

Out with the old, in with the new: Political elections and transitions are all about change, as newly elected or appointed leaders inevitably seek to define their own agenda and leave their own unique mark on their office. As such, these transitions create important junctures in – as well as challenges for – the continued roll-out of a state’s strategy for boosting college and career readiness.

Leadership transitions have the potential to derail progress or slow momentum – especially in cases where reform efforts have been closely identified with a particular governor, chief state school officer, legislator or higher education chancellor. But these transitions are also an opportunity to shore up support, redouble communications efforts and even extend and build upon the college and career readiness agenda in new ways.

Achieve’s *Taking Root* research series on how states sustain education policies over time and through political leadership changes suggests a number of lessons for how states can carefully maintain their reform trajectory in the face of new state leadership. Building broad-based support, communicating clearly and widely, and embedding education reform goals in a variety of state programs and policies all can work together to ensure state education reform policies stay in place – and have the time they need to take root and make a difference in student achievement.

All of these efforts may take time to put in place and to take hold. With an election just a few months away, state leaders should focus on these three steps to help successfully transition from one administration to the next:

- 1. Make Sure Champions—Inside and Outside of Government—Speak Up**
- 2. Inform the Candidates**
- 3. Proactively Educate New Leaders**

Make Sure Champions Speak Up

Champions are widely acknowledged in political theory as an essential part of the policymaking process: They help build momentum for change by identifying problems, developing solutions and mobilizing support.

All causes have champions, but successful causes have champions both inside and outside the government. Both types of advocates should be mobilized during the campaign and transition period to shore up support for a state’s rigorous graduation requirements and broader college- and career-ready agenda.

Champions outside the government include business and labor groups, newspaper editorial boards, education advocacy organizations, public policy research organizations, grassroots organizations and citizen committees – groups that apply pressure on policymakers to make or sustain changes or help mobilize public opinion. These “external” champions are often part of public/private efforts,

At Least Half the States Will See New Governors in 2011

In 2010, there will be 37 gubernatorial elections, including 23 elections where there is no incumbent running (open seats). Among the 35 states in the American Diploma Project Network, there will be 26 elections, 17 of which are guaranteed to have a new governor because the current governor is facing a term limit or has decided not to run again.

	<i>Open Seat</i>	<i>Incumbent Running</i>
	17 STATES	9 STATES
ADP States	AL*, CA, CO, CT, FL*, GA*, HI, ME, MI*, MN*, NM*, OK*, OR, PA, RI, TN*, WI	AR*, AZ*, ID, IL, MD, MA, NE*, OH*, TX*
	6 STATES	5 STATES (and DC)
Non-ADP States	KS, NY*, SC, SD*, VT, WY	AK, DC*, IA, NV, NH, UT
<small>*States with college- and career-ready graduation requirements</small>		

such as state P-20 councils that involve other representatives beyond state agency leaders. These groups and individuals may be the same ones that were critical to getting a state's major education policies adopted in the first place, but may no longer be playing an active role in maintaining support for and sustaining those policies. Yet they should be, as sustainability just isn't possible without them.

In many cases, because of their stature in the community, these champions have key political connections or represent key voting constituents—and thus have important access to or influence with policymakers. States should look for ways to continue to inform these external champions and involve them in the ongoing implementation of new education policies. Importantly, states shouldn't just wait until their policies are under attack to reach out to these external champions; they should be engaging leaders outside the government throughout the adoption and implementation process. These leaders should be tapped to serve on key advisory committees, participate in important state and national meetings, and actively engage in policymaker education by hosting briefings and meetings for current and prospective state leaders. Also, states should encourage these external champions to reach out to their constituencies and strengthen their coalitions and voice.

Important champions also exist within government, and they too have important roles to play. When preparing for a transition, states should make sure key policy-making bodies—such as the state board of education or higher education coordinating committee—signal their support of college and career readiness policies and their intention to stay the course. In gubernatorial elections, the chief state school officer can also play a key role in communicating about the importance of the state's education policy. Although state employees don't lobby or use public resources on public election campaigns, they are an important voice in explaining policy and implementation decisions—and can provide continuity between the current and future administrations.

