

Section C: Best Practices in Continuing Education

I. Statewide Training Programs for New County Commissioners

During the development of a training workshop for the NCACC Annual Conference, Strategic Plan Team No. 2 discussed ways to evaluate and improve upon current county commissioner training programs. It was decided that one of the best ways to improve the current training services was to compare them to what other state programs offer. After researching the program offerings and interviewing the program directors, the three states that stood out as best practice models were:

- Georgia
- Maryland
- Pennsylvania

Georgia

Georgia offered three statewide training programs, one for newly elected commissioners, a voluntary certification level called the **“County Commissioners Training Program,”** and the **“Certified Commissioners Advanced Program,”** which serves as an additional continuing education option for those who have already completed the training program. The Association of County Commissioners of Georgia partners with the Institute of Government at the University of Georgia, which structures the curriculum and courses.

The notable **best practices** in the ACCG programs are:

- 1) Training courses are moved throughout the state (Atlanta, Savannah, Athens, Macon, etc.) for commissioners’ convenience.
- 2) The ACCG has a training advisory committee, made up of commissioners, ACCG staff and IOG representatives that meets twice a year to discuss changes to the curriculum.
- 3) The effect of the statutory requirement is that all commissioners are exposed to the value of education and are more inclined to sign up for the program.

Georgia is currently considering changes to its program, including a requested third level of training, and a new format of courses that would include separate classes geared toward both large and small counties. A third level of courses may serve to be too expensive and overwhelming for the ACCG. Courses for large and small counties, while good in theory, may also cause a rift and lack of understand between counties, creating less learning unity throughout the state.

Maryland

The Maryland Association of Counties has collaborated with the Maryland Municipal League and the University of Maryland Institute for Governmental Service (IGS) to create the **“Academy for Excellence in Local Government.”** The program is voluntary and open to all government officials. Completion of the academy results in becoming a “certified county commissioner.”

The notable **best practices** by Maryland and MACo are:

- 1) IGS at the Maryland acts as the administrator of the program, handling the registration, transcripts and general paperwork. All the fees from the program go to the IGS. The role of the county association is simply to create a governing board and decide on new courses and speakers. This allows the association to spend more time structuring courses to meet the needs of county officials.
- 2) The core courses in the curriculum are primarily taught by the same instructors from year to year, saving in hiring costs and search time. For example, “Consensus and Team Building” is taught each year by the head of the local mediation center each time it is offered.
- 3) Offering courses as part of the regularly scheduled conferences greatly helps in increasing conference attendance. As an added benefit, many incumbents have used their Academy certification as a selling point for re-election.

Pennsylvania

Also dubbed “**The Academy for Excellence in Local Government,**” this program is open to all county officials and most courses are taught at the offices of the County Commissioners Association of Pennsylvania.

The notable best practices from Pennsylvania are:

- 1) The program rotates between paid and unpaid speakers. The list includes lawyers, past county commissioners, associate firms and vendors, and staff.
- 2) The Academy is a voluntary program that operates on a four-year cycle of courses. Interested students may join at any time. As an incentive to join the Academy, members are allowed to pay a flat fee of \$700 for all courses in the program. Non-Academy members may still take the courses, but must pay individually to attend each. Non-members cannot receive credit or certification until they have jointed the program.
- 3) A partnership with the state university – in this case Penn State University Political Science and Public Policy department professors – can be tapped as speakers and course instructors.

One major downside to this program is that most of the courses take place at the CCAP offices. According to the other programs mentioned, offering courses at annual conferences and events boosts attendance greatly.

II. Additional Developments and Potential Best Practices

South Carolina currently offers **teleconferencing** courses for planning and zoning and is considering courses by **DVD**.

- Does this take away the key “peer learning” value of a classroom?
- With no clear way to verify distance participation, will testing be needed?

New Mexico is working to create **online courses** using an authentication program to verify identities.

- Does this solve the testing problem?
- Will it be too expensive to create?

****For the full report on various statewide training programs in continuing education and all contact information, *see Appendix D*.

III. Board Training from Other Associations and Groups

North Carolina School Boards Association

Not everyone has time to go to a conference, especially the busy members of a school board. The N.C. School Boards Association (NCSBA) decided that it would allow the option of home learning to its members. As part of its Academy for School Boardmanship, the NCSBA joined a **consortium of online learning**. The consortium was set up by the National School Boards Association, which provides the platform. State school board associations can then log on and share different online learning programs that have been developed. Each organization shares the costs and revenues of the consortium and must do any adaptation of the program itself.

