

Education Policy Advising

How to set your Governor—and Yourself—up for
Success, Beginning on Day 1



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About Education First Consulting

Education First Consulting uniquely helps policymakers, advocates and funders develop broad-based improvement and reform strategies to inspire and engage all students to graduate from high school and postsecondary studies prepared for a competitive world of constant change and innovation. Education First's practice areas include teacher and leader effectiveness, college and career readiness, college completion and STEM (science, technology, engineering and math) strategies. We support and partner with our clients all over the country to accomplish strategic planning, policy and program development, communications and advocacy, and effective grantmaking to reach important outcomes for students.

Members of the firm have decades of real-world education experience, and include the former education policy advisors to governors and state education agency chiefs of staff and policy directors from Arkansas, Colorado, Massachusetts, Ohio and Washington.

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Introduction

With every incoming governor comes a new agenda, new priorities and, perhaps most importantly, new staff. These are the people who will do the legwork to hammer out the details of the new administration's position on critical issues, hold the behind-the-scenes briefings, and take whatever steps are necessary to promote the agenda and ensure the success of the new governor.

Public education is, appropriately, always a top priority of a new governor. To that end, a key player in every administration is the governor's education policy advisor (GEPA). Different states have different names for the person in this role, but generally speaking this person serves as the administration's eyes and ears in all things education and is consistently well-informed enough to advise the governor on all education-related matters.

Sound easy? It's not, and it shouldn't be. There's a lot to learn, a lot of people to meet, and a lot of history and politics to absorb before new education policy advisors can be truly successful in this critical role. This white paper aims to provide a roadmap for new GEPAs—but may also be useful for new state education department leaders and staff who also are working closely with a governor or Governor's Office—to get up, running, and off to a strong and effective start.

Education aides come to their new jobs with a range of backgrounds—some are former teachers or school superintendents, others are “policy wonks” who may have worked on the governor's campaign, others have led key advocacy or constituency groups well aligned to the governor's interests in education. But regardless of your background, in order to successfully and accurately advise the new governor, every new education aide will need to understand the role of the state in influencing public education and build working relationships with the right people.

Every governor is different, as well, with different management styles, different interests, and different ways of learning and wanting information. And in education, some governors will have well-formed ideas about their agenda and which policies they want to pursue, while others will rely heavily on staff for counsel and ideas. But here, too, regardless of the individual style of your governor, each one will need your help translating the more general promises and sound bites made on the campaign trail to an actionable, detailed and realistic plan for the state's education system.

As you get started, the one word to keep in mind is humility. Set aside what you already know – and think you know—about education and the governor's agenda, and instead spend the early stages of your work listening.

As policy advisor you will not have the leadership responsibility of an agency head or cabinet member, but you will be interacting with the key leaders critical to the implementation of the governor's agenda. Stakeholders on all sides of every issue know this. Having an open door and gaining a reputation as someone who carefully considers all input will help you serve the governor well.

Build Relationships

In every state, there are many people who will have an immediate, keen interest in what the new governor will do. These people will all want to get to know you, and difficult as it may be to return their calls and emails, *make the time*. They will appreciate the response and will have plenty to say. Take good notes. These people will include:

- **Heads of key state education agencies**, including the department overseeing public education and the higher education and community college coordinating agencies, as well as these leaders' management team, chief of staff, directors of key state education programs or initiatives, and administrative assistants (in most cases, building a good relationship with the administrative assistant will be particularly helpful).
- **Key legislative leaders and their staff**. You may not be the one to interact with the Speaker of the House or President of the Senate—and the governor's office likely has a legislative director tasked with communicating and negotiating with legislators—but you should know the chairmen of the education committees in each chamber and the issue areas that animate them, as well as any committee staff. If there are caucus staff people devoted to education, get to know them as well.
- **Major state professional association heads and their key deputies**. These groups could include the professional associations of district superintendents, treasurers, school board members, teachers, other administrators, and the heads of the associations of public and private higher education institutions. Regardless of whether the governor agrees with any of the positions these organizations take, they all play an active and vocal role in shaping education policy debates.
- **Parent and community advocacy groups**. There are a lot of them out there, advocating for everything from arts education to improving opportunities for students with special needs to providing more services for English language learners. Listen to them all. Some of what you hear will be helpful, but most importantly, remember that these groups can be very powerful, and you want them on your side.
- **Business leaders and the heads of major foundations**. Business leaders know that good schools lead to a better skilled workforce, and want the schools in their communities to succeed. Get to know the leaders of business groups with an interest in the education agenda, the heads of foundations (or directors of the education program units of foundations), community based education improvement organizations, etc. These leaders can be especially influential allies.
- **Leaders of key districts, colleges and universities, and other organizations that are providers of services**. This means people like presidents of the largest universities and community colleges, superintendents of the largest school systems, large charter school operators or authorizers, deans of colleges of education, etc. The buy-in of those entities on the ground can have a substantial impact on the speed and success of implementation. And the perspective of those working "in the trenches" will always be important to understand.

