The association celebrates 75 years of advocating for public education
NSBA has long been an influential advocate for public education and the nation’s 90,000 school board members. What’s exciting today is that, as NSBA celebrates its 75th anniversary, it is a more vigorous and dynamic organization than at any time in its history. The past two years have seen the organization transform itself internally and strengthen its partnership with state school boards associations. It also has launched an exciting and ambitious campaign to influence public opinion on education issues and to raise its profile and influence among federal policymakers.

These efforts are not happening in a vacuum. They are being built upon the foundation of good work and hard-earned progress that took NSBA three-quarters of a century to put in place. When the association was founded in 1940, it had no paid staff and few financial resources. Indeed, when its first executive director was hired in 1949, the association had only about $3.50 in the bank. Not surprisingly, NSBA for years played a proud but modest role in speaking out on national education issues.

In the decades that followed, NSBA grew—slowly but constantly building up its financial resources, its infrastructure, and its professional staff—and, in doing so, greatly advanced its capabilities to shape federal education policy. It built itself into a champion of public education whose voice carries weight with the nation’s policymakers.

So why today’s flurry of activity? Why is NSBA talking of a more aggressive advocacy effort and a greater emphasis on influencing public opinion? The simple answer is that the times demand it. Today, public schools are expected to educate more children to higher levels of academic achievement than ever imagined when NSBA was founded. In the 21st century, school boards need a strong advocate to ensure public schools receive the support and resources to do their job. School boards also need a powerful voice to counter the well-funded special interest groups calling for ill-advised reforms that would privatize public schools, divert tax dollars from public education, and undermine the role of school board governance.

To be that strong advocate—that powerful voice—NSBA chose to “up its game.” It was time to reassess its priorities, refocus its resources, and strengthen its partnership with state school boards associations so the maximum effort could be brought to bear on its advocacy work and membership services. Thus, in late 2012, the NSBA Board of Directors laid out a vision to reinvigorate the association—to transform NSBA into a “more visible, influential, and effective leader in public education.”

That plan is now well under way, says NSBA Executive Director Thomas J. Gentzel. “We have no intention of sitting back and allowing state and federal policymakers to underfund public schools and promote the creation of charter schools and voucher schools. We are here to represent the interests of state school boards associations and the school boards they represent ... and to ensure that the voice of school board members is heard when education policy is being decided.”

It’s clear that NSBA knows where it’s going. And it’s fitting that, as we celebrate our 75th anniversary, that we look back at NSBA’s history—through the prism of how the past is serving as the foundation for what promises to be an exciting and meaningful future.

NSBA has many good years ahead of it. So let’s celebrate an NSBA that’s 75 years “young.”
When NSBA was founded—originally as the National Council of State School Boards Associations—there was no U.S. Department of Education, no Title I funding, and relatively few federal regulations to direct the decision-making of local school boards. One of the few significant federal contributions to education was “Impact Aid” for school districts encompassing tax-exempt federal lands.

Through the 1940s and 1950s, it was clear to everyone that the federal involvement in education would expand, yet NSBA was uncertain about whether to welcome or fear this development. In 1962, for example, the NSBA Delegate Assembly, the primary policymaking body for the association, decided by a 2-to-1 vote to oppose any “federal general aid legislation” or expansion of federal programming, out of concern that such developments would lead to federal interference in local control of the schools.

But the world continued to change—and NSBA changed with it. Passage of the 1965 Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA)—and the subsequent wave of new federal funds and accompanying regulations—prompted NSBA to retool its capabilities to influence federal policymaking. In 1967, NSBA, based in Illinois, confirmed its commitment to change by opening a legislative branch office in Washington, D.C.

The next watershed moment in NSBA’s history arrived in the 1970s, when, as former Executive Director Thomas A. Shannon observed in a history of NSBA, association leaders made a “commitment to lead and not just to observe.”

Issues of federal funding often dominated the advocacy work of NSBA, which found itself “in the trenches” during the Reagan administration, and later during the Clinton years, when federal policymakers proposed to make significant cuts in education spending. Defending education funding became a perennial part of NSBA’s advocacy effort.

