

# School Board Members Advocate for Wisconsin Students

*WASB Delegation attended NSBA Advocacy Institute in February*

One of the most important activities a school board member can undertake is legislative advocacy. Lawmakers want to learn about folks in their districts and issues they're interested in. Three members of the WASB Executive Committee 'walked the talk' when they went to Capitol Hill in February to meet with members of Wisconsin's congressional delegation to discuss important issues for the state's public school students.

WASB President Mike Blecha, a member of the Green Bay Area School Board, WASB Immediate Past President Nancy Thompson, a member of the Waterloo School Board, and First Vice-President Wanda Owens, a member of the Barneveld School Board, joined more than 750 school board leaders from across the nation who gathered to advocate for strong public schools for all students. Their trip coincided with the National School Board Association's (NSBA's) Advocacy Institute, held Feb. 2-4, 2014.

The three met with members of Wisconsin's congressional delegation, encouraging them to complete the long-overdue reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA, a/k/a the No Child Left Behind Act) in the current Congressional session. The House version of the reauthorization, H.R. 5, was passed last summer, marking the first time a reauthorization bill has cleared at least one house of Congress.

They also urged Wisconsin's U.S. senators and representatives to prioritize federal funding provided to local school districts under Title I and the Individuals with Disabilities Education

Act (IDEA) when federal budget decisions are made. The WASB members noted that Title I and IDEA grants are effective in helping to raise K-12 student achievement and school performance, affect nearly all school districts, and should be given funding priority over newly created programs that do not have a proven track record of effectiveness.

Another issue raised relates to newly introduced federal legislation that would reduce the authority of states and local school districts to decide the appropriate use of restraint and seclusion in public schools. The three urged our lawmakers to recognize the efforts of states such as Wisconsin and others that have enacted a statutory framework to prevent the inappropriate use of such techniques when considering any proposed federal legislation in this area.

Finally, the WASB representatives raised concerns about federal intrusion and overreach into areas historically reserved to school board policymaking and governance, in areas such as school nutrition and meal programs, bullying and even requirements added to the ESEA waivers. They urged support for H.R. 1386, federal legislation known as "The Local School Board Governance and Flexibility Act." This legislation, co-authored by Wisconsin's 3rd District Congressman Ron Kind, recognizes the benefits of local school board governance and formalizes a process for reporting and oversight of U.S. Department of Education actions by



WASB Director of Government Relations Dan Rossmiller and WASB Immediate Past President Nancy Thompson met with Wisconsin Congressman Tom Petri during NSBA's Advocacy Institute in February.

Congressional committees.

While the fate of a number of important state proposals affecting public K-12 education — such as bills related to establishing an accountability framework for all publicly funded schools, creating special education vouchers and changing the process for establishing and revising state academic standards — remains uncertain as of this writing, there is room for at least some optimism.

A pair of identical WASB-backed bills to repeal the current law mandate on school districts to schedule 180 school days, and instead allow districts to be governed by the hours of direct pupil instruction required under current law are advancing through the Legislature. These bills — Senate Bill 589 and Assembly Bill 749 respectively — were approved unanimously by the Senate and Assembly Education committees and now move on for floor votes in their respective houses.

Delegates to last month's 2014 WASB Delegate Assembly overwhelmingly approved Resolution 14-6 in support of such legislation. ■