilities, and describe processes for monitoring progress. The best plans often stall due to poor implementation. Setting clear expectations for implementation management is essential.

Goals and measures. Boards should consider the question, “How will we know that we are making a difference?” The concept “what gets measured gets done” is prevalent in many strategic plan development processes. While various types of measures can be used—focused on inputs, activities, or outputs, for instance—boards are encouraged to set goals and craft outcome measures that focus on the desired result. For example, an activity statement to “hire more literacy coaches” is not as powerful as the desired outcome, “increase early literacy proficiency by 10 percent in two years” (box 1). The selection of measures can have a profound effect on how progress toward achieving the desired outcomes are monitored.

Goals should meet the “SMART” test: specific, measurable, achievable, realistic, and timely. They should be established based on available data. In some cases, new measures may be defined and plans for collecting new data established. Care should be exercised not to impose too great a burden on those who will do the data collection and reporting.

Baseline values for measures should be established, and targets should be set both for long-term and interim outcomes. Targets should be ambitious but achievable. Short-term measurable wins that show momentum can advance commitment and buy-in to the overall plan.

Box 1. Examples of Metric Types

Various types of measures can be used to assess progress toward goals and objectives.

- **Input.** These assess the resources committed to a strategy. It answers the questions, “Did we invest the resource? Did we staff the effort appropriately?” For example, $500,000 was used to hire six coaches.

- **Activity.** This addresses the activities performed in furtherance of a strategy. For example, the six coaches provided 1,000 hours of coaching support.

- **Output.** This measures the change in behavior or circumstances that leads up to an ultimate impact. For example, coaching support resulted in 100 teachers adopting and effectively using a new instructional approach.

- **Outcome.** This measure focuses on the desired result. For example, the percentage of proficient students in classrooms of teachers who received coaching increased by 25 percent.

Boards should consider the question, “How will we know that we are making a difference?”
planning process and ensuring broad constituent engagement.

**Understand the current state and gather information to make the case.** A meaningful plan is founded on a clear understanding of the current landscape. It is important to review data on student outcomes, teacher supply and quality, leadership supply and quality, school climate, student conditions, among other things. Strategic plans can benefit from a strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats (SWOT) analysis; analysis of current activity; a root-cause analysis focused on specific challenges, and research summaries reflecting evidence-based solutions. The review of the current state of education should make the case to the plan's audience for the strategies that are developed. For example, Mississippi and North Carolina's boards took stock of their strengths and successful practices and lessons learned that could be applied to areas identified for improvement.

**Engage stakeholders and build trust.** Engaging stakeholders and building trust are fundamental to the success of strategic planning. Engagement and trust lay the foundation for a “coalition of the willing” who will join hands to ensure effective implementation. Engagement does not mean that everyone gets what they want. It does mean that everyone gets an opportunity to be heard. Trust helps ensure that everyone feels invested in a successful outcome. In many cases, those who are part of the process emerge as strong supporters, even if their preferred actions are not fully embraced. A strong process makes space for diverse voices and multiple perspectives in plan development that is sustained throughout implementation. Significant information is gained from these processes.

There are several ways to approach engagement and trust building:

- **Public surveys.** Surveys can cast a wide net to achieve broad engagement of large, diverse constituent groups. Care should be taken to ensure that questions are structured in ways that allow constituents to provide meaningful input. Too many open-ended questions can be challenging to synthesize when there are many responses. By taking the time to craft concise, easily understood questions for public input, Washington received an unprecedented response to their strategic plan survey.

- **Peer group meetings.** Many states have found it valuable to meet with groups of teachers, students, parents, and principals. Valuable input can also come from business groups, philanthropies, and local government leaders. Associations can usually help set up such meetings. Maryland kicked off its strategic planning process with a student roundtable led by the board's student member, a teacher roundtable led by the board's teacher member, and a family roundtable led by the board's parent representative.

- **Focus groups.** Focus groups can be effective at testing ideas and gauging reaction to a range of approaches and possible strategies. It is important to structure focus groups effectively to benefit from honest reactions. Kansas received valuable insights that shaped the “Kansans Can” vision for education by asking three easily understood questions during 20 community tours: What are the skills, attributes, and abilities of a successful 24-year-old Kansan? What is K-12's role in developing this successful Kansan, and how would we measure success? What is higher education's role in developing this successful Kansan, and how would we measure success?

- **Policy leaders.** Other state policy leaders will have thoughts and perspectives on the strategic work. These include the governor and legislature as well as other state agencies (e.g., higher education, workforce development, human services, health). They should be engaged in order to inform the plan, promote alignment to other state efforts, and ideally gain their buy-in. How authority is delegated and policy developed in each state will influence which stakeholders need to be involved.

**Develop a framework.** Through a combination of understanding the current state, reviewing research and evidence-based practices, and engaging stakeholders, a set of main ideas and strategic components will begin to emerge. These core organizing elements reflect key, high-level priorities on which the state wants to take action over three to five years. Coming to consensus on the plan's framework is a difficult but essential task for state boards. They must make a realistic assessment of where improvement can be made with a concerted focus and what to leave for later years.
In some cases, it may make sense to take some issues off the table—ones that engender high emotional responses and for which significant unreconciled divisions exist, for example. The purpose is not to avoid these issues but rather to allow for productive conversation on the many aspects of the plan for which collective commitment can be reached. In some plans, it may make sense to have a written section that lays out both sides of a controversial topic to show the importance of the issue and explain why the plan did not attempt to resolve it.

Again, the plan should focus on strategies and actions that have a high degree of impact and are likely to be achievable. In reviewing many state strategic plans, some common organizing elements that reflect priorities over successive years include, but are not limited to, the following:

- **Student access, opportunity, achievement, and well-being.** Twenty-eight states’ plans focus on college, career, and workforce readiness; 20 states on student physical and mental health; and 18 on access to rigorous content and coursework.

- **Educators and leaders.** Twenty-four states include plan elements on developing an effective, high-quality educator workforce; 10 on targeted professional learning; and 9 on educator diversity.

- **Parent, family, and community engagement.** Twenty-eight states set priorities around constituent engagement and 14 around building partnerships and collaboration.

- **School culture and climate.** Eighteen states’ plans focus on safe, supportive, and healthy learning environments.

- **System improvements.** Fourteen states have specific elements related to increasing data timeliness and transparency; 9 on developing a system that is oriented in customer service; 6 states emphasize innovating data systems.

**Plan writing and draft review.** The strategic plan should be a living document that all board members, current and future, can relate to. Clear, concise, evergreen language is essential. To achieve this goal most efficiently, one or two key individuals should be identified to be the lead writers. These individuals should be afforded a good bit of license to prepare an initial draft consistent with the framework and key ideas that emerge from the process. However, their work must be subject to review and modification to ensure the final document reflects the full board’s perspectives informed by those of external constituents. The language should be aspirational, engaging, and jargon free.

### Implementation and Monitoring

A plan is developed so it can have an impact. Sometimes, the plan itself may address certain aspects of implementation. The plan may also specify how implementation will be monitored to ensure the greatest likelihood of success. Specific implementation plans should be developed with clear roles for the board, the state agency, and other key partners. Key aspects of implementation may include the following:

- **Organizational alignment.** A strategic plan may require clarification of the responsibilities of offices within an organization or, in some cases, the establishment of a different organizational structure. It is important to understand the organizational implications of the plan and to avoid creating disconnected silos that are neither connected to other offices nor in alignment with plan goals. It is also important that an organization develop a workplan that lays out the steps and activities that will take place in furtherance of each strategy or goal area. It also is useful to specify the work of the board in advancing the plan as distinct from the work of the agency.

- **Practices alignment.** Boards may want to emphasize the importance of the plan by aligning various board functions to it. The board’s committee structure should align to the plan, and its meeting agenda should point to strategic plan components. Budget processes should be connected to the plan, and decisions about allocating staffing resources and other inputs should also be structured around the plan. State boards are encouraged to review their current strategic plans and determine if their current agendas and board work are aligned to them. Following the development of its strategic plan, the Mississippi board ensures that each agenda item is linked to the plan; otherwise, the item is moved to the consent agenda.

The board’s committee structure should align to the plan, and its meeting agenda should point to strategic plan components.
Communications. A well-articulated communications plan is an important part of implementation. States should be strategic in promoting the vision and goals and keeping stakeholders and citizens apprised of progress. Ensuring the plan is featured on the state website, referenced in public presentations and publications, and featured on social media will build awareness and shared focus on the plan’s direction and impact.

Resources on Nonprofit Strategic Planning


Subplans. In some cases, strategies may require their own plan for implementation. For example, Ohio’s strategic plan led to the later development of a Whole Child Framework to support one of its key strategies. Those charged with developing such plans should make regular reports so that the board and other stakeholders can monitor these processes and their alignment to the overall plan. When subplans complement major strategies, the stage is set to drive coherent change through effective use of resources and coordinated measures of success.

Monitoring processes. Strategic planning is a successive process for identifying, implementing, and monitoring progress toward long-term goals. A well-defined monitoring process usually involves data collection and reporting, regular updates on implementation actions and progress, and discussions about challenges to implementation or barriers identified. Processes usually have set timelines that create review routines. Each year, Mississippi’s board publicly reports on the strategic plan’s annual progress, for example. Monitoring involves constituent engagement to gauge on-the-ground impact. Transparent accounting of progress, or the lack thereof, draws attention to where the plan is succeeding, where additional resources or attention should be focused, and where course corrections need to be made. Transparent reporting also allows for celebrating the collective efforts of schools, teachers, and families in achieving progress—especially important in areas where there have been persistent challenges. In May 2021, Connecticut’s governor touted the state’s efforts to increase educator workforce diversity after the board announced that the state had exceeded its strategic plan goal.