Every debate about how much money to spend—and how it was to be spent—ultimately revolved around two issues: what was best for schoolchildren, and what was the appropriate role of the federal government in setting education policy.

NSBA has always answered that question by arguing that as many decisions as possible should be left to the school board. The school board is the policymaking body closest to teachers and students and,
Grassroots advocacy
The influence of NSBA can be measured in the many who speak out

While Congress was deliberating the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009—an economic stimulus package that would provide about $50 billion in grants plus additional funding to budget-strapped school districts—nearly 900 school board leaders were in Washington, D.C., for the annual Federal Relations Network (FRN) conference (now the Advocacy Institute).

These conference attendees were among NSBA’s most vocal and active advocates on behalf of public education, and they didn’t miss an opportunity when they saw it. The FRN membership flooded Congress with messages and personal visits to argue for passage of the bill.

No one claims school board members single-handedly were responsible for the legislation’s passage a few weeks later. But they did their part, and that’s the point: One of the great strengths of NSBA is its powerful grassroots advocacy—the willingness of locally elected school board members to reach out to their members of Congress and advocate on behalf of public education and issues of federal education policy.

The power of grassroots advocacy was well-recognized by the time NSBA established the FRN program in 1973—just as it is recognized today. “Our grassroots advocates have credibility when they talk about local concerns,” says Michael Zola, NSBA’s associate executive director of federal advocacy and public policy.

“Unlike special interest groups, board members have no personal stake in the issues. It’s about what’s best for children. And, as mostly elected officials, board members are representing the public—representing the constituents of the members of Congress. So their voice carries weight.”

Yet, there are so many new voices joining the debate on education policy—some well-funded by groups supporting policies that do not put children’s needs first—so NSBA has been working with state school boards associations to expand its grassroots advocacy efforts. For example, FRN membership has jumped tenfold—a potent source of influence, given that these are the school board members who have committed to advocating actively on education issues with their members of Congress and other federal officials.

Other grassroots advocacy work has been undertaken by the National School Boards Action Center (NSBAC), a legally independent nonprofit organization founded by NSBA. NSBAC recently established the Friends of Public Education, an affiliation of concerned citizens who have volunteered to contact members of Congress on key policy issues and speak out in general on behalf of public education. In addition, NSBAC is promoting partnerships with other organizations to promote joint advocacy efforts to support sound education policy.
Issues surrounding school law and urban education are prominent throughout the decade. In response, NSBA establishes the Council of Urban Education (CUBE) and the Council of School Attorneys (COSA).

1973 Recognizing the power of grassroots advocacy, NSBA establishes the Federal Relations Network (FRN).

1975 The Education for All Handicapped Children Act (later reauthorized as the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act) is passed as NSBA recommended, the law requires the majority of funding to go directly to local districts rather than through state education departments.

As federal policy increasingly impacts local school boards, NSBA opens a legislative branch in the nation’s capital.

In one of its boldest bids to make a difference in federal policymaking, NSBA organizes legal action seeking to stop President Richard Nixon from blocking the release of millions of dollars in federal education funds.

“NSBA’s influence as an advocate for public education and local school governance has grown. The emergence of the federal government as a major player in educational policy has only confirmed the critical role NSBA plays as our voice in Washington, D.C.”

Carter Ward, Executive Director, Missouri School Boards Association
A network of attorneys
NSBA has a long history of working in partnership with outside counsel

When NSBA established the Council of School Attorneys (COSA) in 1967, school boards were responding to a growing activism in the federal courts.

All manner of issues—from desegregation to employee due process to student free speech rights—were coming before the courts, and how these legal cases were resolved would set precedents that would have an immense impact on the discretion of school boards to set local policy.

At the time, though, NSBA lacked the resources to intervene aggressively in the court cases that would go on to affect how schools operate.

What was needed was a cadre of outside legal experts who could partner with NSBA to file friend-of-the-court (amicus) briefs in key legal battles.

COSA has served this role well, but that’s hardly its only value to NSBA or school attorneys nationwide. From its beginning, COSA also has been seen as a valuable conduit of information and assistance for attorneys serving school districts, and as a forum to allow these attorneys to exchange information and ideas.

