

Prepare for the 2015-17 Budget Debate

Build Relationships with Your Legislators



Even though the Legislature is not in session, there is a lot going on in Madison.

State agencies are preparing and submitting their budget requests for the 2015-17 state budget.

One state agency budget submission we'll be watching closely will come from the Department of Public Instruction (DPI). Historically, the DPI submits its budget request in two parts: the first covers the department's operations; the second covers the department's request regarding school funding (state aids, revenue limit adjustments, major new initiatives).

The department submits the latter request after state general aid amounts for the current school year are certified for each district on October 15. This allows comparisons of budget proposals and amendments to be made to the most current aid figures. The DPI is expected to submit this portion of its request in early November.

While there is a lot going on in Madison, there also needs to be a lot going on in the local communities you represent.

The 2015-17 state budget will be a critical one for public school funding. One reason is that current law provides for no increases in either revenue limits or "per-pupil aid" beyond the 2014-15 school year. In addition, most state categorical aids, including special education

categorical aid, have been frozen for the last five years after having been cut in 2009-10. If state tax collections continue to lag behind projections, this may limit the state's ability to increase funding for public schools.

The WASB is asking the governor and lawmakers to allow school district revenues to increase by at least the rate of inflation and to increase special education categorical aid funding. We recognize that weaker than expected state tax collection figures may make some legislators hesitant to support these requests. School leaders — board members and administrators — working at the local level and making the case with their legislators will be critical in this effort.

While there will be competing demands for resources in the state budget, school leaders should feel comfortable asking for at least inflationary increases. School costs are not stagnant and asking lawmakers for a controlled and predictable increase in funding is responsible and justifiable. Other groups will not be shy about asking for increased funding and neither should public school leaders.

We'll have a clearer picture of the state's finances when new state revenue estimates are released on November 20. However, we already know what your district's needs are. Those needs likely won't change

regardless of the state's finances.

The new 2015-16 Legislature will convene in January. School boards should use the time from now and January to get better acquainted with the legislators who will represent your areas, whether they are newly elected or veteran lawmakers. *[On page 12 in this issue of Wisconsin School News, you'll find tips on how to build better working relationships with the legislators who represent you. We encourage you to read and follow those tips.]*

The key is to build relationships. While you should know what you are going to ask for, don't just make requests—provide some context, help your lawmakers understand your situation and how they can help you, and thank them for being good listeners. Avoid trying to play "gotcha."

Most legislators are not education experts. They may or may not understand that the new school year has brought numerous changes, including more rigorous teacher evaluations and new state assessments aligned to new state standards in English language arts and math. They may not understand your concerns that the new legislative session will bring uncertainty about state academic standards, school report cards, voucher expansion, and school funding. Help them to understand.

School boards are in the educa-

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tion business. And part of that business is educating the policy makers who represent us in Madison about how the decisions they will be called upon to make will affect our schools and our school children.

When your board meets with those who will represent your district in the Legislature, make sure you let them know about the efforts you are making to raise student achievement, including graduation rates and ACT scores, and provide more career and technical education opportunities. Explain the many changes you are working to implement. Let your lawmakers know how reductions in revenue limits and frozen categorical aids have affected your students and your district's efforts to boost student achievement. And be sure to explain how you would use additional resources to improve student opportunities.

Another conversation you may want to have with your lawmakers is about a number of education policy reform initiatives that are certain to be debated in January. Already, key legislators have signaled that several initiatives that did not pass during the 2013-14 legislative session will re-surface when the 2015-16 Legislature convenes in January. These include proposals to:

- Lift the enrollment cap and the income-eligibility cap on the statewide voucher system;
- Give legislators greater oversight and control over state academic

standards and the process for formulating state academic standards; and

- Change the state's school accountability system (*e.g.*, by reformatting the report cards, and/or creating a state accountability council to decide whether and how to impose sanctions on low-performing schools).

A great way to prepare for these conversations is by attending the WASB Legislative Advocacy Conference on Nov. 8 in Stevens Point.

This year's conference is designed to give you information you can use when advocating with your legislators or explaining the key issues facing your district to your communities.

Our goal is to help school board members speak confidently about the key education issues that will be debated in the upcoming 2015-16 legislative session. Whether you are engaging your communities or your legislators, the conference will help you to become a more effective advocate for your schools.

At the Legislative Advocacy Conference you'll:

- Learn about the history and development of the state's new academic standards in English language arts and math, the concerns they are intended to address, and the ongoing role of school boards and local control in determining curriculum and instruction.

- Get a clear picture of how the combination of Wisconsin's aging population and competing budget demands (such as transportation funding needs, growth in Medicaid spending, income tax reforms and reductions, etc.) will impact the state's ability to support its public schools.

- Hear how these trends and conditions make it more important than ever for school boards to forge strong relationships with the lawmakers who represent them.

- Explore how the state budget process works and get expert tips on how to impact the budget debate and put your board in the best position to successfully advocate for the needs of your district and its schoolchildren.

- Learn more about the state's existing report cards and school accountability system, why some lawmakers want to change the report cards, as well as the issues surrounding how to measure school performance in a fair but transparent manner, and the controversies that, to date, have thwarted attempts to bring private voucher schools into the accountability system.

We hope to see you on Nov. 8. In the meantime, study the candidates' positions on education, make sure to vote on Nov. 4, and plan to have conversations with those who will represent your districts. ■



2014 WASB LEGISLATIVE ADVOCACY CONFERENCE



NOVEMBER 8, 2014

HOLIDAY INN HOTEL & CONFERENCE CENTER - STEVENS POINT, WI