The online learning can be reached through the NCSBA Web site, and is password protected. All online courses receive three hours of credit. The program director simply logs on to see if you have completed the course, and you receive credit. Some online courses have tests at the end, but none of them are counted toward a grade. They are simply to show the board member how well they have done. Examples of online courses administered by the NCSBA include “parliamentary procedure” and “school law and communication.”

There are downsides to online courses. Many school board members are older and do not wish to participate in a computerized learning program. As board turnover continues however, younger generations may be more receptive to the program. Another downside is cost. Even though board members pay to take the online courses, setting up, adapting and administering an online program takes money, personnel and time.

South Carolina School Boards Association

SCSBA’s **Boardmanship Institute** offers training for school board members both at statewide conferences and at onsite workshops customized for a particular district. State law mandates that all new board members attend an orientation. SCSBA provides this orientation in conjunction with its annual convention. Those unable to attend may fulfill the requirement by watching the orientation tapes available from the SCSBA office.

The one of the unique elements of this training program – its best practice – is the **onsite customized workshops**. Two workshops, the Basics of Boardmanship and the Master Board Institute, emphasize topics such as board relations, communication, policy and administration, and team building. However, instead of offering generic courses, the SCSBA encourages school boards to ask for these workshops to focus on specific topics. A course may cover a lot of information, but for a board with three new members, the focus will be on team building and communication. These workshops may not cover every area of school board training thoroughly, but they are a good option when a board is experiencing a particular area of difficulty.

For more information, visit www.scsba.org/training.htm.

Contact Gwen Hampton at ghampton@scsba.org.

Tennessee School Boards Association

Most county and school board associations do not test participants once they have completed their training. So how do you know how well you have done? The Tennessee School Board Association came up with an **assessment CD** that is sent to a member's home once they have completed their new board member orientation and the four core training models. This tool, created in-house, identifies a member's areas of expertise and provides suggestions for obtaining additional information in areas that may be weak. A score profile with explanations is mailed to their home once the assessment has been completed. A member can go back and take additional courses to strengthen these weak areas, but the resources suggested by the assessment CD can also be sought out online, in libraries, or at other events subject to the individual's discretion.

For more information, visit www.tsba.net.

Contact Lisa Jolly at ljolly@tsba.net.

Stafford County, Va.

Stafford County realizes that leadership development should be important for the county government at any level. Stafford County wanted to create a leadership program for county employees, but decided that the program could be molded into an opportunity to create bridges between counties and their schools. Thus the **School and Government Leadership Institute** was born.

The program consists of one day-long course each month for eight months. It is run in by the University of Virginia Center for Executive Development, which provides the speakers, activities and class exercises. Sample topics include values-based leadership, effective meetings and learning to be a learning organization. The goal in each session is to have some type of mixed group interaction to share ideas and resources between the school board employees and the county government employees.

Students of the Institute must be nominated by a department head or county official. The cost is \$750 for the year per student and must be paid by county or school board. So far, feedback has been wonderful on the program. Communication lines between the county and school board have strengthened, and in the midst of budget cuts for training, the Leadership Institute was one of the few programs spared based on the recommendations of employees who had participated.

Although this is an example of employee-level training, this idea is something for county commissioners to consider. Perhaps the NCACC and the School Board Association can work together in their training programs to create joint learning environments or joint conferences to facilitate the sharing of knowledge, resources and opening the door to better communication between these groups.

For more information, visit

www.naco.org/Template.cfm?Section=Achievement_Awards&Template=/cfiles/awards/program.cfm&SEARCHID=2005pers32

Contact Susan LaFollette at slafollette@co.stafford.va.us.

National Federation of Community Broadcasters

For most county associations, board training is all about specific workshops and courses that are delivered in bulk to county commissioners. For the NFCB, **board training is all about a customized, introspective experience**. Each training is customized and designed through discussion with the manager and/or board president or designated person.

Instead of focusing on teaching a new skill or idea, the sessions **focus on evaluation of the board**. The first four activities include: 1) Review of responsibilities and structure of the board and of the staff and the appropriate role of each group; 2) Evaluation of how well the board is currently functioning; 3) Discussion of current challenges facing community radio stations; and 4) Interviews with board and/or staff to uncover issues at the station, both good and bad.