Today, helping school attorneys develop their skills—and working in collaboration to challenge state voucher laws in court or battle the regulatory excesses of the federal executive branch—is an essential part of NSBA’s efforts to protect public education.

“Keeping school attorneys informed about the latest developments in school law, and partnering with these attorneys to make the voice of school boards heard in the nation’s courts, is crucial,” says NSBA General Counsel Francisco Negrón.

“Our work with COSA is a key component of our legal advocacy effort.”

1976
NSBA moves its offices to Washington, D.C.

Federal officials begin to voice serious policy proposals for a federal tax credit to fund private schools. NSBA takes a strong stance against any plan that could divert tax dollars from public education.

1980
With the support of NSBA for a cabinet-level department for education, the U.S. Department of Education opens its doors.

1983
One of the most influential federal reports on education, “A Nation at Risk,” is released. NSBA elected officials are serving on several education commissions at this time, including the one that released this report.

1984
NSBA moves into a permanent headquarters in Alexandria, Va.

1985
The nation focuses on the legal battle of Ryan White, an early victim of the still-mysterious AIDS epidemic who is denied entry into his school. Two years later, NSBA receives a Centers for Disease Control grant to assist school policymakers in addressing policy related to HIV/AIDS.
As state and federal policymakers shape new legislation or regulatory mandates, they often listen respectfully to the professional advice of educators. But such deliberations don’t happen in a vacuum. Public opinion also holds sway. If public schools are viewed as failing institutions, then government policies open the door to charter schools and voucher programs.

NSBA has seen this dynamic at work throughout its history. In 1957, the launch of Sputnik shocked the nation and sparked a series of hasty reforms aimed at improving math, foreign language, and science instruction. The 1983 release of the “A Nation at Risk” report initiated an era of increasingly strident assertions that public schools were “failing.”

The Internet, social media, and the proliferation of ideologically driven think tanks, and political commentators talking 24/7 have flooded the public consciousness with ideas, allegations, and opinions—cum-facts and changed the dynamics of national policy consensus. So it should come as no surprise that NSBA has responded by putting “public advocacy”—seizing the high ground in the public debates on education—as a top-tier priority.

That’s made clear by the creation of a Department of Public Advocacy and Communications, which for the first time in NSBA history has been given equal status with the association’s federal and legal advocacy programs. “The NSBA board and executive director were willing to risk change to improve NSBA’s communications efforts, and that has great significance,” says Lisa Bushey, associate executive director of the new department. “To serve the Federation, it is important to speak with one collective voice. Changes prompted by charter schools, voucher programs, and escalating attacks on public education all underscore the need for targeted communications that grow public awareness and inspire action.”

Over the decades, NSBA has made a conscious attempt to speak up aggressively on the issues of the day. In 1970, NSBA’s president chaired a press conference of major education organizations that challenged President Nixon’s veto of public education appropriations. In 1987, NSBA co-sponsored a report, “Cost of Education: An Investment in America’s Future,” to refute what NSBA called “spurious allegations” that public schools were overspending on school

“NSBA has championed the needs of all schoolchildren, promoted the cause of local control of our schools, and worked to develop sound policies that will ensure the continued success of public education.”

Anne M. Byrne
President, NSBA (2014-15)

1986
NSBA chairs the Coalition Against Double Taxation, consisting of state and local governments and public employee unions, to oppose President Ronald Reagan’s proposal to eliminate the deductibility of state and local taxes—a move many fear could impact local efforts to raise taxes.

1991
American School Board Journal celebrates a milestone—one century of continuous publication.

1996
The Telecommunications Act of 1996 establishes the E-rate, allowing schools and libraries to receive telecommunications services at reduced rates. NSBA becomes a champion of the program.

1997
The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act is reauthorized with changes advocated by NSBA to reduce unnecessary costs and administrative burdens on school districts.

2000
A committee of school boards, state school boards association leaders, and NSBA staff distill the successful practices of school boards into the “Key Work of School Boards.”

2001
The No Child Left Behind Act is approved by Congress. NSBA will spend the next 14 years seeking relief for school boards from the law’s more onerous provisions.
administration costs.