- **People in the state budget office.** More public policy gets made in the context of state budget decisions than most people understand. Knowing the budget director or the chief of the section in the budget office that deals with education will be useful all year, not just during budget season.
- **Education reporters and opinion writers for the major newspapers and media outlets.** Know who they are and read their articles. Take them for coffee every few months, and build a relationship on mutual trust. If they trust you, they'll be more likely to follow your lead on stories, and flag you in advance of a negative story, so the governor is never surprised by a headline. In most administrations, communication with the media is tightly managed by a press secretary—so be sure to coordinate any informal meetings with reporters with the press office and work closely with staff there on messaging to earn their trust and confidence.
- **The leaders of national education organizations.** There are a large number of national, nonpartisan organizations that provide advice, information and state-by-state comparisons to governor's offices. These organizations will be more than willing and able to help you with information needs or to help you better understand what is going on in other states. These organizations include Achieve, the National Governor's Association and the Education Commission of the States, among others. It also can be helpful to subscribe to national email news summaries and education publications (most importantly *Education Week*, which keeps a close watch on emerging policy issues).

Some of these meetings should be one-on-one, others should be in small groups, and some – particularly the advocacy organizations – can happen in larger groups. In your meetings, ask lots of questions. What's happening in the state that's exciting? What are the biggest challenges? What hasn't worked in the past? What needs to change? At the end of your meeting, discuss the best way to keep the flow of communication open: regular meetings, email updates, etc.

Building relationships is not about what you need today; it is about how you will interact over the next four years of the governor's term. Regardless of whether there was a landslide election victory that provided a mandate for change or not, knowing your colleagues in education well will either enable – or hinder – your ability to get things done.

Listen, Learn and Understand

Listen to everyone. Gain a deeper understanding of the views and perspectives of those who agree with you, and be gracious and listen with interest to those who do not. Understanding the viewpoints of your allies and opponents, as well as the history behind their opinions, will serve you and the governor well. Respect those who may disagree with the governor, and remember that while you may be on different sides of an issue today, you may need to form an alliance on a different issue tomorrow.

Assume that anything you say will not just become widely known among the stakeholder community but will be seen as the administration's position on an education issue—so think carefully before you speak. The same goes for written notes, email messages and memos. *Assume* they could find their way beyond the intended recipient before you send them.

Dive into the details. Don't be afraid to request briefings on complicated topics, and to ask lots of questions. You won't get it all the first time around, but with each briefing you'll learn more. The people briefing you know that their work will benefit from having you well informed and will welcome the opportunity to brief you – repeatedly, if necessary. What you learn will make sense as you talk to others.

Your ramping up period will be short, and you will be expected to have a basic understanding of the current state of education in your state soon after your first day on the job. There will be plenty of information available, but you will need to pull it together across agencies and funding streams to get a true, holistic picture. The broader your portfolio (early care and education, P-12, higher education, workforce or the full spectrum), the more information you will need to gather.

Consider taking a 1-2-3 approach to your learning:

1. **SCAN** the most recent influential published education reports in your state from both agency and third-party sources (such as advocacy groups, foundations and research organizations). Review annual state-by-state surveys from sources such as Achieve, the Data Quality Campaign, the U.S. Chamber of Commerce, *Education Week* and others to get a sense of where your state fits in terms of the national landscape, as well.
2. **ENGAGE** trusted and influential education leaders, agency officials and legislative staff to dig deeper on identifying important specific niche reports, agency data and enabling legislation.
3. **CREATE** private dialogue opportunities to discuss specific topics in a series of very small, tightly focused issue-based meetings to fully understand the details.

Following these steps will set you up to either craft a new policy agenda or refine the existing one with a greater understanding of the opportunities, challenges and timeframes available.

Key issues such as standards, assessments, and accountability will be critical to quickly understand, but it will also be important to learn all you can about other topics, including non-academic barriers to learning, special education, teacher tenure and evaluation, charter schools, college remediation, and literacy. (*A more extensive list of suggested topics to review is attached in Appendix A.*)

Throughout this process, continually ask how your state compares nationally, regionally, and to the three or four states most similar to yours. There is no downside to wanting to be the best, and learning about other states will help you to learn more about your own.

