



## Looking Back, But Moving Ahead

Last month's conclusion to the 2011-12 legislative session is not just a time to reflect on what happened, but a good time to take stock of where we need to go to better position Wisconsin's schools for the changes that are just around the corner.

Items the WASB successfully advocated for include pushing back the teacher non-renewal date from March 15 to May 15; requiring the state superintendent to revoke an educator's license for immoral conduct (a bill passed as a direct result of the WASB Delegate Assembly's action); and better defining when school staff can use seclusion and restraint techniques – a bill that brought together the DPI, school boards, administrators, special education personnel and advocates for the disabled to fashion a reasonable bill that protects students and staff.

Wisconsin is headed in the right direction with legislation that creates a universal kindergarten screener and requires prospective teachers to demonstrate the ability to teach reading for a variety of learning styles. A new law also allows a teacher evaluation, in part, to consider the test scores of students taught by the teacher. Used judiciously, this can be an important component of evaluations.

With the help of opposition from school board members and superintendents, legislators backed off from a measure that would have created a

statewide independent charter school board, comprised of mostly political appointees, designed to start charter schools without school board approval. Board members successfully argued that Wisconsin has one of the nation's best records for creating and maintaining high-quality charter schools due to the oversight of locally elected school boards.

As we look towards the next legislative session, there are a number of issues school boards should continue discussing with their legislators and candidates for legislative offices.

Economically vibrant communities of the future must have the ability to transfer and use data through a high-speed, broadband infrastructure. For schools, affordability for taxpayers is a vital consideration. Through action in the state budget, the WiscNet system, which provides Internet access for most state school districts, is required to dissolve by July 1, 2013.

A Legislative Audit Bureau report on WiscNet, slated for release by early next year, will guide the next Legislature's decision on how to move forward. Board members would be wise to talk to legislators and candidates this summer and fall about the essential need for affordable, dependable high-speed Internet access for 21st century classrooms.

If this past session is any indication, school board members will need to redouble their efforts to explain to legislators that the state

cannot afford two publicly funded school systems. The expansion of the voucher program to Racine, which occurred via a late-night amendment in the Assembly without opportunity for public input, set the stage for other attempts to privatize public education. An ill-conceived bill to provide special education vouchers to students with special needs – the first bill modeled after Florida and then later after Ohio – went down to the wire before dying at session's conclusion.

There are some legislators who believe vouchers should be offered statewide. The bill to remove language in statutes that would automatically expand vouchers to as many as 37 school districts – Senate Bill 174 – promised to be passed last fall, took until the final days to pass the Assembly. Be sure to raise questions with candidates running for office about their position on publicly funded private schools and the accountability the taxpayers place on such publicly funded private schools.

School board members had several victories this session, but we can't afford to rest. Your work has changed with the passage of Act 10 and other measures from this session. However, the challenges ahead must be met head-on. There's a lot riding on what you do – the success of our students, the health of our communities and the future of our state. ■

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