



The Ball is in Our Court

Action at the federal and state levels provides opportunities for school leaders to shape education policy

Hello Wisconsin! I am proud to be your WASB 2017 President. I have been on the WASB Board of Directors for more than four years and can tell you that the WASB is a focused organization preparing to lead Wisconsin education into the next decade and beyond.

Turning from playing defense into playing offense is not always easy, but the WASB is well situated to use its position as a positive state educational organization to play some offense. In particular, John Ashley, our WASB Executive Director, and the Government Relations team are leading the positive charge. The opportunities (and challenges) are immense with a new federal administration and new U.S. Department of Education Secretary. This coupled with the start of the two-year state budget cycle creates opportunities for a positive “give and take” dialogue at the state and federal levels. I am heartened that Governor Scott Walker has put forward a proposed budget funded with additional educational funds, the likes of which we have not seen in recent years.

In January, I visited Washington, D.C. as a member of the WASB Executive Committee. We had positive talks with Wisconsin’s members of the House, Senate and their staffs. My feeling as a long-time Washington observer is that it is going to be difficult for Congress to move forward in a bipartisan way except perhaps in the education arena. Federal action seems possible for the reauthorization and modernization

of the Carl Perkins Career and Technical Education Act and the Child Nutrition Act, which governs school meal programs. Both bills passed the House last Congress but got bogged down in the Senate. Both laws are in need of an update and prospects appear good that Congress will enhance local control by moving more decision-making authority back to school boards with less federal strings attached.

Of course there is also the U.S. Department of Education’s implementation of the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), which passed Congress in December 2015. For a while it appeared the department would try to rewrite this law through the regulatory process. But with the change in administrations, it now appears that ESSA may be implemented with less regulation, which means the intent of the law to allow states and local districts to play a more major role will be carried out.

That was a theme of our visits in Washington. While money is, and will be, tight, Congress seems willing to hand more control back to the states and, in the education arena, back to local school boards. I sensed a willingness to trust local school boards to a much greater degree than I had in the past.

It is also interesting to note that nearly all of our visits in Washington ended with talking about choice. With the president pledging to promote school choice, we made sure to point out that the Wisconsin

public school system provides considerable choice to parents and students. We talked at length about the myriad of programs that are available as choices to the students within the framework of the public school system, including open enrollment, charters, online classes, Youth Options, and more.

We also talked about what we can do for our representatives. We offered to provide data and facts regarding the education programs in our state. One of the representatives, who plays a key role on the House Education Committee, took us up on the offer and tasked us with reviewing the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) program requirements. We’re always learning new and improved ways to provide educational services. Perhaps, there are ways to update the requirements while ensuring quality services and reducing costs? Congress is listening for suggestions. The ball is in our court.

Yes, believe it or not, I think that amid the government turmoil, education may well be the only place where Republicans and Democrats can get something done together. This year may bode well for education. One can certainly hope. It will not be easy, but if we all keep “Telling Our Story,” we might very well find some gold at the end of our education rainbow. Stay tuned. ■

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