

Recapping the 2013-14 Legislative Session

A look at new laws and school funding picture that resulted from the 2013-14 session

The curtain has fallen on the 2013-14 legislative session, and lawmaking has ceased until next January when the 2015-16 Legislature will convene.

Last month's column addressed key K-12 education-related legislation that didn't pass. This column looks at several measures enacted in the waning days of the legislative session.

One notable new law repeals the requirement that school boards must hold school for at least 180 days each year. It leaves in place the requirement that schools must schedule and hold a minimum number of hours of direct pupil instruction, as specified by grade level. This new law will also allow districts that offer "year-round" school to create "interim periods" during which pupil instructional minutes will count towards "summer school" membership for aid purposes although not toward the minimum required hours of instruction. *(WASB helped write and supported this legislation.)*

Another new law reflects the Legislature's concern over school district levies not subject to revenue limits, specifically those for community programs and services under Fund 80. It directs the DPI to pro-

mulgate rules defining "eligible costs" for Fund 80 and provides that only expenditures that are eligible costs under the rules will be excluded from a school district's revenue limit. It requires each district's annual audit report to provide information about the district's Fund 80 expenditures for community programs and services. Based on the audit, the DPI may decrease a school district's revenue limit in any school year by the amount of the school district's ineligible Fund 80 expenditures in the previous school year. Any decrease, however, will not affect the base for determining the district's revenue limit for the following school year. *(WASB supported and helped make this law less burdensome.)*

Other new laws:

- Allow a school district, CESA, or county to receive special education aid for the cost of contracting with private or public agencies for substitute teaching and paraprofessional staffing services *(WASB supported)*;
- Allow non-instrumentality charter schools to use an equivalency process for teacher and principal evaluations; *(WASB supported)*; and

- Require taxpayer-funded voucher schools to report data on voucher students to the state student information system by the 2015-16 school year. This new law, in combination with provisions enacted in the state budget act (2013 Wisconsin Act 20), ensures the progress of all taxpayer-funded students in schools in Wisconsin will be included in state accountability report cards by the 2016-17 school year *(WASB supported)*.

■ Improved School Funding

Recapping the legislative session as a whole, the school funding picture improved although not as much as many districts would like.

Per-pupil revenue limits were raised by \$75 in 2013-14 and an additional \$75 (\$150 total) in 2014-15 while general school aids increased by about \$88 million in 2013-14 and \$182 million in 2014-15.

Although categorical aids were generally frozen, a new \$5 million per year allotment for high-cost transportation aid was approved to reimburse school districts with per-pupil transportation costs in excess of 150 percent of the statewide average.

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Lawmakers also created a new “per-pupil aid,” considered “categorical” because it is received outside the revenue limit. All districts will receive \$75 per pupil in 2013-14 and \$150 per pupil beginning in 2014-15. This aid is funded on a sum-sufficient basis, so each district is guaranteed this amount (no proration).

■ Changes to Voucher and Charter Schools

A new statewide voucher program was established, limited to 500 students in 2013-14 and 1,000 students in 2014-15 and thereafter, for students with family incomes below 185 percent of the federal poverty level. Per-pupil payments to all voucher schools will increase in 2014-15 to \$7,050 for pupils in grades kindergarten through 8 and to \$7,856 for pupils in grades 9 through 12. A state income tax deduction for private school tuition was also established.

The geographic scope of independent charter schools was expanded to a five-county area surrounding Milwaukee, while per-pupil payments to these schools were increased by \$150 a year to \$7,925 in 2013-14 and to \$8,075 in 2014-15. The funding source for independent charters remains a first draw on general aids that would otherwise be paid to districts.

Beginning in 2015-16, increases in per-pupil payments to both voucher schools and independent charter schools will be set equal to a combination of the increase in per-pupil aid and per-pupil revenue limits received by public schools districts. Open enrollment transfer payment amounts will be similarly adjusted.

■ Funded Mandates

State funding was provided for a number of state mandates, including money to cover the costs of: new Next Generation state assessments to replace the Wisconsin Knowledge and Concepts Exams (WKCE); teacher and principal evaluations under the

educator effectiveness initiative; reading screening tests for pupils in kindergarten through third-grade; and a new mandate on districts to provide academic and career planning services to all pupils in grades 6-12 beginning in the 2017-18 school year.

In addition, lawmakers approved a student information system proposal with reporting requirements that can be reasonably met by multiple vendors, enabling school districts to use their vendor of choice.

■ Looking Ahead

The next Legislature will look quite different come January, as 20 members of the state Assembly and at least five state Senators, at last count, will either not seek re-election or are seeking higher office. And voters will have a say in the future service of the remaining 79 Assembly members and 12 senators who are seeking re-election to another term.

A number of those retiring are moderate Republicans who have strongly supported public education, and public school leaders will have to look elsewhere for support in the future. That makes the November election a critical one for public education.

All 99 Assembly seats and the 17 odd-numbered Senate seats will be on the ballot this fall as well as the governor and other partisan state constitutional officers.

■ Get Involved

This is a great time for you and your board to have a candid discussion with your legislators. After all, if they don't listen to your concerns when they are seeking your vote, when will they listen? It is also a great time to invite all of the legislative candidates in your area to a candidate forum, particularly if an incumbent lawmaker isn't running for his or her seat, creating a vacancy.

To make your forum more attractive to candidates, consider



For help in setting up a legislative forum in your district, contact WASB Director of Government Relations Dan Rossmiller at drossmiller@wasb.org or 608-512-1720.

partnering with boards from neighboring districts (or even your CESA), with other units of local government or civic organizations, and with news media (your local newspapers, radio and television stations) to host a forum. Partnering will give you the critical mass you need to attract candidates and enough voters so candidates will deem appearing at your forum worthwhile.

This shouldn't be a mysterious process or a “gotcha” situation. Legislators are generalists; they aren't experts in every subject, and they certainly aren't all experts on education issues. If you can, provide candidates with a list of the questions in advance or at least some background information on what you intend to ask. If you allow the audience to ask questions, have them submit questions in writing so a moderator can review the questions before they are asked. If you partner with the news media, you can often find a well-known reporter who will be seen as impartial and could serve as your moderator. ■