



## Community Advocates Needed

Implementation of the 2015-17 state budget, signed into law last month by Gov. Scott Walker, is going to be challenging for school districts across the state. While increasing overall state spending, Wisconsin state lawmakers, unlike lawmakers in most other states, have chosen to fund increases for public education below the rate of inflation. As a result, Wisconsin's per-pupil funding is expected to fall below the national average for the first time in memory. And the percentage of the state budget devoted to funding public education is at a 20-year low.

At the same time, Wisconsin's private school voucher programs are increasingly commanding a greater share of the new resources devoted to K-12 education by the state. That reality, coupled with the expressed priority of state policy makers to hold the line on property taxes, will force school boards to continue making difficult budget cuts.

But is this really what Wisconsin residents want?

Results of a statewide poll conducted by the Marquette University Law School in April indicated 78 percent of Wisconsin voters opposed the \$127 million cut to K-12 school budgets initially proposed by the governor. When asked which is more important, reducing property taxes or increasing spending on public schools, 40 percent of voters said reducing property taxes is more

important while 54 percent said increasing spending on schools is more important.

As the Joint Finance Committee was reworking the state budget, parent and community groups across the state made their voices heard in advocating for public education. That groundswell of support for community schools was crucial in restoring the cut in per-pupil aid.

One thing we've learned from this year's state budget process is that the voices of public education advocates matter. But those voices need to be strong and sustained in order for public schools to fight and win. Part of our job will be to nurture these voices and keep them engaged.

Advocacy is important work and, unfortunately, it sometimes gets overlooked by busy school leaders. According to the aggregate results of the WASB/School Perceptions Annual Board Development Tool survey taken this year by districts across the state, advocacy efforts rank low among school board priorities.

I know boards will face some tough budget decisions with revenue limits and state aid frozen next year, but the new school year will soon be upon us and it will bring renewed energy. Our challenge will be to channel that energy to build advocacy groups for public education in each and every community.

Public education is important to our state's citizens, and they have a

clear interest in protecting their investments in our public schools and our students.

It is crucial therefore that, as school leaders, we seek out advocates in our communities. I urge you to connect with community and civic groups in your area and seek out parents and community members who are willing to speak out on behalf of your schools.

The new school year will also bring a new round of Fall Regional Meetings, taking place in September and October. The feature presentation at this year's meetings will focus on developing community advocates and enhancing the role they can play. I strongly encourage you to attend and learn more about ideas and strategies to strengthen community engagement and advocacy.

It is clear that the passage of the 2015-17 state budget hands more challenges to our public school districts (see pages 26-27). The good news is that we may have more people willing to advocate for public education. The cuts to K-12 funding have caused parents and community members to stand up and speak up on behalf of our public schools. We need these advocates to continue the discussion and keep K-12 issues at the forefront. I encourage you, our school leaders, to work with these supporters of public education and help develop more community advocacy groups in your communities. Together we have a stronger voice. ■

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