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WHITE PAPER

Leveraging Transition:

Ten Ways for
New Governors to
Advance Education Policies
and Priorities from Day One



NATIONAL GOVERNORS ASSOCIATION

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I. Introduction

The 2018 election cycle resulted in new governors in 20 states and two territories. The large class of new governors will have further ripple effects as new governors in many states appoint new chief state school officers, state board of education members and other state education leaders. Starting the day after the election, each new governor embarks on a transition process that starts with the election, leads to inauguration and extends through the first 100 days and beyond. This period presents significant opportunities for new governors to advance their education policies and priorities.

The purpose of this memo is to provide initial assistance to new governors and their education teams on how to think about this critical transition period in each state, how to best advance their education priorities and how the National Governors Association (NGA) and its partners can best support their efforts. We recognize that each state's context is different, but we hope that this guidance can provide a framework that helps each new governor work together with other state education leaders to maximize her/his impact on education policy in their states.

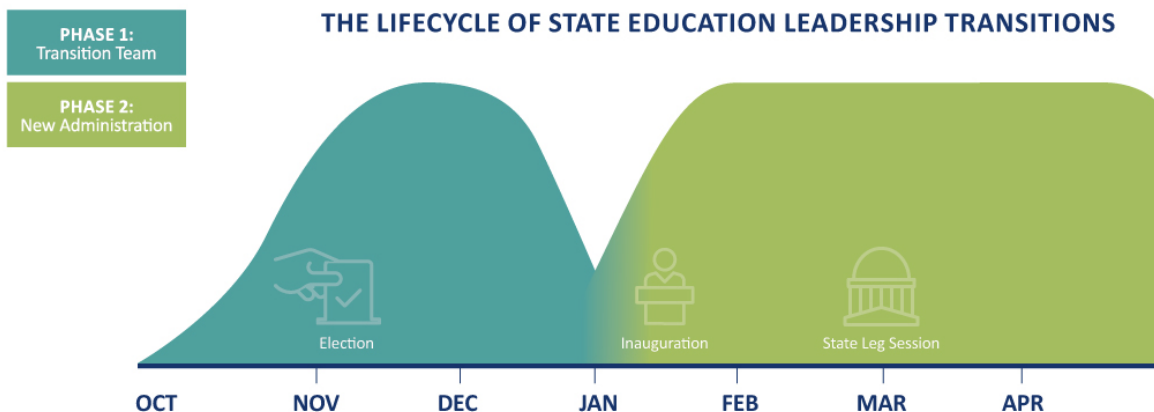
II. Background: The State Role in Education and the Importance of Transition

Providing access to a high-quality education is a critical state responsibility. State education leadership and policy can support great teaching and learning in numerous important ways, spanning the spectrum of education from early learning through higher education. These include but are not limited to setting statewide expectations and requirements, incentivizing and removing barriers to innovation, providing funding and support to improve equity and implementation, building systems for research and encouraging continuous improvement. While each state's context and governance structures are different, every governor has a unique, leading role to play in improving education opportunity and outcomes in his/her state. Each new governor's transition period provides a critical window of opportunity to lead on education by establishing clear successful priorities and strong leadership teams that can articulate and accelerate new priorities and establish a solid foundation for success throughout a new governor's term in office.

It is helpful to think of this transition period as composed of two overlapping phases, shown in the graphic on the following page:

Phase 1: The first phase runs roughly from election to inauguration and involves in part a small transition team with multiple responsibilities (as described below), including conducting due diligence, engaging stakeholders, identifying appointees and transforming campaign positions into policy priorities.

Phase 2: The second phase runs roughly from inauguration through the proverbial "first 100 days" in office, which in most states will include each governor's first state-of-the-state address, first budget proposals, first legislative sessions and first legislative and regulatory actions.



III. The Education Landscape and Emerging Policy Priorities Across the States

We are at a critical moment of change in education. We know more than ever about the key ingredients necessary to create education systems that support each and every child (and their families) in achieving their full potential. Despite some important progress, our education system needs to be continuously improved to address the realities of our ever-changing economy and society. In particular, significant, systemic, long-standing gaps in education opportunity and outcomes persist, including by poverty, race, ethnicity, gender, English proficiency, and disability. Addressing these inequities is particularly urgent given changing demographics in today’s public schools and institutions of higher education.

In recent years, the National Governors Association’s (NGA) Center for Best Practices’ Education Division has worked with governors and stakeholders from across the nation to identify shared education priorities that define the Education Division’s current work. Based on that analysis, the Education Division developed a [strategic plan](#) and has focused on providing technical assistance and expertise on education issues that include:

- designing learning environments that attend to development of the whole child;
- personalizing education to meet the needs, interests and abilities of each student;
- strengthening teacher and leader quality and development;
- promoting meaningful standards, assessments, and accountability; and
- improving school governance and finance.

