

Advocacy is All About Relationships

Howard-Suamico school board members discuss strategies to develop relationships with legislators

SESSION *The Art of Advocacy from a School Board Perspective*

Presenters Howard-Suamico School District: Mark Ashley, board president; Lisa Botsford, board member; Teresa Ford, board member; Laura Barnard, board member

The Howard-Suamico School Board envisions its legislative advocacy as a triangle — the WASB, their board of education and the school district’s legislators.

“All are great resources,” school board member Lisa Botsford said. “It’s important to build on all of these relationships. The ultimate goal is that you have a relationship with your legislators, that you can openly talk to them and be a resource for them. The whole theme for this topic is building relationships.”

Botsford cautioned, “You don’t want to be the type of person who only comes to your legislator when you have a problem. You need to build a relationship before there’s a problem.”

Board president Mark Ashley also stressed that, “A successful relationship is a balance of sharing and listening. It’s not rocket science. You want to be both a resource and a sounding board for legislators.”

District officials and board members have also built key relationships with legislative staff. Joint Finance Committee co-chair Rep. John Nygren (R-Marinette) — who has parts of eight school districts in his legislative district — is one of Howard-Suamico’s legislators.

Nygren’s staffer Caroline Krause joined the district presenters at the convention offering, “(Staff) make a point to bring issues to our legislator’s

attention,” after contact with constituents. “If I have a meeting with people, I am absolutely going to talk about it with my boss.” For board members, Krause said, “Communication is the most critical component of building a relationship with legislators. You guys are the experts. We rely on you for information.”

Ashley impressed upon attendees, “Develop a relationship with staff like you would with a legislator. When you meet with a staffer, you’re talking to someone who is going to have input on the decisions.”

There are various methods to communicate with legislators, such as — inviting them to school events, sending them your district newsletter, writing letters, forwarding school board-passed resolutions on pertinent issues, and holding regular face-to-face meetings and periodic phone calls to touch base.

Audience members bemoaned efforts to talk with legislators who opposed many of the issues board members advocated for. Board member Teresa Ford admitted, “You have to be persistent. There will be times you won’t convince them, but it’s important that they understand what’s going to happen in their district’s schools.

“Try to find common ground. Is there a neutral third party who can help?” Ford said, suggesting a local business person who is also a school



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— Teresa Ford, Howard-Suamico board member

advocate. Others suggested the student perspective is unique and of interest to legislators as is the perspective of local realtors.

Howard-Suamico presenters pointed to their successful efforts to raise the low-revenue ceiling a couple of years ago. Howard-Suamico is the second lowest per-pupil spending district in the state. The district’s advocates were focused, using a single piece of paper to explain the issue, impact to the district, and suggested legislative remedy.

The Howard-Suamico team urged attendees to build communication channels and keep them open, be focused in your advocacy, and always remember to thank legislators — publicly if practicable. Keep it simple, tell a story about children or a program and its success, be reasonable in your request.

“Each district has their own story to tell,” Ford said. “If you don’t tell the story of your district, who’s going to?” ■