Course corrections. A strategic plan should be a living document. Consequently, there will be times when the board will need to make updates in response to changing circumstances or emerging issues. A similar process should be followed for such updates to ensure inclusion and transparency. It is also critical that a board distinguish between when the plan simply needs modifying as opposed to when it is time to engage in a new strategic analysis of the needs of the state.

Paolo DeMaria is president and CEO of NASBE, and Abigail Potts is director of strategic initiatives and planning.

Transparent reporting also allows for celebrating the collective efforts of schools, teachers, and families in achieving progress.
On average, takeover fails to improve achievement measures, but how it is done matters a lot.

Beth Schueler

State Takeovers: No Silver Bullet for School District Improvement

State takeovers of struggling school systems represent some of the most contentious policy decisions in education. The transfer of decision-making power from a locally elected school board to the state is often undertaken with the goal of dramatically improving student academic achievement in districts that have been persistently low performing over many years. The results of such reforms have important equity implications, as the districts targeted for takeover often serve high concentrations of low-income students of color.

What is known about how this significant shift in education governance affects
children and their learning? A recent paper, which I coauthored with Joshua Bleiberg, sheds light on this question. In short, we find no evidence that state takeover benefits student academic achievement and some evidence that it can be disruptive to student reading performance in the early years of reform.

Beyond contributing to what is known about state takeovers specifically, I view this paper as addressing a broader question about educational governance. Our nation’s system of governing schools is quite unique relative to other policy areas. Even at the local level, most domestic public policy issues are handled by “general-purpose” actors and institutions, such as mayors and city councils, that cover a wide range of issues. But education is largely under the authority of “single-purpose” institutions—local school boards and state boards of education—that operate separately from the rest of local and state government. This was by design, meant to remove school systems from broader political dynamics and put them into the hands of educational experts. However, very little is known empirically about the benefits of this arrangement for system performance and student learning. State takeover, therefore, represents an alternative to the local school board model, providing a rare test of the merits of this unusual system of governance.

Previously, researchers Kenneth Wong and Francis Shen examined the impact of takeovers, finding no benefits for student achievement. However, this work came with methodological drawbacks that were a function of the limited data then available. Additionally, the research

Figure 1. Takeovers by Year, 1989–2016

examined takeovers that had occurred before the enactment of No Child Left Behind, and the impact of takeovers could be different in the more contemporary era of universal test-based accountability. A more recent series of takeover case studies, in places like New Orleans, Louisiana,4 and Lawrence, Massachusetts,5 provides some positive proof points in which takeover resulted in impressive benefits in terms of improved student academic outcomes. However, it was not clear whether these districts were representative of the full universe of takeovers, leaving the question of the average effect of takeover nationwide unanswered.

We began our work by tracking all 114 state takeovers that had occurred since the earliest cases in the late 1980s through 2016 and then examining the predictors of takeover. We found that takeovers indeed became more common over time (figure 1) and occurred in 23 states in all four major regions of the U.S. (figure 2). Not surprisingly, we find that districts that were taken over were substantially lower performing before takeover than districts that were never the target of such reforms. However, this relationship is weaker in districts serving greater shares of Black students. In other words, majority-White school districts appear more likely to be taken over based on low academic performance than majority-Black systems, suggesting that on average nationwide, race appears to play a role in the selection of takeover districts. This finding is important, in part because we ultimately find that the impact of takeover on student outcomes varies along lines of race and ethnicity.

After exploring the predictors of takeover, we estimated the impact of takeover on student achievement outcomes as measured by reading
and math standardized tests. We focused on a subset of 35 takeovers that occurred between 2011 and 2016, for which data are available that allow us to make test score comparisons across states. Overall, we find no evidence that state takeover improved academic achievement or changed average educational inputs, including per pupil expenditures, class size, and the size of the charter school sector. We also find some evidence of negative disruption to reading achievement in years two and three of the takeover.

Although we found no positive learning impacts of takeover on average, we did document substantial variation in the effect of takeover across districts, including positive and negative cases. We display this variation by plotting the overall impact of takeover on ELA and math test scores (in standard deviation units) by district (figure 3). Perhaps surprisingly, this variation occurs even within states, suggesting it cannot be explained by state capacity alone.

Takeover is particularly harmful when it is undertaken in districts that were relatively higher achieving before takeover. To clarify, takeover districts tend to be low performing within their state but are not always among the very lowest performing in the country, and it is these relatively higher performing districts where the negative effects of takeover are concentrated. In contrast, we found that takeover is least harmful in districts serving large concentrations of Hispanic students, suggesting that takeover has been riskier when implemented in majority-Black contexts.

As a whole, the results suggest that state leaders should exercise caution when considering state takeover for the purpose of improving academic achievement. This caution is especially warranted for districts that are not among the very lowest performing in the nation or for contexts that differ from those in which takeover has been effective in the past. An important caveat is that our study of state takeovers focused on the impact of takeover itself. We do not, for example, estimate the effect of the threat of takeover, which could provide some positive accountability pressure for districts to improve even in the absence of takeover itself. This is a topic I hope scholars will study in more detail since the current research leaves it an open question. In addition, takeover in many cases is pursued less due to academic underperformance than to financial troubles. As a result, researchers should also examine the effect of takeover on school finance outcomes and fiscal solvency.

Given that we found no impacts of takeover on educational inputs, we are limited in our ability to draw conclusions about the mechanisms behind the lack of impacts, but other research may provide clues. Political scientist Domingo Morel has found that state takeover, when implemented in majority-Black districts, decreases the number of Black local elected officials. However, Morel finds the reverse is true in majority-Latino districts, where takeover appears to open the door to greater descriptive representation—that is, the extent to which elected officials mirror the characteristics of the communities they represent—for Latino citizens. Other researchers document that non-White representation on school boards increases the academic achievement of non-White students. Therefore, one possible way in which takeover influences student achievement, consistent with our pattern of results, is through local descriptive political representation.

Researchers will need to do more to pin down these mechanisms more convincingly and provide a better understanding of why takeover does not benefit student achievement on average. It would also be useful to capitalize on the variation in impacts across districts to uncover why some takeovers are more effective than others and to inform districtwide improvement efforts.

One puzzle is that the case studies of takeovers that have generated benefits for students illustrate dramatically different ways in which state-appointed policymakers have used their authorities. For example, in New Orleans, which saw dramatic improvements in student outcomes after its takeover, all schools in the district were eventually converted to charter status, and the teachers were all fired early in the reform period.

In contrast, in Lawrence, Massachusetts, where takeover also led to impressive early gains in student achievement, none of the schools were converted to charter status, and only roughly 10 percent of the teaching force was actively replaced in the first year of reform. Instead, leaders in Lawrence focused on raising expectations, increasing learning time, pushing
Figure 3. Takeover Effects by District

resources from the central office to the school level, increasing school-level autonomy, improving human capital through principal replacements and a new merit-based career ladder pay scale for teachers, and using data to drive instructional improvements.

Our work shows that one piece of the extended learning time initiatives called “acceleration academies” (sometimes called “vacation academies” or “empowerment academies”) helped to explain a large part of the early gains in Lawrence. These were programs for which the district recruited teachers they considered to be particularly talented to work with small groups of 10 struggling students in a single academic subject over week-long vacation breaks.9

The Lawrence case is also notable because the public reception to reform was not as negative as it tends to be with more typical cases of takeover and districtwide turnaround. In previous work, I have documented how features of the local and statewide context help to explain why this was the case. The leaders’ approach to reform also improved the political dynamics. In what has been described as a “third way” effort to reconcile seemingly intractable, polarizing disagreements between education reformers and traditionalists, turnaround leaders wove together the best ideas from both perspectives into something new and more palatable to both sides.10 The results have implications for state and district leaders looking to implement sustainable districtwide improvement efforts that garner public support.

Perhaps most important, given that takeover appears to be no panacea for improving academic achievement, the field remains in urgent need of research-backed, effective policy approaches for dramatically improving the performance of the lowest performing districts in our country. With that goal in mind, I led a recent meta-analysis in which we analyzed all 67 evaluation studies of efforts to improve low-performing K-12 schools and districts in the U.S. in the

“Acceleration academies” helped to explain a large part of the early gains in Lawrence.

Figure 4. Effects of School Improvement Overall and by Intervention Feature

era after No Child Left Behind, regardless of whether these reforms occurred in the context of state takeover or not.

Two features of turnaround interventions were associated with the greatest gains in student achievement across all the reform efforts studied in this period: extended learning time and significant teacher replacements (figure 4). This suggests that time and human capital, not surprisingly, have high potential for school and district improvement. We also find that gains from turnaround reforms have been largest in contexts serving high concentrations of Hispanic students.

We do not find that those interventions described as involving a significant new infusion of funding were associated with greater impacts than those that did not. However, it is possible this could be a function of limitations in terms of how the reforms were described in the evaluations, as other research persuasively documents large positive effects of spending increases on average student achievement. That said, less is known about the impact of spending in the context of school and district turnaround more specifically. This points to another key area for future research.