While the immediate challenge most states in 2010 face is successfully managing the transition to new leadership after the fall elections, champions should also see this time as an opportunity to redouble communications and public engagement efforts. Having broad public understanding of the state education reform agenda becomes even more important in times of transition.

Inform the Candidates

Beyond being leading advocates for college- and career-ready policies—and ensuring attention continues to be paid to state efforts already underway—external champions should be asked to step up and play a unique role in engaging with candidates in support of this agenda.

Community champions often have access to and the ear of candidates, and they can send a strong signal that if the candidates want their support, they should embrace the state's goals for boosting college and career readiness. For example, the Maryland Business Roundtable for Education—a coalition of 100 leading employers who have made a long-term commitment to support education reform and improve student achievement in the state—engages with candidates in key election cycles. Recognizing the influence the business community usually has with gubernatorial candidates, the Roundtable arranges meetings between its CEO's and the candidates to discuss education reform policies. It also asks candidates to complete a survey expressing their views on and plans for education reform. Through all these opportunities, the Roundtable signals clearly to candidates its interest in them endorsing Maryland's college- and career-ready agenda.

Business and advocacy groups in other states have played similar hands-on roles during election campaigns. In Tennessee, for example, where current Governor Phil Bredesen is not running for re-

election because of term limits, the new education reform group SCORE (State Collaborative on Reforming Education) hosted a candidate debate that was broadcast statewide to probe and publicize each gubernatorial candidate's policy positions. Working with key stakeholders to create a state strategic plan for K-12 education reform, SCORE knows that the next governor will need to be an important ally. In addition to signaling the state's current commitment to sustained reform, Bredesen succeeded in getting all six gubernatorial candidates (three from each party) to sign a letter endorsing the state's federal Race to the Top application and committing to implement its reform agenda. Tennessee was one of just two states chosen for round 1 funding, in part because of the clear and broad (and intentional) commitment of a broad group of stakeholders across the state to its reform plan.

At the same time, smart external champions recognize that change isn't always bad: New leaders often come with fresh ideas and fresh perspective that can actually work to accelerate state policies and plans. "Stay the course" isn't a very compelling campaign slogan, and state leaders should creatively look for ways of connecting an existing reform agenda to the new approaches that new governors, legislators and chief state school officers advocate. For example, in Pennsylvania—where retiring Governor Ed Rendell has led the adoption of a new suite of end-of-course exams that ground district graduation requirements—savvy advocacy groups have been working since last summer to influence the next governor's education agenda. The goal is to find new ways that candidates can "own" this agenda—not just sustain it but more importantly build on these policies. In particular, these groups are working to get commitments from candidates on supporting new drop-out prevention initiatives that can contribute to graduating more students ready for college and careers.

Proactively Educate New Leaders

Even after the election and winners are known, outreach and communications efforts shouldn't end, but should be redoubled. To begin, states can take stock of which staff in key positions will be remaining, and immediately organize focused briefings about the state's college- and career-ready agenda and next steps.

In Washington state, for example, the business coalition Partnership for Learning has traditionally organized a bi-annual, all-legislators special briefing session to review key education issues with both newly elected legislators and veteran legislators who find themselves in new leadership positions. Past legislative briefings have reviewed current public opinion survey results showing support for the state's reform agenda, showcased innovative work at the district level and engaged CEOs in discussions about the importance of improving the state's schools and college-going rates.

The Bottom Line

When leading advocates – be it governors, state education leaders, legislators or other high-level officials – leave office, their policy legacies may face scrutiny and be subject to being overturned. Given the sheer volume of reform that has occurred over the past year – let alone the past four years – this issue of ensuring sustainable reform through political turnover is both timely and urgent. Elections also offer an opportunity to re-connect and re-engage external champions, bring new leaders in the fold, and expand upon the scope and reach of the college- and career-ready agenda. The key is to engage early, often and effectively before, during and after political change.