In recent months, NGA has monitored education issues emerging in state gubernatorial races and has identified several trends in emerging education themes and priorities. This work has identified a number of common areas that may emerge on the decision agendas of many states, including:

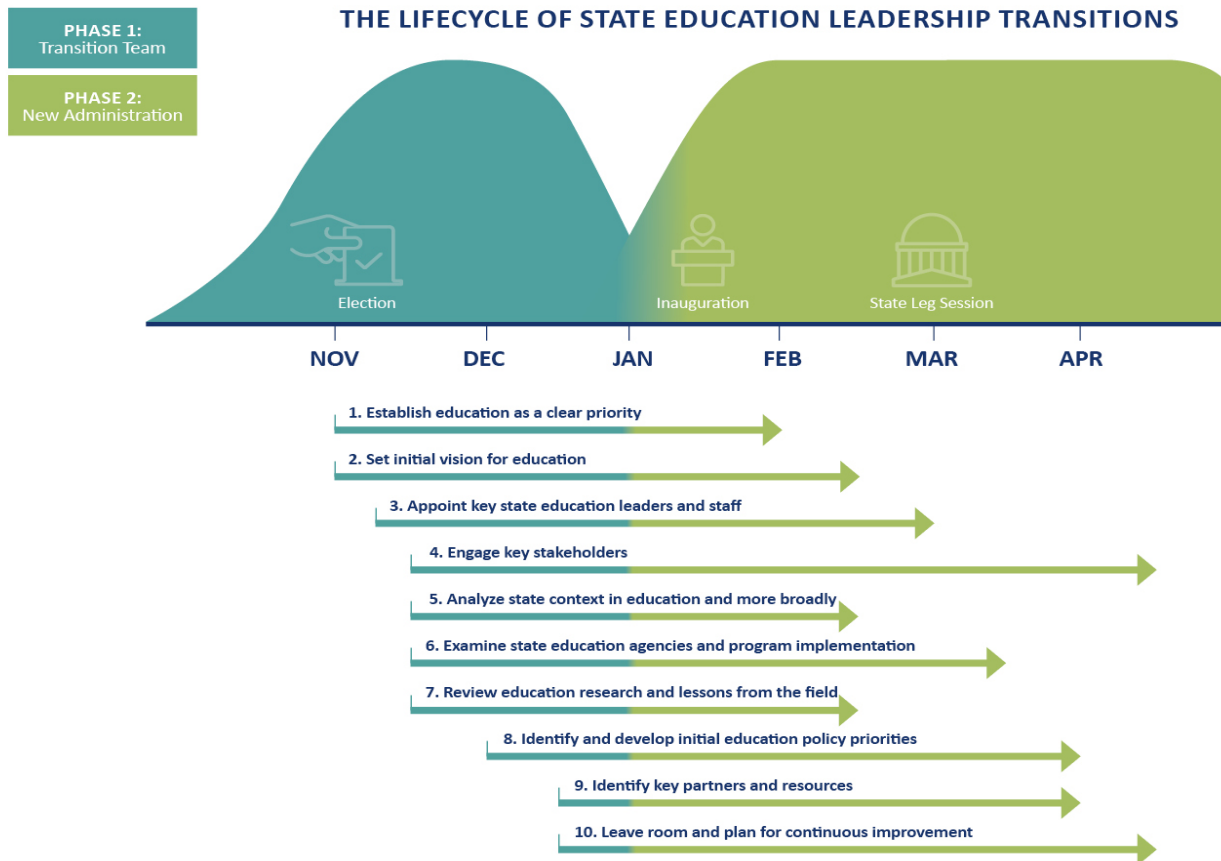
- workforce education, including career and technical education to computer science;
- early education, including Pre-K, full-day kindergarten, and affordable childcare;
- K-12 funding systems, including funding levels, equity, and efficiencies;
- recruiting and retaining excellent teachers, including teacher compensation and addressing the needs of rural educators; and
- higher education access and affordability.



IV. Hitting the Ground Running: Ten Opportunities for Action in Gubernatorial Transition to Advance Education Opportunity and Outcomes

Based on lessons learned from prior gubernatorial, state and national education transitions, this section articulates ten opportunities for action that each new governor and their teams can consider – from election to inauguration and in the first 100 days – to advance policies and priorities in their state.