Given the variation in takeover’s effectiveness across very different types of reforms and contexts, the literature presents a challenge for researchers seeking to find patterns that would point to best practices for districtwide improvement. Two key things vary across all the cases of district turnaround and thus make generalization difficult: (1) district and state contexts and (2) features of the turnaround interventions that policymakers implement. The next generation of research should pay close attention to the ways in which context may interact with policy. In other words, what is effective in Louisiana may not be effective in Massachusetts. Understanding these patterns will help leaders ensure that school systems live up to their promise as the great equalizer for students.

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6We used data from the Stanford Education Data Archive 3.0, and we use difference-in-difference methods to examine the change in achievement outcomes for takeover districts before and after reform to the change in outcomes for demographically similar districts that did not experience takeover in the same period.

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Two features of turnaround interventions were associated with the greatest gains in student achievement: extended learning time and significant teacher replacements.
Harnessing the Power of Evidence-Based Policymaking

Evidence-based policymaking can transform the delivery of education services, restore public trust in schools, and improve outcomes for students. It can cut through the noise of political and cultural divisions and give decision makers clarity on how to prioritize the use of limited resources. And it can help build a shared understanding of where the systems designed to serve kids are working well—and where they aren’t—so that leaders can ground their decisions in facts rather than anecdotes and in real student needs rather than perceptions of them.

Given the many challenges to U.S. public education, students, educators and communities need nothing less than excellent support. By harnessing the power of evidence-based policymaking, state boards of education can make faster progress toward that excellence. When government leaders build data and evidence use into the fabric of their organizations, they are better positioned to accomplish the following:

- understand students’ needs;
- strategically and equitably invest in evidence-based strategies aligned with those needs;
- learn more about the impact of their investments, policies, and programs on students’ opportunities and outcomes; and
- continuously improve the state’s education system.

A Shared Definition and Criteria

State boards that embrace a shared definition of “evidence-based policymaking” and fully wrestle with its practical implications will be better positioned to see and effectively act upon opportunities to address important needs. The good news is that state boards do not have to start from scratch.

There are two good starting places for understanding—and eventually adopting—evidence-based policymaking as an everyday part of how state boards approach their work: The first is a set of guiding principles outlined by the bipartisan U.S. Commission on Evidence-Based Policymaking in 2017. The commission defined evidence-based policymaking simply as the application of evidence to inform decisions in government, and it outlined five principles for doing so (box 1).1 The commission’s work has become a touchstone for federal government agencies, leading to a steady series of improvements,2 and can serve as a model for how state boards consider the role of evidence in their own state-level context.

Second, Results for America’s “Invest in What Works State Standard of Excellence” further operationalizes what it means for evidence to inform state policymakers’ decisions.3 Every year, we analyze how state governments are using data and evidence in budget, policy, and management decisions to achieve better, more equitable outcomes for their residents. Our analysis uses 16 criteria, which fall into four groups (figure 1). Results for America has identified 263 examples of data-driven and evidence-based practices, policies, programs, and systems in effect as of August 2022 in 41 states. In over half of these, the education sector is implementing one or more of the criteria.4

Barriers to Incorporating Evidence

It is not an easy task for state boards to make evidence-based policymaking the new normal. The Bipartisan Policy Center’s 2018 report on how Congress

Heather Boughton and Sara Kerr

State boards should lean into education data and work to overcome challenges to doing so.
These three types of barriers may be significantly impeding state boards’ ability to engage in evidence-based policymaking.

Box 1. Guiding Principles

**Privacy.** Individual privacy and confidentiality must be respected in the generation and use of data and evidence.

**Rigor.** Evidence should be developed using well-designed and well-implemented methods tailored to the questions being asked.

**Transparency.** Those engaged in generating and using data and evidence should operate transparently, providing meaningful channels for public input and comment and ensuring that evidence produced is made publicly available.

**Humility.** Care should be taken not to overgeneralize from findings that may be specific to a particular study or context.

**Capacity.** The capacity to generate and use data and evidence should be integrated within government institutions and adequately funded and staffed.


Does and does not use evidence identified 16 barriers to evidence-based policymaking within Congress. Some of these are specific to federal-level policymaking, though state boards may experience them in slightly different ways. But the authors focus on the three major categories of barriers, which most certainly limit the degree to which state boards can make effective use of evidence:

- **Perception barriers,** which affect whether state board members value evidence, believe it to be credible, and see how evidence can help the board accomplish its strategic goals;
- **Institutional barriers,** which stem from the structure of the state board or the state education agency (SEA); and
- **Systemic barriers,** which stem from the norms, processes, and procedures that guide the day-to-day operations of a state board and the state education agency.

Our 2022 State Standard of Excellence research strongly suggested that these three types of barriers exist at the state level as well and may be significantly impeding state boards’ ability to engage in evidence-based policymaking:

- **Just eight states had statewide strategic education goals** that were public, quantitative, published regularly, customer-oriented, aligned, equity-oriented, and publicly informed. (Other state boards may be publishing agency-specific strategic goals that may or may not connect to statewide strategy.) For state boards without established strategic goals, it will be difficult to understand how specific points of data and evidence will further their goals and to discuss the implications of data on policy and program decisions (perception barriers).

- **There were no examples in which a state education agency repurposed for results**—that is, improved outcomes by shifting funds from ineffective programs to those that get results. For state boards, there can be political risks associated with sharing and acting upon evidence about ineffective programs or, more generally, evidence that does not support a particular statewide agenda (institutional barriers).

- **Eight state education agencies had authority to use evaluations to improve results.** Only two state education agencies dedicated evaluation resources to improving results. State boards and state education agencies have many competing priorities. Where they have not intentionally organized and dedicated resources to evaluation, they will
Our 16 criteria are organized by thematic areas: managing for results, leveraging data, building and using evidence, and investing for results.

### MANAGING FOR RESULTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Setting Strategic Goals</th>
<th>Performance Management</th>
<th>Culture</th>
<th>Innovation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The state has statewide strategic goals that are public, quantitative, published regularly, customer-oriented, aligned, equity-oriented, and publicly informed.</td>
<td>The state has achieved better outcomes through an enterprise performance management system that engages state leaders in using performance data to continuously improve results.</td>
<td>The state has a culture that supports the sustainable use of data and evidence to deliver results in a transparent, equitable, and ethical manner.</td>
<td>The state uses innovation to achieve its priority goals and improve results for residents.</td>
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### LEVERAGING DATA

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Data Leadership &amp; Governance</th>
<th>Data Policies</th>
<th>Data Infrastructure</th>
<th>Data Use</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The state has senior leadership and governance structures with the mandate to equitably use data to improve results.</td>
<td>The state has data policies that outline the principles, people and activities that govern its data collection and use.</td>
<td>The state has improved outcomes through technology infrastructure that allows it to efficiently collect, inventory, and share data.</td>
<td>The state has improved outcomes by combining and analyzing cross-agency data to inform policy, budget, or management decisions.</td>
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### BUILDING AND USING EVIDENCE

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<tr>
<th>Evaluation Leadership &amp; Governance</th>
<th>Evaluation Policies</th>
<th>Evaluation Resources</th>
<th>Evaluation Use</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The state has a leadership and governance structure with the authority to use evaluations to improve results.</td>
<td>The state has evaluation policies and a learning agenda that outline the principles, people, and activities to use evidence to improve results.</td>
<td>The state has dedicated resources for using evaluations to improve results.</td>
<td>The state has improved results by using evaluation, program inventories, and cost-benefit analysis.</td>
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### INVESTING FOR RESULTS

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<tr>
<th>Results-Focused Budget Process</th>
<th>Results-Focused Contracting</th>
<th>Evidence-Based Grantmaking</th>
<th>Repurpose for Results</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The state has improved outcomes by prioritizing data and evidence in its budget process through guidance to agencies and engagement with the legislature.</td>
<td>The state has improved outcomes by using results-focused contracts for its publicly funded programs.</td>
<td>The state has improved outcomes by allocating grant funding based on evidence of effectiveness.</td>
<td>The state has improved outcomes by moving funds away from programs that are ineffective and toward those that get results.</td>
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be less prepared to engage in evidence use (systemic barriers).6

Some of the most perceptive takes on the challenges facing state boards come directly from the SEA leaders who work on these issues daily. Those that become our organization’s State Education Fellows have shared that state-level evidence-based policymaking is consistently at risk because of political vulnerabilities resulting from organizational structure, as well as limited, inconsistent investments in support of robust research capacity. When SEA leaders have the opportunity to generate and use evidence, there is often internal pressure to avoid negative findings, as well as external distrust of positive findings.7

While the barriers are plentiful and interconnected, state boards can overcome them. They do not have to do this work alone. Pew Charitable Trusts identifies several solutions to the challenges of evidence-based policymaking and calls upon philanthropies, research institutions, and other organizations to support states in this critical work.8 Among other steps, Pew encourages greater investments in state research capacity, increased focus on applied research, and opportunities for states to learn from each other.

State boards can also look to their peers for inspiration and support. For example, the Illinois State Board of Education used data to understand how the pandemic disproportionately affected low-income students in their state.9 The board is now investing $17 million in Freedom Schools, a research-based program intended to supplement learning in school, specifically focused on supporting low-income communities. Significantly, there are evaluation requirements associated with this investment. The state will use a combination of qualitative and quantitative data to continuously improve this initiative. The Ohio State Board of Education receives regular briefings from the Ohio Department of Education’s director of research and evaluation, on topics ranging from Ohio students’ internet connectivity and technology access, to the impact of the pandemic on student outcomes and students’ mental and physical health and well-being.10 The state board uses the data they learn about through these briefings to understand students’ needs and prioritize resources.