Understanding the current policy environment, opportunities and challenges is an important first step, but will only tell you part of the story. To be fully prepared for thoughtful change, you must understand how your state finances the work of education through the use of state and federal funds, as well as how foundations or donors are supporting education reform policies and practices with private dollars. Keep in mind that federal funds can originate from a variety of sources and agencies, and if formula-driven, generally have a state-level plan that articulates how the money will be spent. In some cases, those plans can be changed via a waiver request or a plan-change submission, but not always. Determining the amount of flexibility that is available and the process by which changes can be accomplished will be exceedingly helpful in planning how funds can support any policy shifts the new administration may want to make.

Set the Stage and Make a Plan

The new administration's action agenda will be based on many of the promises made on the campaign trail, but these won't be all encompassing. After you've been briefed and met with everyone who wants to meet with you, clearly define—with as much input along the way from the governor directly—what he or she intends to accomplish in education. The details don't need to be laid out comprehensively right away, but some questions need to be answered early on, including: What do you want to do first? What can wait? What needs more processing? What is the timeline? How difficult will it be to get these changes enacted?

Put your ideas in writing, but don't distribute it until you've gained the approval and support of the governor and key stakeholders. Involve people you trust, and those with whom you've begun to build good relationships to participate in the development of this plan. Their perspectives will be helpful, and in the end they will feel some ownership of the final product and be more likely help to move it forward.

The document you and the governor produce will become the roadmap for the future of public education in your state, and should be bold, ambitious and forward-thinking, but realistic. The governor will be held to the promises that are made, so don't put anything on paper unless you have defined a clear path to put each initiative into action. Other states have developed good plans that can be used as models. This document will be widely distributed and often cited, and should be used as your tool to track progress and a means to communicate your broad message.

To put this plan into action you will need to first set the stage for success by assessing the environment and conducting some simple—but often forgotten—tasks:

- **Know your place in the pecking order.** You're not an agency secretary or commissioner, but you are positioned to interact with all of the key leaders responsible for the implementation of the governor's agenda. Be sure you have the access necessary for success by requesting online privileges, meeting the right people, and clarifying how your needs can be met.
- **Understand how things work in the Governor's Office.** Who will be in charge of scheduling – and how can you flag must-attend education events for the governor? Who writes the speeches? Who accepts invitations? What role do you have in each of these areas? What are the expectations for who you are to bring in on what portions of the issue as you are working the agenda?
- **Make sure people are on board.** To the extent that the governor can influence appointments to state boards and commissions, he should make sure that people are in-line with his or her vision for the future. Are there current appointees that could be helpful to the effort that should get early briefings or discussions on the topic? Are there legislators or other visible leaders who are of like mind? If so, determine if you can work with them directly or if it will be more appropriate for others (legislative leadership, or others in the Governor's Office) to reach out.
- **Identify, to the extent possible, the opportunities and obstacles** you are likely to encounter as you move the agenda forward. These can be policy, people or resource constraints that are either direct

or hidden in the background of an issue. Are there natural champions that could be helpful or influential leaders at the local or regional level that could rally support for or against the agenda?

Once you have set the stage and understand the landscape, put together a plan that addresses these needs:

- **State what you hope to accomplish and what outcomes the governor’s education agenda will help to achieve.** To the extent you can put this in concrete terms with clear, achievable and compelling data points, the better chance you have of reaching the goal. Articulating the outcomes the agenda will achieve is most important. As you work through the various processes ahead, there may be more than one way to achieve the outcomes, and the more you can realize where the flexibility points are at the beginning, the better you will be able to guide the process in ways that will allow for leaders to win and many to invest in the solution.
- **Compile a contact list for who you need to assist with the work.** You may already know all the players; you may not. But you want to be able to reach out to them easily and engage them directly over time. Develop a contact list with email addresses, office numbers, and if possible cell phone numbers. Use this list to evaluate if you have the right people who can help you move the agenda and a small enough group to tightly manage the work.
- **Try to anticipate your needs in advance as much as possible.** Having a plan with identified steps will help you predict needs, as well as give your team and partners appropriate time to respond to requests. While much of the work in any Governor’s Office is a 24/7 endeavor, and things can happen very quickly, reserving immediate turnaround requests for when you need them most – not having them come with every phone call or conversation – will help you build good will with, and show respect for, your team. When crunch time does come, and it will, people will be more likely to respond quickly if you haven’t cried wolf in the past.
- **Find ways to build and sustain momentum.** As you figure out the best path to get the work done, identifying a few “quick wins” will help build public support, raise enthusiasm and ensure that the governor is quickly seen as a leader who can make things happen.
- **Identify the responsibility chain.** Determine who will be responsible for which activities and benchmarks, define a timeline and clarify who will be responsible for communication.
- **Develop a process for taking stock and staying apprised of progress.** You will need to be updated regularly by the people responsible for implementation, and will be expected to keep the governor, the senior staff and the state’s leadership team updated. Determine a schedule of regular reports and/or meetings and make the time in your schedule to attend them all.
- **Identify external advocacy and implementation partners needed to reach the goal line.** While advocacy partners may not be critical to setting the agenda, they may be instrumental in achieving your goals. Given who they are, when is the best time to reach out to them? What role might they play? Do you have a history of working with them on the past?

