

National Association of State Boards of Education

⊕ State Boards Advance Equity Agendas in Challenging Times

By Kimberly Charis

Efforts to advance educational equity are challenging in the best of times. Differing attitudes, beliefs, policy agendas, and political viewpoints can make collaboration difficult and, in some cases, seemingly impossible. As a result, equity efforts remain uncoordinated and compartmentalized, often unable to produce meaningful, lasting change. The pandemic and the strife over racial injustice compounded these difficulties in 2020.

As citizen boards who must be nonpartisan to be effective, state boards of education are uniquely placed to help eliminate the political divides that impede decisive action to end inequities in learning. Three state boards of education and education agency staff—in Nebraska, New York, and North Carolina—committed to joining a NASBE-led network, the Leading for Equity and Excellence Program (LEEP) State Policy Network. By partnering with local officials, setting clear equity goals, convening multiple stakeholders, and posing meaningful questions at the board table, these state boards are pressing to change their state systems.

“Every generation of Americans gets its own set of challenges and opportunities,” said Eric Davis, chair of the North Carolina State Board of Education, during a recent NASBE meeting. “We don’t get to pick what challenge or opportunity we have. We sure do get to pick how we respond.”

The LEEP State Policy Network fosters collaboration between state boards, state education agencies, and district and school leaders to

strengthen equity agendas across state and local systems. Network teams of state board members, administrators, principals, and teachers convene virtually to engage diverse perspectives on equity and equality, institutional racism, and poverty while discussing hindrances to closing the achievement gap. Participants also have opportunities to meet with national experts to discuss the most relevant policy issues affecting school communities around the country including social and emotional learning and school funding.

STATES LEARN FROM EACH OTHER

As part of efforts to advance educational equity and close the achievement gap in their states, Nebraska, New York, and North Carolina each put together a LEEP team in 2020 to design work plans with clear equity goals. In the wake of Nebraska’s release in 2018 of a declaration outlining state commitments to advance educational equity,¹ the Nebraska team focused its LEEP work on creating tools to guide ongoing efforts to raise school leaders’ awareness of the equity implications of their decisions.

“Our Nebraska equity tool has drawn interest from [districts, schools, state agencies, and other organizations],” said Patsy Koch Johns, member of the Nebraska State Board of Education. “They are asking if they have permission to use our document as a model. We are very clear that our document was developed for Nebraska Department of Education staff and the state board. However, we also want them to know that our equity tool is a fluid document and that we hope they will adapt it and use it to achieve equitable outcomes for their members and organizations.”

New York set out to increase the use of evidence-based research in all areas of the state board’s policymaking and incorporate diversity, equity, and inclusion in their policy discussions. “Being part of the network and having regular meetings is a way to keep the efforts on the front burner,” said Nan Eileen Mead, member of the New York Board of Regents. “There are many competing interests with regard to how we spend our time, and participating in the network keeps equity at the center of the work that we are doing.”

During a session at NASBE’s 2020 annual conference, Davis outlined equity work of the North Carolina board. “Our first step along the equity journey was to become students again,” he said. “We found it important to become vulnerable and to be really honest with ourselves about what our own life experiences tell us and what they don’t tell us about each other and what assumptions we carry with us in our blind spots.” Next, the board looked at data on North Carolina demographics and on persistent gaps in student outcomes and worked on a common definition of equity in education. “That was no small task,” he said.

For their LEEP efforts, North Carolina coordinated a peer network for equity officers in school districts across the state, audited state board policies to foster equity, and provided technical assistance to local policymaking boards to help align state and local efforts. Partnerships have been essential for ensuring that state boards’ efforts are well grounded, Davis said. Experts and stakeholder groups have met with the North Carolina board, including students. “The power of convening is in many ways as important, or maybe even

more important, than policy because you get more hands on the oars,” Davis said.

When state boards partner with local decision makers and allocate time and resources to advance equity collaboratively, school communities gain momentum to move forward and stay the course, agreed Shino Tanikawa, co-chair of the Education Council Consortium in New York City.