In addition, state boards can look to other state-level boards for inspiration. State-level workforce development boards also seek to improve their use of evidence-based policymaking. For example, the Colorado Workforce Development Council developed and began using an evidence continuum as part of grant award scoring. The council is awarding $2.25 million for evidence-based strategies through their Reskilling, Upskilling, and Next-skilling Workers program. The Texas Workforce Commission piloted an evidence- and performance-based grant for a building and construction trades program focused on serving opportunity youth. The commission is scaling this approach through $5.5 million in grant awards and using the same evidence-driven strategy for $3 million in federal Perkins funds that will go to community colleges.

A Culture of Evidence-Based Policymaking

The culture of an organization also affects the degree to which perception and institutional barriers limit state boards’ use of evidence. A culture of evidence use is one in which members of the organization place value on mutual trust, transparency, continuous improvement, and innovation. State boards that are building such a culture are not satisfied with the status quo and use data and evidence to seek opportunities for improvement. They can articulate shared goals, and they recognize that individuals in democratic societies can disagree on how to meet those goals and still use data and evidence to build consensus around solutions. And they center students, families, and communities in all aspects of policymaking, ensuring that they are engaged in collecting, interpreting, and acting upon data and evidence.

State boards interested in strengthening their culture of evidence-based policymaking can break this process down into a series of steps, each of which will move them closer to a culture of evidence use:

1. Work together to articulate the importance of evidence-based policymaking for the state board and for the state’s education system.

Where there is disagreement on the value of evidence-based policymaking, identify the reasons and work to remove those barriers to agreement. Start by finding common
2. Take stock of the best practices that are embedded in the state board’s day-to-day operations. Which practices represent areas of strength for the state board? Which practices are opportunities for growth? Results for America’s State Standard of Excellence can serve as a resource for identifying the practices that characterize a robust system for evidence-based policymaking.

3. Use this stock taking to build a holistic picture of how the state uses its resources—its data infrastructure, organizational structure, and communication strategies—and identify strategic opportunities to break down barriers to evidence-based policymaking. The most effective evidence-based policymaking happens when leaders understand how evidence-based practices fit together and where gaps in best practice might limit effectiveness.

4. Commit to investing in the resources the state board needs to engage in evidence-based policymaking. Most SEAs do not have dedicated research staff whose time is primarily dedicated to developing the kinds of practices that will make it easier for state boards to engage in evidence-based policymaking. At the federal level, increased focus on evidence-based policymaking is leading to important cultural and systemic changes among federal agencies. Since 2013, federal agencies across sectors have shifted more than $19.7 billion in funds to evidence-based programs and policies.

A greater focus on state-level evidence-based policymaking likewise can improve how states use data and evidence to make decisions. Already, there are states making great strides. Since 2018, there has been a 130 percent increase across sectors in the number of practices we have featured in our analysis. State boards can lead the way in this critical work. Building a strong culture of evidence use, investing more resources in internal capacity, and systematizing the use of data and evidence in board decision-making can all help meet the significant challenges of these times.

The commission’s report defines “evidence” as systematically collected data that have been analyzed with rigorous research methods to provide insights about how policies and programs operate.


Examples associated with the education sector are not limited to examples that come specifically from state boards of education or state education agencies.


There is no requirement compelling states to participate in Results for America’s “State Standards of Excellence,” and states that receive “credit” for a practice, policy, or program may be less inclined to continue reporting additional examples. Thus the analysis may underestimate the number of practices, policies, and programs in place, yet it remains the most comprehensive data on state-level evidence-based policymaking available.

Elizabeth Farley-Ripple et al., “Building Capacity for Evidence-Informed Improvement: Supporting State and Local Education Agencies” (University of Delaware, October 2022).


Based on spring 2022 research by the Results for America team, leveraging SEA organizational charts and website reviews as the primary data source.
State Boards and the Governance of Early Childhood Education

As the definition of education has expanded to include the years before kindergarten, so too has the role of state boards of education. Boards now play an expanded and essential role in supporting the early childhood system. That role can vary substantially across states and evolve within states, making it important for board members to stay informed about developments in the early childhood system. And state board members should be ready for their role to shift dramatically if their state decides to change how it governs early childhood.

The early years matter a great deal to the overall education system. If a cohort of children is more than a year behind at the end of second grade, only 15 percent of school districts in the country can get that cohort caught up by the end of high school. Partly for this reason, states have increasingly emphasized the value of publicly funded early education and care.

Early education and care comes in many forms, and in most states different government agencies oversee key pieces of it. There are good reasons the system was built that way—and there are good reasons states are remaking it. In the years ahead, state boards’ role will continue to evolve, and state boards can take important steps to make that evolution a success.

The Federal Impact on State Systems

Before diving deeply into how state early childhood systems function now, it is worth looking at how the federal government has influenced those systems’ development. In 1965, the creation of the Head Start program opened a new era of federal investment in early childhood. Head Start has evolved substantially over the years but for most of its history has been a preschool program for three- and four-year-olds. Early Head Start, created in 1994, serves younger children. Standards-based education is a part of Head Start, but the program has always had a broader focus and commitment to developmental services. Federal funding for the program goes directly to service providers, with no state oversight role. (The program does fund collaboration coordinators housed within state government.)

The federal government created the Child Care and Development Block Grant in 1990, building on previous efforts. It offers subsidies for families who obtain child care on the open market, and states have meaningful flexibility in setting eligibility criteria and reimbursement rates. In most states, a human services agency oversees this funding.

When Head Start funding stagnated in the early 2000s, states stepped up support for state-funded pre-K. Pre-K programs vary quite a bit across states, both in size and quality. The most recent yearbook from the National Institute for Early Education Research found that 29 percent of four-year-olds and 5 percent of three-year-olds are enrolled in state-funded pre-K. Largely created to provide standards-based education, state-funded pre-K programs are overseen primarily by state boards and state education agencies (SEAs).

Another important element of state early education and care systems are services for children identified as having disabilities under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act. This law requires SEAs to be responsible for special education services of children ages 3 to 21, which includes preschool. Younger children receive services under Part C of the IDEA, and states can designate a lead

Elliot Regenstein

As states seek to bring coherence to the disparate systems that have a hand in early education and care, state boards have key roles to play.
agency for Part C services. While some states designate the SEA, in most states a health or human services agency administers Part C.

**The State Trend toward Unification**

While state administrators may be keenly aware of the differences among funding streams, most families are not. Some providers leverage multiple funding streams (sometimes referred to as “blending and braiding”) and may intentionally obscure which funding streams they are using for particular services. The experience of the early childhood system at the user level can look very different from the experience at the administrative level.

Providers of early education and care services are a diverse group, but schools are a critical part of the system. In many communities, schools deliver state pre-K, Head Start, or both, and they also sometimes offer child care. But there is also a diverse network of private providers who offer publicly funded services in a variety of settings. Collectively, this universe of service providers is referred to as the “mixed-delivery system.”

Over time, states came to realize that the mixed-delivery system was not just a collection of different provider types; it was about their unique alchemy in combination. Pre-K and child care relate to each other in complex ways, and housing them in different agencies can create friction at the margins. Both are particularly important to low-income families, and policy incoherence can make it harder for those families to access services.

For that reason, states have increasingly sought to house pre-K and child care in the same agency—often including the Head Start collaboration office and other early childhood services. How that shift has played out varies from state to state, but there are three major approaches:

- **Creating a new agency focused on early childhood.** This approach puts multiple programs under one roof and also elevates a cabinet-level leader focused on early childhood. For state boards, it may mean giving up oversight of state pre-K. While their agencies differ depending on state context, states that have created a new agency include Alabama, Colorado, Connecticut, Georgia, Massachusetts, New Mexico, Oregon, and Washington.5

- **Consolidating functions in a human services agency.** In some states, multiple early childhood programs are consolidated in a human services agency. This generally means moving pre-K into the agency already responsible for child care, which again can reduce state board responsibility. States taking this approach include Indiana, North Carolina, and Vermont.

- **Consolidating functions into an education agency.** In this scenario, child care and other services are moved into the education agency, which can lead to a substantial expansion of the state board’s authority.6 States that have taken this approach include the District of Columbia, Florida, Louisiana, Maryland, Michigan, and North Dakota.

Decisions about where to house responsibility for early childhood often involve significant discussion about leadership roles and stakeholder relationships. Early childhood advocates typically want to see greater state government focus on the prekindergarten years. In many states’ education and human services agencies, the most senior early childhood leader is a division manager who is several rows below the agency head on the organization chart. Those division managers may feel constrained in their ability to act or to collaborate with each other. If the state does lack a senior leader with authority over multiple early childhood programs, advocates will likely press to create that kind of leadership.7

If a state seeks unified leadership, it has to then create an organizational home for that leadership. State education agencies are a logical choice because of the important connection of early childhood to K-12. But private providers are often concerned that SEAs do not know how to work with them and set policies more favorable to public schools than to private providers. Some SEAs do a very good job of engaging private providers, but in states where that has not been the history, consolidation into the education agency may be unpopular in certain sectors.
In that spirit, state boards can play an important role in ensuring that early childhood is considered when setting policy for the entire system. State policies on accountability, teacher licensure, special education, discipline, English learners, data systems, school choice, and others all have potentially significant impacts on early education and care, but states do not always consider those impacts in setting policy. Boards can do a lot to make sure that senior staff and other stakeholders are paying attention. For example, Washington State Board of Education Executive Director Randy Spaulding said that when his board discusses accountability, “if we are talking about gaps children are experiencing in schools, we want to be cognizant of where children are starting.”

