

Key Issues for 2015-16

Contact new legislators and develop working relationships before the new legislative session begins



There's an old saying that the more things change, the more they stay the same.

The thing that's changing is the composition of the Wisconsin Legislature. What remains the same is the need for school leaders to be in touch with their current and future lawmakers on a regular basis.

With nearly 30 open state legislative seats, many new members will be sworn in when the 2015-16 Legislature convenes in January. It is critically important for school leaders and for the WASB to build relationships with these new legislators and to educate them about the needs (and the value) of our public schools. Now is the time to begin building those new relationships.

Many key education issues will likely be decided when the next two-year state budget — the 2015-17 budget — is debated and passed by the Legislature. This will all take place during the first six months of 2015. That's why it's so important for school leaders to begin those conversations now.

While public schools in our state have many success stories that we need to celebrate, public schools also face many challenges. To overcome the challenges and build on the successes, we will need the help of supportive (or at least receptive) lawmakers.

Too often, lawmakers say they only hear from their local school officials when they are complaining

or need something. Because of that perception, it's important to build a relationship before making a big "ask" of your legislators. The first phase is getting to know each other and finding out what you have in common.

What we're talking about is a conversation. Invite legislative candidates to meet with you to get to know you and your district, and vice-versa. Understand that candidates are busy, with lots of demands on their time. If you can't get them to come to you, find out where they will be and ask them personally for a chance to talk. Find a time that works for both of you. Keep trying.

As a follow-up, arrange a sit-down meeting with parents, business leaders, school staff and other public school advocates in your community. Stories from parents, students and local business people are more apt to stick with a candidate than budget numbers.

The important thing is to begin to get acquainted. There will be plenty of time to make specific requests of your legislators over the course of the two-year 2015-16 legislative cycle.

What might some of those requests look like? As the state begins preparing its 2015-17 state budget, the WASB has been putting together its budget agenda. Perhaps some of the items on the WASB's list might help to shape your own list.

Revenue Limit Increase: The WASB's state budget agenda includes a request to tie school district

revenue limits to inflation so the amount of additional revenue school districts can raise each year keeps pace with increases in the cost of operating schools.

For most of the history of revenue limits, the legislature has allowed an annual per-pupil increase roughly matching the rate of inflation. However, since 2009-10, annual adjustments in state-imposed revenue limits have not allowed school districts to bring in revenue to at least match the rate of inflation.

By not allowing district revenues to keep pace with inflation, the state is, arguably, forcing districts to cut educational programs at the local level, unless they are unable to pass a referendum. Even districts with stable enrollment find this problematic, but districts with declining enrollment face a more serious problem that jeopardizes their ability to maintain programs and services for their students.

Many districts are spending less money per student today than they did five years ago. Although districts have been able to balance their budgets by using the flexibility provided by Act 10 to reduce employee costs and deferring building maintenance, many districts cannot continue to do this indefinitely without seriously harming the quality and scope of the educational programs they offer their students. Whether this inflationary increase comes through revenue limits alone or in

Too often, lawmakers say they only hear from their local school officials when they are complaining or need something.

combination with additional per pupil aid for each district, the important thing for schools is to keep pace with inflation.

Increase the Reimbursement

Rate for Special Education Services:

State and federal law require that local school districts provide special education and related services to children with disabilities ages three through 20 who reside in the school district.

To partially fund the costs of providing special education services, the state provides special education categorical aid that is funded on a sum-certain dollar basis. This aid was cut in 2009-10 and has been frozen ever since. It reimburses only about 26 percent of a district's prior year's special education costs.

Because all districts incur special education costs, all districts would benefit from an increase in special education categorical aid that would increase the percentage of costs reimbursed.

Under revenue limits, some argue that as special education costs rise faster than special education categorical aid, the spending authority of school districts for regular education is diminished.

In districts that receive little or no general equalization aid, the increased costs of special education not reimbursed by categorical aid are paid fully from property tax revenues to the extent revenue limits permit. These districts would welcome more state funding.

State Funding for School Technology: School districts are increasingly implementing blended learning strategies, one-to-one computing initiatives and bring-your-own-device programs that require more robust Internet connectivity. The move to online assessments also requires highly reliable and secure high-speed connections.

A pressing question for schools is how to pay for additional bandwidth into schools and additional connectivity within schools to foster the types of personalized learning that will equip students to compete in the 21st century economy.

The WASB has been working with other public education groups on a proposal to significantly increase state technology funding assistance for schools. We hope this plan will be included in the 2015-17 state budget.

An earlier version of the proposal was endorsed in the final report of the Assembly Speaker's Task Force on Rural Schools in May. The plan provides:

- additional state funding for more broadband at lower cost to all school buildings in a district, rather than to just one building as under the current program;
- block grants to districts for networking equipment (e.g., routers, switches and other internal connections that support Wi-Fi connectivity) they need to ensure every classroom is adequately connected; and
- better training for teachers on how to get the most out of technology-empowered learning.

A separate recommendation of the task force urges the Legislature to explore incentives to encourage Internet providers to extend broadband service to rural areas that currently lack it, helping all students to have broadband access.

Pupil Transportation: Many rural school districts with large geographic areas have high pupil transportation costs. They spend much more money just to get students to the classroom door (and back home again) than other districts. This funding cannot be used for instruction as it would be used in more compact urban or suburban school districts.

The Rural Schools Task Force recommended that the Legislature increase funding for pupil transportation aids but offered no specifics. The WASB will be seeking an increase.

Our success in achieving the items on this list will depend on local boards and administrators telling your stories and making the case for increased funding. The WASB will be supporting you, but your work with lawmakers is critical. ■

Dan Rossmiller is the director of WASB Advocacy and Government Relations.

