

# We the Media

## *Stepping Out on the Public Square*

If you are a new member of a state board of education, you have by now settled into your seat at the table. Likely, you are getting acquainted with the rules of public engagement. As an elected board member coming off the campaign trail, you may already feel confident about engaging with the media and constituents. As an appointed member, maybe not so much. Regardless, a few tips can set you up for success.

**Get to Know Your Role.** New board members come bearing goals and perspectives. Diversity of perspective is critical for policymaking and can lead to better outcomes. In a recent NASBE interview, Maryland State Board Chair Clarence Crawford said his board can “disagree on policy matters without becoming disagreeable.” Despite differences in opinion and expertise, members organize around a common goal: improving educational opportunities and outcomes for all of Maryland’s children. In other words, this board has discovered power and authority in its collective voice.

Although you may not agree with a board vote, you stand by that decision once made. Publicizing differences of opinion after the fact discredits the board and undermines its authority. Your goal is to find agreement on clear, cohesive messages to help the public make sense of policy decisions. Members should collectively form a game plan. At last year’s New Member Institute, Indiana State Board Member Byron Ernest shared three questions that guide his public speaking: Does the issue need to be shared publicly? Does it need to be shared now? Am I the right messenger?

**Lean on Staff.** On a panel at this year’s Legislative Conference, North Carolina Deputy State Superintendent of Education

Michael Maher said, “A good communications director is worth their weight in gold.” Many state boards are fortunate to have a communications team they share with the state agency. Some lucky boards have their own. Most often, boards have an executive director that serves as chief of operations: helping set meeting agendas, ensuring members are prepared for meetings, and carrying out initiatives. Whomever you have, get to know them and let them help you.

Communications folks can help your board develop media relationships that will lead to better reporting and a keener understanding of the board’s policy decisions and initiatives. They can also help develop individual members as spokesman and implement strategies to help the board achieve its public engagement goals and build communities’ trust.

**Leverage NASBE.** Every summer, NASBE hosts a New Member Institute to help new state board members understand their role and what it takes to be a successful, productive member of a state board. This year, we are hosting the event virtually over three sessions: June 28, July 26, and August 30. These sessions cover several topics: understanding state board authority and how to lead for lasting change, parliamentary procedure, using evidence and data in policymaking, collaboration and engagement strategies, emerging education issues, and more! Past attendees frequently remark on how valuable these sessions have been to their board work, as well as the chance to connect with board members from across the country. Don’t fail to take advantage of this unique professional development opportunity! ■



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