Focus on kindergarten transition. The vast majority of children in publicly funded early education and care will enroll in public schools. State boards can help to ensure that schools are ready to help those children be successful. A growing number of states have developed playbooks or guidebooks to support those transitions. In states without a playbook, state boards can instigate their creation, and they can also play an important role in shaping their content. Boards can also make sure that agency staff are continuing to focus on the issue.

Another important transition is the transition into Part B special education. If the state board is not responsible for Part C Early Intervention services, it will need to maintain a relationship with the agency that is. In many states, this junction point has proved to be difficult, and state board members should work with staff to ensure that transitions are managed as effectively as possible.

Partner with other agencies. Particularly where governance is fragmented, it will be important for agencies to work well together. Board members can play a key role in making that happen. Cogen Lipton said that having board members in Michigan who are committed to interagency partnerships has led the entire board to think differently about who to bring to the table and has meant that the board’s thinking is often informed by leaders from other agencies. Spaulding said that board members in
Washington “get tapped to be involved in a lot of different work groups.”

States are required by federal law to have a state advisory council that brings together leaders from multiple agencies, along with outside stakeholders. Having a state board representative on that advisory group can help tighten the connection between the board’s work and the early childhood community.

**Build partnerships and knowledge.** An important part of policy development is building relationships with new partners. When the state board is developing K-12 policies, it will expect to hear from teachers, principals, and administrators from within the K-12 system. But it might not expect to hear from early childhood advocates. Board members can engage with those advocates and build relationships, which can help increase the board’s understanding of how K-12 policy affects early education and care. As Cogen Lipton said, “It’s really important to know your players.”

Pacione-Zayas said that board members should also take every opportunity to learn more—and help other partners learn more at the same time. For example, board members can take field trips to visit high-quality early childhood programs and schools that are working effectively in the early childhood community. They can also bring along other advocates and partners on those visits. Boards can also bring in experts to help them get smarter on topics of particular interest.

**If the state is considering a governance change, get involved.** If the state is having a public discussion of potential changes in early childhood governance, state board members can and should be involved. These conversations can be a valuable way to learn about the early childhood system—and to shape it.

**Conclusion**

In recent decades, states have increasingly focused on early childhood education—and expansion of early childhood services. With that growth has come growing pains, and states are now considering the best ways to manage their disparate systems. State board members can add important perspective to that work and can also help to ensure that the state education agency is sensitive to broader dynamics.

Experts in child development have emphasized that children’s experiences in the first five years have a major impact on their long-term outcomes. Whatever role the state board plays in managing those first five years, it has an essential role in supporting those long-term outcomes. State board members are well advised to learn more about their state’s early childhood system and ensure that the board itself is actively participating in conversations about how that system works—and how it connects to the K-12 system board members know so well.

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4 The term mixed-delivery system is defined in the Every Student Succeeds Act, 42 U.S.C. 9831(b)(5).


The Role of Teachers Unions in School Governance during COVID-19

When COVID-19 forced a set of extraordinary challenges upon the U.S. education system in March 2020, risk and uncertainty were constant. Many stakeholders sought to weigh in on the endless choices confronting school leaders, including the teachers who would implement those decisions. In speaking with teachers union and association leaders across the country, we found that, more often than not, they described collaborative relationships with district leaders. What we learned highlights critical practices sustaining these relationships, and we believe state leaders have the power to both model and encourage many such practices in school governance.

Our analysis suggests that relations between district leaders and teacher membership organizations need not be contentious and adversarial. Rather, under the right circumstances, these relationships can incorporate conflict and negotiation alongside collaboration and mutual respect in a way that can strengthen decision making and policy implementation.

This complicates the dominant narrative. Journalists and scholars have largely focused on districts’ contentious relationships with teachers unions and the unions’ influence on forestalling or resuming in-person learning. Certainly, quantitative analyses do suggest that places with stronger teachers unions were more likely to start the fall of 2020 in virtual learning as well as to remain in that modality throughout that first part of that school year. And research on teachers unions has typically framed them as a powerful special interest, concerned more with adult economic interests than the diverse needs of their students. But this narrative often focuses on a narrow subset of organizations and places, ignores activities that cannot be easily quantified, fails to describe important variation in unions’ and associations’ work, and dismisses evidence that unions and associations also have the potential to magnify the concerns of students, families, and communities, with whom they are in close contact.

Likewise, whether or not to deliver instruction virtually was but one choice facing schools. From the onset of the pandemic, leaders of large and small districts alike had to weigh health risks, social-psychological harms, learning loss, community anxieties, political pressure, and myriad logistical challenges. As fall 2020 approached, leaders had to determine what circumstances would allow them to reopen, invent safety protocols, develop hybrid learning schedules, and strengthen communication with families and communities. When vaccines became available in early 2021, district leaders confronted yet another set of thorny choices surrounding vaccine access, employee mandates, reopening timelines, and how to safely serve students who were unable to return whether due to medical vulnerability or parents’ fears. At each juncture, unions and associations had the potential to shape many decisions, and their membership bore the responsibility for translating new protocols into daily practice.

Teachers’ Voice in Governance

Inclusive decision making can be especially important in public governance. For programs and policies to be faithfully enacted, they must be viewed as legitimate by the many groups that have an interest in how schools function. Consequently, teachers or their
Across the 45 districts, collaboration emerged as the most common pattern.

memberships organizations should be involved, whether that involvement is legally prescribed, necessitated by collective bargaining, or less formally structured. Indeed, some prior research suggests that in crisis situations in particular, unions can help districts to adapt and innovate.

Teachers unions and associations are important participants in governance not only because they have formal collective bargaining rights in many states but also simply because most teachers belong to them. Approximately 70 percent of America’s teachers report that they are affiliated with an employee union or association. As the pandemic progressed, federal and state public health guidance for local schools was constantly shifting and incomplete. Teacher leaders could be cut out of decision making in the name of expedience or tapped to supplement district leaders’ need for extra support, manpower, and expertise. In our study, we found instances of both.

Collaboration and Contention

To understand the role teachers unions and associations played in decision making during the pandemic, we began reaching out in May 2020 to union and association leaders across the country in urban, suburban, and rural communities; a range of political environments with respect to both partisanship and the strength of public-sector unions; and varying levels of pandemic severity. We interviewed local and state leaders working in 45 school districts across 14 states, with a primary focus on local teacher leaders.

We observed that their relationships with district leaders ranged from extremely contentious at nearly every crucial decision point to highly and consistently collaborative. In more collaborative school districts, local union leaders provided specific examples in which they had worked alongside district leaders to communicate with families, develop plans for online learning, deliver laptops or hotspots, and make sure students had access to meals.

In more contentious school districts, local union leaders described fractious relationships with district leaders and provided examples in which they were rebuffed when they asked questions, sought representation on planning committees, or offered to collaborate on program rollouts. In several cases, union and association leaders felt it necessary to resort to confrontation to obtain basic information about COVID-19 response plans or described having to comply with a top-down policy only to discover it unworkable and find it abandoned shortly thereafter.

Though it may come as a surprise to some, across the 45 districts, collaboration emerged as the most common pattern. Local union and association leader comments, in combination with supplementary documents, suggested a broadly positive, constructive relationship in 25 districts (more than half of our sample). In another 9 districts, those same data suggested a relationship that included elements of both collaboration and contention over the course of the school year. In just 11 districts, the relationship appeared to be primarily contentious.

Notably, while partisan politics was cited in several cases as a source of strain, we found no consistent relationship between the collaborative or contentious nature of the relationship and partisanship. Likewise, we could find no association between the strength of unions in state law and the quality of the relationship between administrators and union/association leaders. Both findings suggest that district and teacher leaders have considerable room to set the tone in their communities.

To describe the character of those interactions in more depth, we identified four dimensions that distinguished collaborative from contentious relationships:

- the presence of good will and trust (or distrust) between local teachers and district leaders;
- the degree to which their relationship was characterized by consistent communication and information sharing;
- the extent to which planning processes included or excluded teacher voices and union or association input; and
- whether public comments were mutually supportive or exploited opportunities for blame shifting.

Union and association leaders’ comments regularly touched on these themes, and though some overlapped and reinforced one another, we
believe the distinctions are useful for reflecting on ways in which productive partnerships can be built and sustained or undermined.

**Goodwill and Trust (or Distrust)**

Districts where local union and association leaders described a more collaborative type of relationship did not necessarily escape the stresses or politicization of the pandemic, but the leaders described a sense of goodwill and mutual trust between themselves and district leadership. A shared sense of priorities—most often commitment to community and to students—and a personal connection between leaders undergirded this trust.

This goodwill bred a willingness to tolerate differences as well as a sense that parties were negotiating and communicating in good faith, making it easier to make concessions when necessary. In one small-city district in the West, the local union leader emphasized that the hard-won relationship they had built with the superintendent, after decades of conflict, was worth protecting. Thus when budgets were uncertain during the summer of 2020, the union was prepared to negotiate furloughs without a fight if the district deemed them necessary.