Such isolated examples don’t begin to do justice to the decades of public advocacy work by NSBA. But what’s important today is where NSBA is headed. In recent years, it’s become clear that NSBA needed to embrace a broader and long-term strategy to win public support for public education. Thus, NSBA launched the Stand Up 4 Public Schools campaign, which has produced public service ads in which basketball legend Earvin “Magic” Johnson, television personality Montel Williams, former astronaut and educator Barbara Morgan, and others speak out on the success of public education.

NSBA also has greatly expanded its social media presence, posting, for example, regular Twitter comments during the most recent State of the Union Address and combating the “well-funded PR machines” that, during National School Choice Week, advertised heavily to promote charter schools. In a Huffington Post article, for example, NSBA Executive Director Thomas J. Gentzel pointed out that choice exists in public schools.

Speaking out aggressively on the national stage is now an established part of NSBA’s strategy for the future, Bushey says.

“We realize that public schools are under siege and that for-profit interests are working in high gear to create a secondary system of education that siphons public tax dollars away from public education. This campaign is essential in telling the other side of the story, on our terms, and in a way where we do not get mired in a distracting point-counterpoint debate with critics.”

A powerful voice
NSBA’s flagship publication has been a powerful voice for school boards since 1891

American School Board Journal was first published in 1891, making NSBA’s flagship publication for school board leaders one of the oldest continuously publishing magazines in the nation.

Once printed in newsprint, with a typical 19th century layout, the privately owned publication was purchased by NSBA in 1967 and quickly redesigned to the more standard magazine format that is familiar to today’s readers.

In its 124 years, ASBJ has covered the major issues of the day, such as the initial use of school buses in the early part of the 20th century, the introduction of 16 mm films to the classrooms, initial concerns about how to deal with HIV-infected students in school, the challenges of No Child Left Behind, and the fate of the Common Core State Standards Initiative.

ASBJ has seen it all over the years, but its staff is eager to tackle the issues of the 21st century, says Editor-in-Chief Kathleen Vail.

“Our goal is always to provide school board leaders with an insightful look at the issues—with one eye always on how that information can be used in the practical, day-to-day realities of school district operations.”
Today’s policymakers are bombarded with information—so much so that, years ago, one legislator scoffed when someone pointed to research to back up his argument. If you look hard enough, noted the cynical lawmaker, you can find a study to support any position on any issue.

There is some truth to that—and that undermines any informed deliberation of education policy. That’s why, in 2006, NSBA launched the Center for Public Education (CPE) as an information clearinghouse, to help school board members, state and national policymakers, and anyone else find reliable and unbiased information on public education issues.

CPE is not the first attempt by NSBA to set the record straight. Yet its creation signaled a change in NSBA’s approach to the misinformation and ideologically driven “research” that exists on the national stage. Instead of addressing an issue with a one-time report or study, NSBA now is looking for “brand recognition ... as an organization that provides information, accurate and unbiased, that policymakers can rely on,” says Michael Zola, NSBA’s associate executive director for federal advocacy and public policy.

To that end, he says, NSBA’s advocacy professionals are making a subtle but important change in how they do business: They don’t intend to be seen on Capitol Hill only when NSBA has an issue to address. “We want to be available as a resource for people on Capitol Hill. We want them to know who we are, but more importantly, that they can turn to us for accurate and reliable information.”

It should make sense for policymakers to turn to NSBA for policy answers, Zola says. “Our school boards know what’s happening at the local level. They can explain the practical impact of a policy. So we hope that, when someone needs information about how legislative language or a new regulation will affect local schools, NSBA will be seen as the logical place to turn for answers.”

“My name is Don Blom. I was the former chief executive officer of NSBA. I serve on the NSBA Board of Directors. In 2007, I was the chairman of the Board of Directors. I am very proud of where NSBA is today. I think the campaign, Stand Up 4 Public Schools, is fabulous. It’s built on the shoulders of leaders of the past, just as I was able to be a part of NSBA and stand on the shoulders of leaders before me. We are being proactive. We are being forthright in our work on legislation on the reauthorization of ESEA. I love the fact that we stood up for the expansion of E-rate. Altogether, we are in a great, strong place.”

