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, have a high-quality teacher in every classroom, make 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 “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

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

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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.

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.

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.

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
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
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.