Interviewees often emphasized the time and care necessary to build trusting, mutually beneficial relationships. In a large, suburban district in the South, the local association leader described the tone of respect set in her first meeting with the district superintendent years before the pandemic. The two had built on that relationship, and the local association leader felt it had carried them through the first wave of the pandemic and the planning for fall 2020.

Union and association leaders in more contentious environments frequently highlighted interactions tinged with suspicion and distrust. These leaders expressed frustration, anxiety, and a reticence to act on information the district administration provided or plans proposed by them. The local union president in a small, rural district in the Midwest described outright hostility toward his efforts to start conversations about COVID safety. Administrators regularly shared misinformation, dismissed the concerns of teachers with health conditions, and refused to let teachers work from home despite operating in distance learning as a result of state-issued guidelines. The local president in a midsized Western city said that teachers’ distrust stemmed from what they perceived as district leadership’s refusal to provide clear information about COVID exposures.

**Communication and Information Sharing**

In many instances, the presence or absence of trust appeared closely connected to the quality of communication and information sharing. Districts where union and association leaders described a more collaborative relationship also tended to describe an environment of frequent and open communication, information sharing, and an ethic of transparency. This openness could be facilitated through scheduled meetings or in less formal, but still frequent emails, phone calls, and text messages. Regular communication allowed union and association leaders to learn about district plans in advance so they could set expectations with members or raise concerns before major decisions were publicly announced. It also facilitated preparation among teachers and a willingness to compromise when union or association leaders disagreed with the proposed plan. Communication flowed in the other direction too; districts often had access to surveys and communications from teachers providing information, expressing concerns, and highlighting problems or potential conflicts.

In one small Western city, the union successfully urged the superintendent to hold town hall meetings at which district leaders could listen and share current rationales. Communication became more consistent and expansive as the school year went on. In a rural Southern district, one local president shared member survey information with the district to facilitate the immediate transition to distance learning and then planning for the 2020–21 school year. Later, when the governor pressed this district to return to in-person learning, the local union communicated constantly with district leaders about what that return would look like. A “lengthy call” with the superintendent about outbreaks, testing, and quarantine protocols also fostered goodwill.

A lack of communication strained relationships that were otherwise collaborative—or at least not contentious. In a Western urban district, the union leader said the pandemic interrupted regularly scheduled meetings
with the superintendent and other district leaders. Consequently, he was caught off guard by announcements made at trainings or staff forums and frustrated by the need to respond in an ad hoc manner.

And where relationships were already contentious, lack of information sharing complicated an already difficult decision-making environment. In one urban district in the Midwest, a newly elected president emphasized how little anyone outside a small group of administrators knew and how much difficulty that created. She said their reticence created a Catch-22 for reopening to in-person learning, where the district needed to know how many students were returning, but parents hesitated to commit when they did not know the plan for returning. Moreover, it was impossible to consult with educators about feasibility since leadership did not want information circulating prematurely.

**Inclusive (or Exclusive) Planning**

Local union and association leaders who described a more collaborative relationship emphasized that they were invited into planning processes early, allowed to weigh in on key decisions about implementation, and genuinely listened to. Collaborative decision making facilitated troubleshooting challenges in implementation but also built teachers’ buy-in and confidence. More than just good communication, a consistent seat at the table with an ability to influence key decisions marked cooperative planning during the pandemic.

In several instances, union or association leaders recalled superintendents inviting them early on to join planning meetings. This inclusive process early on also cultivated understanding when district leaders wanted to create smaller, more nimble committees. In one instance where the union was not included, the union president expressed some empathy and understanding for the district’s position. A local president in another district described how their district’s inclusive model of decision making created space for union and district leaders to negotiate different perspectives, build understanding, and achieve the consensus needed to back up major decisions.

Conversely, union leaders elsewhere were shut out of planning, fought to gain entry, or were notified of decisions well after they had been made. We observed this in districts that had a history of contentious relationships pre-pandemic but also in some where teacher leaders described the working relationship before the pandemic as cooperative. In one such district, the superintendent’s announcement that secondary school students would be returning to in-person learning in several weeks caught teachers completely off guard and set off a series of confrontations.

**Public Support or Blame Shifting**

We identified public representations as an added dimension of collaborative relationships. As conflicts over safety, workloads, and learning modality became increasingly politicized, union and district leaders alike had to choose whether to express mutual support or take advantage of strategic opportunities for shifting blame to redirect public ire. These public representations could reinforce or disrupt goodwill and reinforce or remove incentives to work collaboratively.

In a large urban community in the West, the superintendent and the local union president gave a joint press conference announcing the decisions to temporarily close schools. The local president continued to disseminate information between schools and the central office, saying she felt her role “was to [be] collaborative as possible to create…the best, most aligned outcome for everyone.” A union leader in a rural Southern district emphasized feeling it was both strange and important to stand publicly in solidarity with the superintendent and the board to defend difficult choices.

Conversely, a local leader in a Midwest district said the superintendent habitually and publicly misrepresented union positions, including on budget cuts. The leader said the union’s offer to help ensure that the district made the most effective cuts possible was rebuffed: “They… made those decisions unilaterally.” Later in the year, he said, principals mischaracterized union positions on social media, and when an early dismissal because of inadequate ventilation during a warm day created chaos, the superintendent implied in a public interview that the union’s contract was the cause. Administrators in another district adopted a policy to let
students complete courses pass/fail and encouraged teachers to focus on socioemotional well-being, but then criticized teachers for the subsequent lack of learning.

Conclusions

While the first wave of educators’ responses to the pandemic were met with grateful praise, by the fall of 2020 the pandemic had become bitterly politicized. Conspiracy theories proliferated. Demands for, and protests against, masking intensified. And teachers unions and associations especially found themselves regularly castigated for raising concerns about safety, in-person learning, or overwork. We cannot claim our sample is representative, but our study reveals greater nuance in teachers unions and associations’ participation in decision making than has been commonly portrayed. There was tremendous variation in the character of union-district relationships across different environments.

In the more collaborative relationships, local union leaders described working alongside and in partnership with district leaders, strengthening educational governance by helping to anticipate challenges, support implementation of pandemic plans, and ensure teacher buy-in at a time when demands were ever-changing. School leaders today face a new set of urgent duties: ameliorating learning loss; supporting students who missed out on friendships, suffered anxiety, and experienced the death of friends or family; and serving a public that is in many ways more polarized than at the pandemic’s outset. They should take a note from the districts that built productive relationships before, and maintained them during, the pandemic.

A version of this analysis was presented at the 2021 annual meeting of the American Political Science Association. Lesley Lavery and Sara Dahill-Brown, “Collectively Confronting COVID-19: Teachers Unions Respond to a Global Pandemic,” presentation to APSA, September 2021.


Terry M. Moe, Special Interest: Teachers Unions and America’s Public Schools (Brookings Institution Press, 2011).


Teachers can possess formal authority at both state and local levels. For example, the chief state school officer of Arkansas is required to have 10 years of teaching experience and hold a current teaching license. State teachers of the year occupy seats on the state board of education in Michigan and North Carolina (though in neither instance can they vote). Where collective bargaining exists, teachers unions can exercise substantial control over policy issues. But teachers are also intrinsically important: Their experience and expertise in combination with the organizations that represent them often ensure a measure of informal influence. See chapter 1 in Sara E. Dahill-Brown, Education, Equity, and the States: How Variations in State Governance Make or Break Reform (Harvard Education Press, 2019).


Refer to the National Center for Education Statistics National Teacher and Principal Survey for 2017–18 to view more precise estimates by type of school and/or state: https://nces.ed.gov/surveys/ntps/tables_list.asp.

This later criterion, pandemic severity, proved to be not terribly significant given that the pandemic reached all regions and communities fairly quickly.

For all but 6 of those 45, we spoke with local leaders at least twice during the pandemic. We promised confidentiality, and whenever possible we collected local news, district communications, social media, and COVID planning documents to validate and fill out stories they shared with us.

School leaders should take a note from the districts that built productive relationships before, and maintained them during, the pandemic.

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Let’s start with reflecting on the past several years: What have been your board’s proudest policy accomplishments?

**Clarence Crawford**: In addition to hiring a new state superintendent who is exactly the transformative leader we were hoping for, we’ve been focused on leading transformative educational reform for all of Maryland’s children. We are developing a multiyear strategic plan to implement the Blueprint for Maryland’s Future legislation, originating from the Kirwan Commission report. The commission completed its study over a six-year period and got the legislature to implement the reforms, accompanied by a funding commitment of about $3 billion over a 10-year period. We’re blessed with a once-in-a-generation opportunity to dramatically change the educational trajectory for hundreds of thousands of children.

**Eric Davis**: Over the last few years, we have become more mindful that our system is serving a lot of students well but not serving far too many well enough. One of the first things we did in 2019 was rethink our strategic plan, with a focus on maintaining things that are working and changing things that absolutely need to change in order to support all our students. It has three primary goals: eliminating opportunity gaps, improving school and district performance, and increasing educator preparedness. We selected 2025 as our goal target date. Of course, we know what happened in 2020, so we are updating those objectives not only to account for COVID but also to include, frankly, insights and experiences we have had about meeting the needs of all students and building into our goals a strong commitment to equity.