Communicate, Communicate, Communicate

Do not underestimate the value of having – and implementing – a strong, strategic communications plan. Setting up meetings with key players and returning phone calls and emails from stakeholders are important, but it is also critical to have a carefully designed, proactive communications plan to ensure that the governor’s message on education gains the support it will need to be successful.

This will require a combination of steps:

- **Work with the governor’s communications team to live by the “no surprises” rule.** They will be the public face of the administration with the media, and will be called on to answer education questions. Provide them with bulleted talking points and analysis in advance of any breaking news to ensure that they are always prepared to respond thoughtfully. Flag them when you anticipate controversial issues developing.
- **Keep your colleagues in the Governor’s Office informed.** Make sure the governor’s staff knows about new initiatives and success stories as they occur. These updates will help them find ways to tie education into the bigger vision and goals of the administration.
- **Connect and work with your peers.** Some states may have one person responsible for all education policy, but others have multiple people dedicated to oversight of policy related to early education, K-12 and higher education. Many reform efforts straddle the P-20 spectrum, so look for ways to connect early on to build strong working relationships and good communications.
- **Make use of social media.** Social media has grown into one of the easiest, most effective ways to communicate directly with the public without the need for the media as the “middle man.” Review your state’s policy on social media, and work with the governor’s online team to contribute to the administration’s Facebook page, Twitter account and YouTube page. Use these to post education-related press releases, pictures, videos and analysis.
- **Hold regional forums on education.** Bring the state’s education leaders – and governor if possible – on the road for a series of Town Hall meetings across the state. Publicize these as both an opportunity to learn more about the state’s education agenda, and an opportunity for the public to be heard. If well-publicized in advance, these can be well-attended and extremely effective. Record videos from each forum and post them on YouTube, and live “tweet” throughout to build momentum and interest in future forums.
- **Build a content-rich, easy-to-use, frequently-updated website.** One of the keys to good communication is transparency. Contribute compelling data, fact sheets and clearly written information about key education initiatives to the Governor’s Office official website.

Conclusion

This paper has laid out some practical steps to get newcomers to the education policy arena started. Add your own items, find your own successes and make your own mistakes, and prepare to learn more than you ever thought possible along the way.

As you do, keep in mind that your work directly affects our nation's most precious resource: Kids. Remember, as you sit through meetings, write memos and attend press conferences, that everything thing you do—big or small—will impact every child in your state and ultimately provide them with a better education, more skills, and more options for their future.

Appendix A: Critical Briefing Topics

	Early Education	K-12 Education	Higher Education	Workforce Development
21 st century skills		✓	✓	✓
Accountability structure	✓	✓	✓	
Assessments		✓	✓	
Arts education		✓		
Availability of data	✓	✓	✓	✓
Bullying	✓	✓	✓	
Charter schools		✓		
Collective bargaining		✓	✓	
College completion		✓	✓	✓
College readiness		✓	✓	✓
Data systems	✓	✓	✓	✓
Data use	✓	✓	✓	
Dual enrollment opportunities		✓	✓	
Educator preparation programs		✓	✓	
English language learners	✓	✓	✓	
Gifted and talented education	✓	✓	✓	
Homeschooling		✓		
Kindergarten readiness	✓	✓		
Legislative activity	✓	✓	✓	✓
On-line learning		✓	✓	
Quality assurance for pre-schools	✓			
Pre-school regulations	✓			
Scholarship/loan forgiveness		✓	✓	✓
School and district leadership		✓		
School finance		✓		
Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics (STEM) strategy		✓	✓	✓
Special education	✓	✓	✓	
Standards	✓	✓	✓	
Strategic planning	✓	✓	✓	✓
Student outcomes	✓	✓	✓	✓
Student retention		✓	✓	
Teacher/leader evaluation	✓	✓	✓	
Teacher/leader induction		✓		
Teacher/leader licensure		✓		
Teacher/leader tenure		✓	✓	
Vocational-Technical education		✓	✓	✓
Workforce training program		✓	✓	✓

Note: This chart is not meant to be an all-inclusive list of every education topic. Many states will have unique areas with region-specific topics that are critical in public education.