Anne L. Bryant
Former Executive Director, NSBA (1996-2012)
Member Service

The partnership with state associations is the key to NSBA’s past—and future

While NSBA’s advocacy work tends to attract the most attention, it’s worth noting that another key element of NSBA’s mission is serving the more practical needs of its member state school boards associations—and the school boards served by our state partners.

In fact, when the NSBA Board of Directors called for a revitalization of the association in 2012, it specifically set the objective that “as an organization, NSBA will reconnect with its state association members in new and more effective ways.”

That’s not to say that NSBA ever ignored that part of its mission. In the seminal history of NSBA, “The National School Boards Association: Reflections on the Development of an American Idea,” author and former Executive Director Thomas A. Shannon wrote extensively on the ongoing efforts of NSBA leaders to develop and refine its member services.

Among these efforts is the Summer Leadership Seminar, a meeting whose programming and networking opportunities allow state association leaders to address educational leadership and association management issues from a state association perspective.

Meanwhile, the Conference of State Association Legislative Staff (CSALS) serves as a forum for communications and collaboration among the professional advocates of NSBA and the state associations. Another key collaborating group is the Council of School Board Association Communicators (COS-BAC), founded in 1979 as a forum for the public relations and communications staff.

NSBA also has a long history of reaching out, in partnership with state associations, to individual school boards as the need arises. As the challenges of urban education took the national stage in the 1960s, NSBA established the Council of Big City Boards of Education—now the Council of Urban Education (CUBE)—in 1967. In the early 1970s, in response to concerns about the need for more black representation on school boards, the National Caucus of Black School Board Members was founded. In the years that followed, NSBA also organized the National Hispanic Council of School Board Members and the National Caucus of American Indian/Alaska Native School Board Members.

Given the vision set forth by the Board of Directors, emphasis on member service is a part of the daily conversation at NSBA, and recently NSBA introduced two new services for its members: executive director searches for state associations, and “transition workshops” for state association boards and their newly hired executive directors.

Today, NSBA Executive Director Thomas J. Gentzel sees NSBA as “the Washington, D.C., office for state school boards associations. We’re here to advocate and monitor the issues and be active in representing the interests of our state associations and their member school boards.”

“Through the years NSBA has never lost sight of its guiding principle of focusing on the student achievement needs of the millions of children enrolled in America’s public schools while representing the collective resolve of the membership.”

Sis Henry
Executive Director, Georgia School Boards Association
Key Work of School Boards
Providing a clear framework for improving student achievement

School board members have always cared about student achievement, and, over the decades, NSBA has produced a variety of publications, videos, and conference programming to help school boards govern with student achievement in mind.

Yet, perhaps the most important initiative in this effort has been the “Key Work of School Boards,” a framework of key practices to help focus and guide school boards in their efforts to improve student achievement.

The development of the Key Work was a two-year project involving experts in school board training and leaders from NSBA and several state school boards associations, who together reviewed the research and best practices shown to help school boards build academically successful school districts.

After the findings were released in 1995, “the Key Work really drove a lot of our work [for the next decade],” says Anne L. Bryant, NSBA’s executive director at the time. “Much of our annual conference programming focused on the Key Work. Our publications focused on elements of it. And state associations picked up on our guidelines, as well. What I think it ended up doing is it reconfigured the way we think of school board governance.”

This year, NSBA has launched an updated edition of the Key Work. Kanisha Williams-Jones, NSBA’s director of leadership services, says new research and the experiences of the past decade have revealed a need for school boards to put even more emphasis on their responsibilities to influence and inform community opinion, advocate effectively, and use policy to have a positive impact on student achievement.

“The revised Key Work is a step forward because it will point school boards in the direction they need to go to be effective leaders in their school districts and effective advocates for public education,” she says. “More and more research points to the powerful role school boards can have on student achievement when they put their energy and focus into the right areas at the appropriate leadership level. The Key Work helps identify those core areas for effective boards.”

“NSBA has been important to me since I began service on a local school board in 1977. It is the one organization committed to the education of America’s children in cooperation with state school boards associations.”

E. Harold Fisher
Past President, NSBA (1992-93)