To turn those objectives into actions, we developed a seven-point plan, which will sound familiar to anyone in this space. It includes things like teacher development and recruitment, having a high-quality teacher in every classroom, making sure every school has a high-quality, effective principal, update finance systems so they support all students, and update the assessment and accountability system. All seven points have a system flavor, including transforming and improving the performance of districts and schools, because you have to change the system in order to change the outcomes for students. Developing that plan and the strategic goals and objectives are some of the things I am most proud of.

**Casandra Ulbrich**: In the 16 years I have been on the board in Michigan, we’ve had consistent board membership and department leadership. We’ve had only two superintendent searches: one because former state superintendent Brian Whiston passed away in office, after which we hired the current superintendent, Michael Rice. That has allowed stability, particularly overseeing the department of education. Where we do not have stability is when external interests want to micromanage education in the state outside the structures of the board and the department.
We also have engaged in strategic planning, resulting in our Top 10 in 10 plan. Thanks to federal funding and state priorities, we have been successful in increasing funding in areas where we were deficient before. We managed to get an extra $246 million for students with disabilities and $245 million for student mental health. Five years ago, we had zero dollars in our state budget for student mental health. We also received $210 million for school safety, as this has become a top priority following the tragic Oxford school shooting last year.

Now we are also experiencing a teacher shortage. We have people leaving the profession and not enough going into the profession. We need to focus on increasing the numbers and levels of educators. We were able to get funding to support students going into teaching as well as ensuring that those in the profession can get resources they need.

As you reflect on your accomplishments, what have been key contributors to that success?

Ulbrich: Anytime you can approach topics with a unified voice—which is difficult to do in education because we have all these organizations that focus on different things—and bring them together under a common cause, you can do wonderful things and get great policy passed. Michigan has stringent term limits: six years in the House, eight in the Senate, two terms as governor, then a lifetime ban on running again. What that means is you are constantly churning elected officials, and you must reeducate constantly. If we are each educating them on different things, we are not winning. But if we come together, that makes a huge difference.

How does the board in Michigan bring people together? What do those mechanisms and processes look like?

Ulbrich: It usually centers around ideas that surface that aren’t necessarily good for the system, and we need to come together to push back. Lame duck, for Michigan, is usually when these ideas come up and things happen quickly. Some of the worst education bills I have seen get introduced during this time, and the education world comes together almost instantly and as one entity fights back. When we coalesce around trying to make sure [we] “do no harm,” we can be effective.

Most recently, around the educator shortage, [the funding initiative] was really driven by the state superintendent and the department. They were able to get all the education entities on board and then promote it with the governor and legislature, to the point that it became the number-one issue people started talking about. As a result, we made recommendations and were able to get many of those enacted.

Crawford: We are blessed to have a 14-member board made up of outstanding individuals who possess unique technical expertise and varied perspectives, but we have still been able to organize around how we can dramatically improve the educational opportunities and outcomes for all of Maryland’s children. For example, in 2021, we passed a resolution to safely return our children to in-person learning in classrooms. In 2022, we passed another resolution that signaled our commitment to bold, transformative educational reform. [As part of] that process, we have created a culture based on respect, civility, and transparency. As a board, we have demonstrated that we can disagree on policy matters without becoming disagreeable. In addition, I and the vice president contact every board member monthly, and we start the conversation with, “Tell me how I can improve. Tell me what I need to do differently.” From there, we talk about where we are going as an organization.

In Maryland, we are a policymaking board, so the actual delivery of educational services takes place in the 24 local school systems. Historically, we had not engaged with those systems effectively. We did not engage with the legislature. We did not engage with other key stakeholders. However, over the past few years, we made a major transformation in which we are engaging with them in the development of the strategic plan. We are engaging with the unions over teacher pipelines and working conditions, as well as with students. This heavy engagement is dramatically different from what we have done in the past, and we are seeing tremendous benefits.
 monthly meetings was a data deep dive, and we started to look at student performance from a number of perspectives. He’s been saying from day one, “We don’t want to go back to where we were pre-COVID, because pre-COVID educational achievement wasn’t good enough.”

Like Eric said, some of our students were doing quite well, but for a number of our students—the underserved, low-income, children of color, English language learners, children with disabilities—we were not doing well. We have used the data to help make the argument for bold, transformative change. In discussions with local boards and superintendents, we are finding that many of them are taking our data and sharing it locally. Part of what we are doing with the rollout of the strategic plan is hosting what we call gallery walks in regions, displaying the data for that particular region. In some instances, we’re hearing people say, “We’ve never seen these data.” In another instance, after seeing how a western Maryland district was leading in the number and quality of its apprenticeships, a superintendent from another part of the state said she had to rethink what was possible in her own district.

While we cannot make districts select a particular curriculum, we want to work with them to ensure they draw from proven, research-based solutions and can demonstrate that they are implementing those solutions with fidelity.

We had another issue, and that is the Accountability and Implementation Board. One of the criticisms over the years in Maryland was that we have had these once-in-a-generation education reform initiatives, but the board and the state education department failed to implement them with fidelity. As a result, the legislature created an accountability board that will work with us to ensure that the districts, the state board, and the education department follow through with fidelity on the Blueprint for Maryland’s Future.

**Ulbrich:** You always want data to inform your decisions—to identify where you need to improve and what you are doing well. We appreciate that the department provides updates on our Top 10 in 10 playbook every month. From our perspective, we do not just want to hear about test scores. We want to provide people with real information that they can act on. When we were coming up with our

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**Davis:** We have a lot of similar characteristics [in North Carolina]. We start with the groups that are, for the most part, not partisan but student oriented. Then, similar to Clarence, we found the best solutions when we listened to our 115 superintendents, who are out there every day on the front line.

We were able to get some synergy around literacy. Nothing motivates you more than to have some other state show you up. And when Mississippi showed progress—boy, that got to us. In a rare moment of unity, the board, our recently elected superintendent, the general assembly, and the governor—who are sometimes at odds—came together around a unified strategy to improve literacy. It was imbedded into the university system’s educator preparation programs. We cannot dictate to districts what to use, but there were enough districts using it and having success that we could point to it and say, “Hey, there’s the solution.” Already, the results are pointing in the right direction, and the feeling of working together in times like this is maybe as important as the actual results.

The one that was a little more difficult was during our periodic review of academic standards. A couple years ago, social studies was the topic of the day and a pretty good point of controversy. We delayed our work until after the election of a new superintendent so they could participate. She had some different points of view, which we paused to incorporate and found a degree of compromise and common ground. It did not necessarily change the general direction we were taking but widened the tent, if you will. I am really pleased with what we came up with. We were criticized by both sides, which tells me we are in about the right spot. But it held true to the core principle that we want to educate students in the American experience of all Americans. We want to celebrate accomplishments we have had and challenge ourselves not with shame but with vision to do better for all Americans.

**How important are data and evidence in fostering collaboration and coalescing around an action or agenda?**

**Crawford:** It’s very important. One thing that the new superintendent instituted at our

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**We have used the data to help make the argument for bold, transformative change.**
accountability system [under the federal Every Student Succeeds Act], the state board said, “We want an accountability system that parents can actually use.” We created a parent dashboard, which includes not only test scores but information parents can use if they want to make a different choice for their child. Does this school offer music and art? What is the teacher-student ratio? Then we give schools the opportunity to put in highlights of their own.

**Davis:** We can hardly have a two-minute conversation without somebody sharing data about the issue, which is really good. But I have to admit, we’re not satisfied with our use of disaggregated data. To Casandra’s point that it is more than test scores, we are trying to reform our licensure system because of the way it affects preparation, support, retention, and recruiting of teachers. We are trying to create a connection between increasing certification and student outcomes. Unfortunately, right now our system only has one data connection, and that’s through test scores. That is so problematic, so limiting. We’re trying to create additional measures: student surveys, evaluations, a host of different things. So far, we haven’t found anyone who has cracked that nut. [But] it is pretty clear that you need to look through multiple lenses to get the full picture.

**Ulbrich:** I’ve worked in higher education for over 20 years, so I have never worked for an institution that did not have a strategic plan. In K-12, it was a little unusual to me when I first started that we did not have a blueprint. When Brian Whiston came into the state superintendency, one of the first things he did was pull people together to talk about, what are the things we need to focus on over the next 10 years? It is absolutely important and helps focus the work.

**Davis:** I have gone through a strategic planning process in a business environment and now in the education environment. In both places, it is a terrific learning opportunity. You learn about what’s working, what’s not, what the needs are, and what aspirations there are. With an open mind and a bent toward learning, it is a great unifying experience because the process causes us to listen to each other, find common ground, and move forward. Developing the plan is invaluable; implementing the plan, however, is a whole other conversation.

**How important is a strategic plan for bringing people together and making sure members of your board understand they are part of a collective effort?**

**Crawford:** It’s extremely important. We are rolling out our strategic plan in three phases. The first phase is building out the high-level mission, goals, and vision. In the second phase, we will inform the process with baseline data from our state assessments. The third phase will involve heavy engagement with stakeholders and decision makers, getting them to feel a sense of joint ownership of where we are going and how we are going to get there.