Again, we want to highlight and acknowledge that context matters. In considering the opportunities articulated here, new governors and their teams should closely consider where the governor and state have clear authority, how state education governance is structured, the current status of state education policy and implementation, what is in demand among key stakeholders and more. Further, it is important to note that election and transition cycles do not always line up well with the timelines needed for meaningful, equitable and sustained education change and implementation. While it can be tempting to focus primarily on “early wins” in the first hundred days, this time period also presents a unique opportunity for new governors and their staffs to establish the framework for what priorities they will *continue* from prior administrations as what they will *change or add* in terms of education vision and policies.





1. **Establish education as a clear priority for state action.** There is limited room in each state on the decision agenda, including for education. Governors are therefore singularly positioned to make education a clear priority for state government and the public. Prioritization can be signaled in the transition by, for example, having a dedicated education transition team and focusing some of a governor’s visible time, statements, outreach and appearances on education issues. As the formal administration begins, this prioritization of education can be further displayed through key speeches, legislative proposals, the state budget and structural mechanisms.

2. **Set the education vision.** Governors are uniquely situated with executive authority and bully pulpit legitimacy to set a vision for the state to help guide its overall education agenda. This vision may be developed from campaign commitments and/or the state context. To leverage this vision-setting power, a new governor’s vision could include a focus on the outcomes the governor seeks for all students, the systems the governor wants for the state and the areas of focus of the governors’ administration. This vision can be clearly articulated through the bully pulpit as well as policy, budget and other decisions.

3. **Education leadership appointments.** In many states, the governor has a critical role in appointing other state education leaders – both in the governor’s office (such as the education policy advisor or state secretary of education) and in state boards and/or state cabinet positions in charge of education and related agencies (such as the chief state school officer). This talent is critical to success. It begins with who will lead the education transition and requires education leaders who share a new governor’s vision. These leaders must also have the governor’s trust, have the respect of key constituencies and the field, represent a diversity of experiences and expertise and have the education knowledge and leadership skills to drive effective education change and implementation. These appointments will begin at the cabinet level and be followed by key deputies and assistants. Appointing the right people to the right positions is critical for defining and advancing a new governor’s education vision and priorities. Additionally, the governor should articulate how these leaders will engage with the new governor during their administration.

4. **Engage key education stakeholders essential to informing and supporting a new governor’s education agenda.** Early and ongoing stakeholder engagement is critical to inform policy, promote buy in, improve implementation, sustain attention and achieve key outcomes that emanate from a new governor’s education agenda. Key early stakeholders at the state level include the state legislature (vital to policy and budget proposals) as well as the outgoing administration and career staff (who will have critical knowledge). Key voices from the field include teachers, school and district leaders, parents and families, students and others who are closest to the ground and in touch with how education is playing out in the state, as well as civil rights, business and other sectors central to education as a priority.

A NOTE ABOUT TIMING

While the ideas below are presented in somewhat linear order, they are deeply overlapping and not purely sequential. The timelines referenced below are meant only to serve as guideposts during the transition process. Depending on a state’s unique context, many of the actions articulated can and should be pursued simultaneously and are meant to both inform and build on each other in different ways through each phase of transition. Finally, the ideas below do not end with transition, but the transition period can help define and accelerate efforts that continue throughout each governor’s term in office.



5. **Analyze relevant education and other data and information to understand state context and status of education efforts.** In many cases, the gubernatorial transition period will be the first time that a new governor can “get under the hood” and deeply examine the state education context, including key education and youth data, initiatives, structures, trends and gaps. These points will all have significant implications for defining state policy priorities and ensuring a stronger transition. It is critical that new governors and their teams develop a deep understanding of the state education context in terms of strengths, weaknesses and important efforts already underway. It is also important to understand the state’s education structure, which will deeply inform how change is implemented. By analyzing and understanding state data and context, transition teams can ensure that a new governor’s priorities build on what came before and address what is most relevant, needed and impactful.
6. **Review state education agencies and programs.** As part of the review process, the transition team should closely examine the work of the state’s various education agencies and status of education policy implementation. This is important to inform big priorities, but also to ensure that the day-to-day work is well in hand. It also empowers the team’s ability to proactively prepare for issues that may arise in transition related to federal compliance, state or local implementation or unexpected challenges. Education occurs at the local level, and it is critical to consider the impact of state action on localities.
7. **Review education research and lessons from the field to identify and inform best ideas for improvement in your state context.** To inform a new governor’s priorities and policies, it is important to marry her/his vision and analysis of state context with what the field knows about what works in education (and in what contexts) to advance equity and outcomes. This means purposefully examining the relevant empirical research and leading practice – from within the state and beyond – that can help the state achieve its education goals. New governors and their teams may also wish to examine state research functions and identify potential opportunities for improvement in those systems.
8. **Identify and develop initial education policy priorities – both short- and long-term.** A key role of the transition leading into the first 100 days is to begin to translate campaign commitments and the efforts described above into concrete education policy priorities for early action. This could include a limited set of big priorities and/or a number of smaller ones. These policy priorities could become part of the state-of-the-state address, early legislative or regulatory proposals, early budget priorities, or other opportunities to leverage a new governors’ bully pulpit. Importantly, new governors should focus not only on what education policy priorities they want to add or change but also on what priorities and initiatives they want to continue from the prior administration to help maintain continuity and promote longer-term impact.
9. **Identify key partners and resources that can help implement a new governor’s vision and priorities for education over the long-term.** Related to stakeholder engagement, as the policy agenda becomes clear and the new administration begins, it is important to identify and engage key partners that can help to define and support that agenda in broad terms. These same stakeholders can also provide critical capacity for advocacy and implementation on specific policy priorities. This may include specific state and local leaders and organizations but also regional and national partners and networks of nonprofits, foundations and technical assistance providers. The reality is that many states face capacity challenges in terms of budget and personnel. Furthermore, the education system in each state is complex and may be resistant to changes. It is important to align key players and resources to build an infrastructure for change – from the teachers to the governor’s staff.