The NFCB uses forms and interview questions adapted from CompassPoint consulting group, which it partnered with in the past. Once the evaluation has been completed and discussed, the NFCB focuses its training on planning and goal setting with the evaluation in mind. Training facilitators try to help with goal setting for the next year by working through a step-by-step process with the board members.

For more information, visit www.nfcb.org/services/boardtrainings.jsp.

Contact the main office at (510) 451-8200.

Section C: Continuing Education for Commissioners Summary of Findings

It is clear that there are many choices and formats for a continuing education program. It will be up to county commissioners to decide what program they want to attend and what courses will benefit them.

My questions for county commissioners (included in the full report: Appendix D) would be:

- What is the perceived value of the Institute of Government to county governments and what changes must be made?
- Is there a need for a higher level of classes beyond the orientation level?
- Does North Carolina need a certification program? Will it act as an incentive to officials or have no effect?
- Can the programs be more accessible through distance learning, or will the loss of a peer learning environment make the program less effective?

As evidenced by the preceding section on future developments, many states are considering new means – through technology – of reaching out to commissioners. North Carolina will need to carefully weigh the pros and cons of new teaching formats.

It may be necessary **to create customized onsite workshops** – such as the ones conducted by the South Carolina School Boards Association – in order to make the workshops more relevant. The question is: How easy is it to customize workshops for boards, and are they effective? Does the nature of changing government and the need for awareness at all levels make it harder to customize a commissioner's education?

One thing is clear: none of these associations **try to tackle continuing education alone**. Most county associations partner with a university or work with a consultant to design their program. Even those who have an internal program have used tools or formatting from a consultant group. The problem for county government is that most consultant groups specializing in board training focus their programs for nonprofits. If the NCACC or an individual county had the resources to hire a consultant, it would be unlikely that the consultant would have experience with government boards.

The focus of education in county government is constantly changing. From my research and interviews, it is clear that several changes to county government education must be explored.

- 1) **Negotiation:** The area of negotiation education is growing among Master of Public Administration programs and has presented graduates with valuable team skills. As the need for inter-team and external collaboration (contracts, intergovernmental relations) grows, understanding negotiation styles and strategies will be key for an effective county official.
- 2) **Mixed-group education:** As evidenced by Stafford County's Leadership Institute, elected officials will have varying skills and ideas to bring to the table. Education programs must include county officials, managers, clerks and even school board members in order to educate officials by providing a wide range of perspectives on county issues.
- 3) **Stress and the speed of information:** Education programs should not just be about leadership. Addressing personal concerns such as stress and time management are much more relevant in today's technology-driven world. These

“soft” subjects can make the difference between an effective official and a miserable board or staff member. Also, with the mounting demand for information from all levels of government, officials will need strategies for more effective communication, more diverse methods of communication, and dealing with increased public scrutiny.

Education is not necessarily the answer to all of a board’s problems. Is the problem a deficiency of knowledge or skill among the board, or is it a deficiency of execution? **Board members at the very least must know:**

- the roles and responsibilities of county boards, and the roles and responsibilities of individual board members
- Structuring the work of the board (e.g., committees) in a way that will optimize effectiveness within their current capabilities
- Developing the appropriate working relationship with professional staff (if one exists)
- Understanding and accepting their role and its restrictions under the law

All the training in the world will not make a board effective if the ability to implement is not there. Here, areas such as poor leadership, lack of consensus, poor communication and lack of resolution procedures should be examined.

You may **need to perform a board evaluation** or bring in an outside consultant to perform an assessment. Whatever the case may be, don’t see training as a way to solve all your problems, but rather as a tool to help you recognize them.

The NCACC’s part in continuing education is more as the role of a facilitator. A workshop at the 2006 NCACC Annual Conference titled “Are you ready to be certified?” is a perfect starting point. It a great opportunity to explore a more structured continuing education program in county government, one that not only addresses basic information for new commissioners, but creates a peer learning environment that helps seasoned commissioners address upcoming issues in their county. Courses in negotiation, contract law, time management and team building are always relevant at any stage of a public official’s career.

Lastly, as recommended to Strategic Goals Team No. 2, NACo serves as an excellent resource for new commissioners. Every four years, NACo publishes “The County Leadership Handbook.” This document includes sections on board leadership, media relations, Information Technology and understanding the budget. I recommend that this be part of all new commissioner packets and distributed to each county as new handbooks are published.