We conducted a statewide, online survey and received over 27,000 responses from people from many different walks of life. About 85 percent of the respondents said that the quality of public schools is extremely important for Maryland’s success as a state. In addition, we have hosted over 22 virtual roundtables, involving over 300 participants. These roundtables included representatives from a wide variety of groups, such as local boards, superintendents, administrators, English learners, business leaders, parents, students, teachers, and others. A key element of our outreach is our willingness to listen, listen for understanding. We have been able to largely avoid disruptive situations that you have seen happening in other educational board settings. I believe this has been because we encouraged people to express their opinions and passions. But we insisted they do so in a respectful, civil manner, and we reminded them that we must be able to disagree without becoming disagreeable. Our children are watching us as role models, and we are all Americans. Even when we had to go through the face-covering issue, we were able to work through that situation in a respectful and civil manner. Our leadership and performance gave the board added credibility.

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**What does good relationship building look like, and how does it contribute to the board’s success?**

**Crawford:** As I mentioned, for about a decade, there was little engagement with key stakeholders by the state board, but we have
The pandemic was probably the worst point for board relations as well as external pressure.

reversed that practice. In fact, we typically meet in Baltimore but held our October board meeting in western Maryland. One of the local board members said, “It’s great for you to come out so people can see that you’re not someone with two heads.” We started the conversation with, “We’ve come to listen.”

We are meeting with local boards informally. We had one board in particular that was troubled by what we did with respect to face coverings so we met with the local president and superintendent offline. We had a great conversation and built some bridges, because at the end of the day, I believe everyone had one goal: How do we better educate our children?

Davis: It’s interesting, Clarence, that you mention how you traveled out west. This past week, we met in Pembroke, one of our smallest towns. It’s home to the University of North Carolina–Pembroke, which started as the Indian Normal School in our state. Of course, our board member who is from Pembroke was thrilled, and it strengthened our relationships to be in that environment.

I have learned more from not-so-good relationships than from the good ones, but what I’ve learned most is it begins with being willing to talk and, when it comes to conflict, treating each other with respect, which is easy to say and hard to do. As a board, honestly, we rarely have split votes. But when we do, a measure of our health is how quickly we move past it without underlying frustrations. Usually, I can get a sense of that by the conversation after the meeting. Who is talking to whom? If I see colleagues on opposite sides of an issue talking, that’s a good sign. Oftentimes, that happens without prompting. When it doesn’t, then we have more work to do.

Ulbrich: Well, I’m jealous, because that’s not my experience these days. When I started on the board 16 years ago, even though we are a partisan board, if you had talked to any one of us, you would not have been able to figure out who had a D behind their name and who had an R. We had the same goals. We might have gotten there differently, but we all wanted the same things. We didn’t disrespect each other publicly. If we had disagreements, they were one on one and not on social media.

The pandemic changed that. I have seen more disrespect and vitriol in the last couple years than I ever witnessed before. Just looking at advertising in Michigan over this [last] election cycle, the things that have been said about our educators and schools are disturbing. I would love to get back to the place where public education is seen as a public good, and everyone could at least agree on that and want to strengthen and support it. The pandemic was probably the worst point for board relations as well as external pressure. Somehow that opened a door and allowed for more disagreements. I am hopeful that we can get past this.

Are there strategies you use to create open communications, trust, and respect? How does that look?

Crawford: The board is appointed by the governor and confirmed by the Maryland Senate, and board members can serve up to two four-year terms. We have been able to maintain a clear focus on educating children. We have had a few challenges within the board in how we address certain cultural issues, but these challenges enabled the board to grow and mature as a policymaking body. Local boards have said that they have tried to model their meetings after ours. Again, it comes down to being sincere and listening. We were always very respectful of the opinions of board members and key stakeholders who disagreed with the board’s policy decisions. For example, during the face-covering issue, we decided to hold a public hearing. We invited people from every conceivable walk of life. We had some people say, “You can’t allow him or her to come because they’re crazy.” We said, “Yes, we are going to allow them to come and speak.” Our approach worked beautifully.

In 1916, the legislature commissioned a study about the education condition and effectiveness in Maryland. A number of the challenges cited in that report are still with us today. Every place we go, I say, “Wouldn’t it be something if we could slice this Gordian knot and have people look back 100 years from now and say, ‘What did those crazy people do in 2022 that changed everything for Maryland’s children?’ ” That’s part of what we are doing—trying to get everybody excited about this. We do not underestimate the complexity, and like Casandra and Eric said, this is a 10-year effort. My biggest fear, in this highly political environment, is whether Maryland can
stay focused over a 7- to 10-year period. So far, so good.

What challenges have you experienced, and what has made those challenging? How did you address them?

**Davis:** Typically, our board members have eight-year terms. We are appointed by the governor, confirmed by the general assembly. The benefit is that you get people who are willing to commit for an extended period. But also, it spans governorships and legislative terms. One of our goals is to insulate the system from the sway of partisanship. We’ve not been able to do that as much as I would like.

We are our best when we rely on professional educators and committed board members to steer the system. We are answerable to elected officials, but we don’t do our best when they get into the details. We are in a valuable position to provide some degree of continuity because things aren’t going to change in two years, in four years. It takes an 8- to 10-year commitment to make meaningful change. Unfortunately, we just don’t have the patience these days to accept that. Not a day goes by where I don’t get an email from someone who believes passionately in a cause. But we do need to protect our education system from the divisive issues of the day and figure out a way to maintain stability and focus on the right things.

**Ulbrich:** I couldn’t agree more. Having long terms and only two board members turn over every two years has brought education some level of stability in Michigan, even when there could be vast swings at the state level from one side to the other. And then having us appoint the state superintendent keeps the superintendent insulated a bit from those swings as well.

What challenges do you see on the horizon for your boards and education systems? What advice would you give other board chairs?

**Ulbrich:** We all just went through something that nobody had gone through in a hundred years. We don’t know what the long-term effect is going to be on education, on mental health, socialization. There are going to be ramifications. We have to have flexibility and understanding to take into account that our kids have gone through some traumatic experiences, and maybe we need to rethink how we do our work to reflect the new reality.

There were also some benefits. For example, we focused on the digital divide, making sure that every student has access to technology and the internet. We have a renewed focus on food insecurity. If we have another incident where we have to shut down schools for a time, we now understand that we can still feed our kids and get them resources.

**Crawford:** While the mortality issue with COVID was terrible, I believe the real story is going to be the pandemic’s social and emotional harm to children and adults. We have to think differently, to figure out how we can provide wraparound services. We cannot afford to get sidetracked in divisive disputes. The thing I always ask when people ask about a divisive topic is, “So if we pursue this, will more of our children be able to read at grade level in the third grade?” The other thing is for the boards to model behavior that we want to see in the rest of our society and stay focused on educating our children.

**Davis:** While we need to be a source of stability and certainty, we also have to have the courage to change. Whatever was a problem before COVID has now been exacerbated. We need to challenge ourselves, to face the criticism that comes with advocating for change and make our best judgment. We can’t go back. We can’t sit still. We’ve got to move forward.

**Ulbrich:** Language matters. When you are talking to people about education, make sure you reflect the fact that we have all been through some pretty traumatic experiences, and our educators have been on the front lines. We need to get back to where we are treating educators like professionals, where we are talking about education in a way that is aspirational as opposed to destructive. I want to get back to using language that makes people want to be in this environment and in this field.
What a delight it was to interview three rock-star state board chairs for this edition of the Standard! Their passion for excellence in education is infectious, their focus on creating the conditions for student success is inspiring, and their respect for, and trust in, the intentions of fellow board members and policymakers is admirable. They have navigated issues both challenging and not so challenging and sought consensus with care. They truly value their board’s collective voice and a commitment to journeying together, even when it is difficult to achieve.

I am writing this a few weeks after the November 2022 elections. In campaigns across the country, candidates from all sides often demonized and vilified their opponents—the antithesis of the “we’re all in this together” mentality necessary to build common vision and purpose. Negative campaigning is common, I know, but sad nonetheless.

NASBE from time to time has been asked to quietly advise boards who struggled to achieve a unified vision. While the challenges vary, the approach that works best assumes good intent, facilitates respectful dialogue and empathic listening to people with varying perspectives, and embraces civility. Different perspectives inform policy design and implementation, and impactful ideas are shaped from the input and embraced.

It is also better to be kind. In R. J. Palacio’s young-adult novel Wonder about a visibly disabled student, the student’s teacher, Mr. Browne, says, “When given the choice between being right and being kind, choose kind.” It is a great rule for effective living—and effective boardsmanship. We teach our children that meanness is unacceptable. And yet it seems that more and more adults feel they have permission to be mean, insulting, and to attribute malicious intentions to others. In our hearts, however, we know better.

Most of our elected officials end up in collective decision-making bodies: Congress, state legislatures, city and county councils, boards of education. For most of these bodies, split votes are actually relatively rare. And they all function best when their members develop policy in an inclusive manner. Collective voice does not mean there are no disagreements—and sometimes even deep disappointments at certain outcomes. But for the most part, progress is thereby made.

Congratulations to new state board members—those who are newly elected, newly appointed, or replacing retiring members! People in your state, on your boards, and at NASBE value your commitment and your perspective. As you join the policymaking table, take a moment to look into the eyes of each person around the table and remind yourself that you are surrounded by good people who want what is best for children. Approach your work at that table with positive intent and assume others will do the same.

Make no mistake, we are stronger when we work together and seek common ground. State boards share a desire for great education opportunities that create the conditions for children to learn, grow, and be prepared for success in life. If we always start from there, and keep an eye on that objective, our children, our communities, and our country will be served well.
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