

## 2013-14 Legislative Session Winds Down

### *Common Core, charter schools, school accountability and more*

A long and tumultuous legislative session is coming to a close. It may well be a session that is remembered more for what *was not* enacted than *what* was enacted.

In this month's column we take a look at some of the significant proposals that *did not* pass. Next month we'll highlight those that made it into law.

There were a number of important issues on which lawmakers were unable to reach a consensus needed to pass legislation through both houses as the 2013-14 session wound down.

As a result, the session will end without any legislative changes that would disrupt the adoption or the implementation of the Common Core State Standards or create a process for adopting state standards that would give lawmakers the final say over the content of state standards.

A strong showing by school leaders who testified at a Senate hearing on a bill (Senate Bill 619) to create a model academic standards board, played a key role in sidetracking such proposals, if not permanently, at least until the next Legislature convenes in January.

The session also ended without any significant expansion in how non-district charter schools (known as independent charter schools) are authorized.

*(An independent charter school is a public school authorized by an entity other than a school district. Currently, independent charter school authorizers in Wisconsin are limited to Milwaukee and Racine. In the rest of the state, the only way to create a charter school is to receive the approval of a local school board.)*

Legislation to allow independent charter schools to be located anywhere in the state and to broadly expand the list of entities that can authorize such charters did not pass.

One factor blocking independent charter expansion was concern over how these schools are financed. Currently, independent charters are funded through a reduction in general school aid to every school district in the state that occurs before any aids are distributed. In 2012-13, for example, every district in Wisconsin saw its school aids reduced by 1.4 percent to fund the roughly \$60 million independent charter school program. Because each district is allowed to raise its property tax levy to offset the aid reduction, independent charter expansion has the effect of raising property taxes.

Related proposals that would have eliminated district-authorized instrumentality charters and

required independent charter school authorizers to grant requests from charter school operators and allow the "replication" (creation of brand new charters modeled on existing schools run by the same charter operator) did not pass. Again, the latter proposal may have been thwarted by the funding concern noted above.

Lawmakers stopped short of enacting proposals to establish a comprehensive school accountability system for all publicly funded schools (public schools, independent charter schools, and private voucher schools) that would include sanctions (penalties) for low-performing schools.

In the end, lawmakers scrapped proposals to revamp the state's existing school report cards and to establish a council of political appointees to determine the consequences for low performance on those report cards.

Instead, a more modest proposal was adopted that will require the state superintendent to ensure that every private school that accepts voucher students and every independent charter school supplies DPI with student performance data using the student information system or a compatible system by the 2015-16 school year. It also authorizes the state superintendent to withhold state payments from a private voucher school that fails to comply.

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Bills to create special education vouchers failed to generate momentum, surprising in light of the state Assembly's passage of a bill to create such vouchers in the 2011-12 session. Although bills to create special edition vouchers were introduced in both houses, they were not voted out of committee. Concern about expanding any voucher program in the absence of an accountability framework may have played a role.

School leaders should understand that many of the issues that were set aside in the current legislature will almost certainly be revisited in the 2015-16 session, and many of them are very likely to be debated early on as part of the state budget. Knowing this, public school leaders need to begin making advocacy plans now.

A Rural Schools Task Force appointed by Assembly Speaker Robin Vos (R-Rochester) spent several months examining the needs of Wisconsin's rural schools. Rural

superintendents and school board members who addressed this task force were clear about the need for mandate relief and a revised school aid formula that addresses rural concerns — such as transportation costs, technology infrastructure needs, and attracting and retaining talented teachers.

The task force has yet to release its final report, which means it will come out too late to be acted upon by the current 2013-14 Legislature. But that doesn't mean rural school leaders shouldn't seize upon it to build their legislative agenda for the 2015-16 session.

Rep. Rob Swearingen (R-Rhinelander), chairperson of the task force, says the report could address maintaining or increasing state aid for transportation costs, greater access to broadband connectivity and creating an incentive for better teacher retention, such as loan forgiveness.

Perhaps the most welcome turn of events that occurred due to the

Task Force is that many legislators were able to view schools outside of their own districts. These school tours were a real eye-opener for many legislators, with several expressing surprise at the challenges faced by rural schools. We need to redouble our efforts to get local lawmakers into our classrooms to see the real-world impact of their decision-making in Madison.

One of our challenges is to ensure that a legislator never utters, 'Gee, I didn't know their needs were so dire.'

We already know what many of the issues and challenges facing public schools will be in the next legislature.

As the school year winds down, and legislators begin returning home to campaign for re-election, every school board should begin to craft a legislative advocacy plan for the 2014-15 school year. The time to start is now. ■



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