COVID-19 AND EQUITY WORK

As schools closed in response to the pandemic, LEEP state networks shifted their focus. State and district leaders worked countless hours daily to ensure the health, safety, and well-being of students, educators, and other school personnel. It soon became clear that the pandemic was laying bare and exacerbating systemic inequities. For many leaders, educational equity went from being a theoretical concept to a stark reality. Many states had difficulty keeping track of students and giving them access to virtual learning, especially in urban and rural districts with less broadband connectivity. States focused on students’ increasing food insecurity and challenges to their social and emotional well-being. Although learning loss was an issue for many students, those receiving special education were at even greater risk of falling behind academically.

During the height of the pandemic, LEEP provided targeted support to help state board members and local education leaders identify key opportunities to move educational equity forward in difficult circumstances. These virtual learning events and project update meetings provided a forum for open discussions between policymakers, administrators, and educators to commiserate about the challenges of pursuing equity during the COVID-19 crisis. Since many of the challenges within school systems are systemic and political in nature and relate to differences between various education stakeholder groups, having the opportunity to hear diverse perspectives was extremely valuable to the network teams, said New York Board of Regents member Mead.

LEEP participants agreed that state board collaborations can raise awareness of local

issues to the state level. Shining a light on partners’ work both elevates those efforts and makes it clear to state stakeholders that “it’s not just the state board doing the work. We’re actually just one player on a bigger team,” Davis said.

At a recent annual conference session, Illinois state board chair Darren Reisberg added that the pandemic also provided some opportunities. Because they were the new normal for conducting board business, virtual environments made “stakeholder engagement easier, more manageable, and more inclusive.” Consequently, his board heard from leaders in parts of the state that don’t routinely attend in-person meetings of the board.

WALKING THE TALK

The pandemic increased public awareness of society’s vulnerability, and the deaths of George Floyd, Ahmaud Arbery, Breonna Taylor, and others at the hands of police during the same period raised awareness of systemic structures that create many of the racial inequities in the public education system.

As important as awareness and empathy can be, “it’s going to take more than empathy, more than writing checks, and more than making statements,” Davis said. “I firmly believe that what it’s going to take is for those of us in leadership, especially white people in leadership positions, to come to grips with racism as a more dangerous epidemic than COVID.”

State boards, including those that participated in LEEP, are taking actions to address inequities. Several state boards have stand-alone equity committees or dedicated staff to ensure that equity remains a central focus of the state’s strategic plan, as North Carolina has done.²

Many boards have done work to address the digital divide, as California has.³ At NASBE’s annual conference, California board chair Linda Darling-Hammond said her state has so far been able to cut by half the number of students without access to virtual learning, adding “we’re bound and determined to finish that process.”

Some state boards are taking on revisions to social studies standards, particularly in history, with an equity lens. Many are taking steps to increase diversity of leaders in the state education agency, as well as in the classroom, and developing cultural competence standards in educator preparation programs, as Illinois is doing, or increasing training for current teachers, as California has done. Illinois also has committed to developing an “equity journey continuum” to help school districts assess their progress in incorporating an equity lens in their decisions and practices, Reisberg said.⁴

These boards have gone beyond crafting an equity statement and developing an equity agenda to creating and implementing action plans to dismantle the structures that impede their progress to eliminate inequities. NASBE looks to more states to join the effort in the days ahead.

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NOTES

1 Nebraska Department of Education, Resolution on Educational Equity, August 3, 2018, https://cdn.education.ne.gov/wp-content/uploads/2018/08/Resolution_on_Equity_Education.pdf; Nebraska State Board of Education, “Equity Lens,” https://cdn.education.ne.gov/wp-content/uploads/2019/09/Equity_Lens_8_20_19_Rev_9_5_19-1.pdf.

2 North Carolina is also working to set up an equity office within the board.

3 California Department of Education, “State Superintendent Tony Thurmond and Digital Divide Task Force Connect School Leaders to Available Devices as Learning Resumes,” press release, August 5, 2020.

4 Equity Advisory Committee, “The Equity Journey Continuum,” presentation before Illinois State Board of Education, September 16, 2020.

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