

The SREB Legislative Advisory Council: More Than 50 Years of Service to the Region

SREB

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State legislators play a significant role in the programs and services offered by the Southern Regional Education Board. Their continued involvement is critical to the Board's effective operation. Legislators from all 16 SREB states serve as members and officers of the Board, and as members of the Board's Executive Committee and Finance Committee. The Board has elected a legislator to serve as the SREB treasurer every year since 1957. Legislators also serve on other SREB committees, panels and work groups.

The SREB Legislative Advisory Council, composed of senators, representatives and delegates from each member state, is the largest permanent advisory body to the Board. For more than 50 years, the Council has advised the Board on legislative matters related to regional education and has served as the steering committee for the annual Legislative Work Conference, the nation's oldest annual forum for legislators on education issues. The Council, created in 1955, meets two to three times a year: at the SREB Annual Meeting, at the Legislative Work Conference, and often at a midyear Council meeting that, at times, includes additional legislative guests.

All legislative members of the Board automatically serve on the Council. Additional legislators are appointed by the governor in most member states and serve at his or her pleasure. No specified number of members is required from each state. As with all SREB activities and services, the Council is nonpartisan. SREB's vice president for State Services serves as its primary staff.

The Council is governed by the chair and vice chair, who are elected annually by the general membership based on the recommendations of a nominating committee. The election of officers takes place at the Council's business meeting during the Legislative Work Conference. The chair and vice chair positions alternate between House and Senate members each year; nominations are based on length of legislators' service on the Council, involvement in Council activities and their state leadership role in education. In addition, the chair and vice chair are selected from a state that is not represented among the officers of the Board.

Origins of the Southern Regional Education Board

SREB was created in 1948, 10 years after President Roosevelt's Emergency Council called the South the nation's No. 1 economic problem. As the South moved from a rural-based agricultural economy to an urban-based industrial economy, state leaders realized that if colleges and universities were unable to meet the educational demands of these changes, Southern states would be unable to compete. Today, SREB continues to grow and build on its founding premise that improving education in the South improves the region's economy.

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From the beginning, the cornerstone of SREB's work has been to facilitate the sharing of resources to allow member states to do together what is impractical to do alone. These efforts date back to 1929, when several universities first began to work cooperatively to share programs and services within states and across state lines. The demand for professional degree programs, which were few and crowded, forced policy-makers to look beyond the resources inside their own state lines. After much discussion about the benefits of regional cooperation and the desire to create formal agreements among states, a special meeting of the Southern Governors' Conference was convened at Wakulla Springs, Florida, on February 7, 1948.

During the meeting, a committee of three (Governor Millard Caldwell of Florida; Cecil Sims, a prominent Nashville attorney and adviser to Governor Jim McCord of Tennessee; and Georgia Attorney General Eugene Cook) was designated to draft a Compact creating the Board of Control for Southern Regional Education, which would later be known as the Southern Regional Education Board. The Compact was drafted immediately and signed on February 8 by the nine governors in attendance. One month later, in Leon County, Florida, a certificate of incorporation was filed for the Regional Council for Education, the interim body charged with developing the plan for regional cooperation.

Six state legislatures were required to ratify the Compact before it could take effect. In the interim, work continued to create the foundation for regional cooperation. The Regional Council for Education was formed in March 1948. The first director, John Ivey, was hired in August, and offices were established in Atlanta by September. The sixth state ratified the Compact in March 1949, making it the first interstate compact for education in the nation.

The original Compact called for four members from each state to comprise the Board: the governor and three additional members, one of whom was required to be from the field of education. Formal organization of the Board was completed at the inaugural meeting on July 11, 1949, in Daytona Beach, Florida. An amendment to the Compact in the mid-1950s added a fifth Board member from each state. This member was required to be a state legislator.

Initially, SREB focused its work on higher education. However, reports issued by the SREB Task Force on Higher Education and the Schools (*The Need for Quality* in 1981 and *Meeting the Need for Quality: Action in the South* in 1983) recognized that the links between schools and colleges were critical to ensure quality in higher education. SREB began to expand its focus, and today, it provides programs and services at every level of education, from pre-K to graduate school.

