

Pivotal Year for Education Issues

New Year could signal a new direction for public education policy in Wisconsin



As you read this, a new two-year legislative session is upon us.

One of the largest freshman classes ever in the Wisconsin Legislature will be taking its seats as the 2015-16 Wisconsin Legislature convenes. The State Senate will have seven new senators (five Republicans, two Democrats), and the State Assembly will have 25 new representatives (18 Republicans, seven Democrats).

School leaders would be well advised to begin building relationships with these incoming lawmakers and strengthening relationships with those lawmakers who are returning to Madison. Get to know them and their staff members. Introduce yourself at every opportunity. Sign up for e-update newsletters by visiting their legislative webpages. Invite them to your schools to show the great things happening in your district. And invite them to your local legislative breakfasts — if you don't have one, the WASB government relations team would be happy to help you start one!

Building relationships with your legislators is crucial to being an effective advocate for your school district. We want them to consider you a trusted resource on education issues.

■ Education Issues and the State Budget Debate

Debate over the state budget for the next two years will likely dominate the first six months of 2015.

That debate could highlight a division among Republican lawmakers between those who favor aggressively pursuing education reforms and those who favor taking a more measured approach.

In the state Assembly, where Republicans control 63 of the 99 seats, the appetite for putting a partisan stamp on the direction of K-12 education policy is strong.

In the state Senate, the leadership has appointed two separate committees to address education issues: the Senate Education Committee, chaired once again by state Sen. Luther Olsen (R-Ripon), and a newly formed Senate Committee on Education Reform and Government Operations, chaired by state Sen. Paul Farrow (R-Pewaukee).

Last session, Olsen and Farrow were often in disagreement on issues like school accountability, Common Core State Standards, and voucher expansion. While Sen. Olsen has stated publicly that he wants to work with his Senate colleagues on these issues, he acknowledges that the more conservative Senate elected in November will likely attempt to

go around him, and the creation of the new committee seems to bear this out.

■ Reforming School Accountability

One of the first education items on the legislative docket, according to Assembly Speaker Robin Vos (R-Rochester), will be a proposal to reform the state's school accountability system that Sen. Farrow is taking a leading role in trying to ready for introduction.

Public schools are already a part of that system. They have received school report cards for the past three years and district reports cards for the past two years. However, private schools that accept students who receive publicly funded tuition subsidies known as "vouchers" have never been included in the state accountability system.

One of the key issues to be resolved as this legislation moves forward is what testing will be used for accountability purposes. Currently, all students who get publicly funded education (including private school students benefiting from taxpayer subsidized vouchers) take the same standardized tests (*i.e.*, state assessments) as students in public schools. However, some Republicans, including Sen. Farrow and Speaker Vos, and

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private school leaders are pushing hard to allow schools to choose what test they use, provided it is nationally norm-referenced.

While public school advocates argue that multiple tests will create a murky accountability picture that will not allow for an “apples to apples” comparison, advocates for private voucher schools are convinced the results can be merged (using fairly complex statistical processes) to produce equivalency calculation data that can be used to compare schools and come up with goals.

Another key issue is what kinds of interventions or sanctions might be imposed on persistently low-performing schools. Sen. Farrow’s proposal will likely call for the creation of a statewide school accountability council that would oversee school quality, but exactly what that council could do about a low-performing school isn’t clear yet. (Last session, replacement of the principal

and staff, conversion to a charter school or closure were among the sanctions proposed.)

Another key issue, and one likely to be decided in the state budget debate, is whether state-imposed per-pupil revenue limits on public schools will be adjusted upward (two years ago, the initial budget proposal that was introduced called for no increase).

■ Stay Informed

The legislative session commences on Jan. 5, and it is anticipated that Gov. Walker will introduce his 2015-17 state budget proposal in late January.

School board members who want to stay abreast of developments related to these issues and others should read the weekly legislative updates provided through the WASB *eConnection* electronic newsletter and monthly columns like this one in the *Wisconsin School News* magazine.

In addition, school board members should mark their calendars and plan to attend two legislative updates that will be provided by the WASB government relations team at the State Education Convention in Milwaukee on Jan. 23 and at the WASB Legal and Human Resources Conference in Stevens Point on Feb. 27.

School board members who want to make their voices heard in Madison should also plan to attend the 2015 WASB Day at the Capitol in Madison on March 18. This event begins at the Monona Terrace Convention Center with a series of morning briefings on the state budget and effective lobbying techniques and ends with meetings with legislators in their Capitol offices in the afternoon arranged by the WASB staff. Watch wasb.org and your mailbox for further information about this event.

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