10. ***Leave room and plan for continuous improvement in the education agenda.*** There is no silver bullet to advance excellence in education. It is an ongoing, long-term process of continuous improvement, with one positive and meaningful development hopefully building on the next. A new governor can help set that tone and understanding early from the top. This means creating the expectations and structures to support innovation and productive risk-taking, set benchmarks, make evaluation meaningful, iterate on implementation actions to achieve measurable progress and review and improve efforts over time. These expectations and structures should also establish a process of continual review and improvement

V. Keys to Success in Education Transitions

The ten ideas above to guide state action in transition may seem obvious, but they can be difficult to ensure in practice. Time is short, people are new, and there is more to do than may seem possible. The work of states in prior education transitions yield several important keys to successfully leveraging transition to address each of the ten items above. We boil them down to three “Cs”:

- **Communication:** The focus on education in transition depends on clear gubernatorial leadership. A new governor can prioritize education and set a course for both continuity and new priorities – both internally and externally – through judicious use of his/her time, voice, and political capital. New governors can build systems for communication and feedback both internally and externally and continue to communicate from the initial vision to policy priorities to lessons learned and continuous improvement.
- **Capacity:** Managing the education transition and early administration requires capacity, including key staff, funding and infrastructure. This requires clear capacity and authority for education leaders on the transition team and in the new administration. Education leaders should be closely connected to a new governor and her/his overall leadership team. This capacity should be built internally but can include external support and public-private partnerships including research and stakeholder engagement.
- **Continuity:** While the election, transition and new administration are separated by clear dates and roles, they are most successful when they are integrated and one builds on the other. In particular, the work of transition can and should deeply inform initial governing opportunities, such as the state-of-the-state address, first budget, and first legislative and regulatory priorities. In addition, priorities set in the education context should be understood and connected to systems that other parts of transition and new state administration will address, from budget to health care to child care to workforce development. Finally, this focus on continuity includes intentional focus on what education priorities should be maintained from the prior administration and how that, too, is understood and communicated as a key leadership decision.



Support Available from NGA’s Education Team and Its Partners

Staff members of the National Governors Association Center for Best Practices (NGA Center) serve as direct consultants to the nation’s governors. The Center provides information, research, policy analysis, technical assistance and resource development for governors and their staffs. The Education Division focuses on assisting governors in developing effective policy and supporting its implementation spanning state education systems, from early education through postsecondary. Our activities include direct site visits, responding to technical requests from governors, convening stakeholders and hosting policy workshops and collaboratives with governors’ staffs from across the country. The NGA Center is well equipped to respond to both immediate requests requiring rapid responses and longer-term policy development.

Conclusion

Gubernatorial transitions are moments of tremendous excitement and activity, and also provide multiple opportunities for action to advance a vision of a high-quality education for all students. However, given the many competing priorities at play during the transition process, it is important to act quickly and intentionally. Based on key learnings from past transition efforts across the country, this memo highlights ten opportunities for action that can help guide the education transition toward success. The Education Division looks forward to working with new governors and their staffs to develop and advance education policies and priorities.

Key Sources:

[Transition and the New Governor: A Planning Guide](#) (National Governors Association)

[Critical Lessons for Governors-Elect 2018 Edition](#) (National Governors Association)

[From Candidate to Governor-Elect: Recommendations for Gubernatorial Transitions](#) (June 2017; Eagleton Center on the American Governor and Eagleton Institute of Politics at Rutgers University)

[Presidential Transition Timeline and Guide](#) (Partnership for Public Service)

[50-State Review State Education Governance Structures: 2017 Update](#) (Education Commission of the States)