The Legislative Work Conference

Not all provisions of the Compact and the *By-Laws of the Southern Regional Education Board* could be implemented immediately. While governors and state legislatures created and funded the Compact, college presidents and other education leaders shaped over several years the formal agreements that permitted sharing of education programs through SREB's Contract Program and addressed other details to strengthen regional collaboration among member states.

Once the principles and procedures for sharing educational programs were developed, the next step was to "provide consultative services to states and institutions on improvement of higher education in the South and on problems of major regional significance." The purpose of the first Legislative Work Conference, held in September 1952 at the Hermitage Hotel in Nashville, was to "find methods by which legislative leaders ... could share with the governors, educators and lay leaders on the Board the job of planning and carrying out

regional programs.” A steering committee of legislators appointed by their governors planned the conference and proposed a number of resolutions to be acted on by delegates.

Board member and State Representative Kenneth Cagle of Lake Charles, Louisiana, reported to the Board in November 1952 on the first Legislative Work Conference. He noted that “participation of the legislatures was necessary before the Southern Regional Education Board could function with the full effectiveness as an instrument of the state governments.” The delegates to the conference recommended to the Board that:

- members of the House and Senate in each state might be appointed by the respective governors to attend Board meetings in an advisory capacity and serve as a liaison between the regional education program and the legislatures;
- a report might be prepared on potential needs of graduate and professional training in the region and distributed to legislators;
- each state might invite members of the Board’s staff to attend legislative sessions or appropriate committee meetings to inform legislators about the Board’s activities; and
- legislative delegates meet again in 1953 to continue consideration of regional education.

For the next few years, the Legislative Work Conference was planned by a steering committee of legislators appointed by member states’ governors. The conference served, as it does today, as a nonpartisan venue for state legislative leaders to discuss important education issues and to identify ways to strengthen education within and among the member states.

The Legislative Advisory Council’s Creation

As early as 1950, recognition of the importance of formal legislative involvement in SREB had been documented. At that time, an adviser to the Board was working on the development of a “suggested public information program” that included a recommendation to maintain contact with the state legislatures through a small group of its members.

The first Legislative Work Conference was a major step in cementing the formal relationship between the Board and state legislatures, and the first three Legislative Work Conferences produced a series of recommendations for the Board to consider. It was at the fourth annual Legislative Work Conference, in Biloxi, Mississippi, in 1955, that delegates recommended that:

- the Southern Regional Education Board create a Legislative Advisory Council to include legislative members of the Board and at least one other legislator from each Compact state to (1) advise the Board and its director on legislative matters pertaining to higher education, and (2) serve as a steering committee for the annual Legislative Work Conference on Southern Regional Education.
- the Southern Regional Education Board increase the membership of the Board, and that new members include one legislator from each state in the membership from that state.

Members of the Council were appointed following the Board’s action in October 1955, and each legislative Board member automatically became a member. In addition, governors appointed one additional legislator from each state to serve on the Council. The Council met for the first time in January 1956, with representatives from 14 states present, to organize and begin planning the fifth annual Legislative Work Conference. The first chair selected by the members was Representative Preston Marchant of South Carolina. The vice chair was Representative W. S. Heatly Jr. of Texas.

The Council Today

Since its inception, the Council has actively worked with the Board and staff, both by providing advice and counsel and by requesting services and information. Council members and other legislators have served on many SREB commissions and work groups over the years, such as the Council on Educational Television, the Educational Plans and Policy Advisory Committee, the Commission on Higher Educational Opportunity in the South, the Commission on Regional Cooperation, the Task Force on Higher Education and the Schools, the Commission on Health and Human Services, the Commission for Educational Quality, and the Commission on Educational Goals. Council members will serve on new work groups that continue to be formed as they are needed.

Council members frequently seek information and assistance from SREB staff. Staff members visit state capitols regularly during legislative sessions, and often, legislative committee meetings, as recommended by delegates of the 1952 Legislative Work Conference. SREB research and policy reports are tailored to state needs and priorities, and Council members frequently ask staff to present findings at legislative committee meetings. Special research requests from Council members are handled promptly; the information then is usually shared with members from other states.

The Legislative Advisory Council continues to serve a vital role in educational and economic progress in the region, the premise upon which SREB was formed.

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