



Find Common Ground

This month, we welcome new school board members and thank departing members for their service. With new board members joining many of our districts, now is a good time to refocus our energies.

I read recently that our neighbors in Minnesota have set a state goal of cutting their achievement gap in half by 2017, and they are making progress. I don't know all of the details and I'm sure there are controversies and critics, but what was striking is that it is a state goal to close the achievement gap — with state and local leaders on board.

What are they doing? According to national reporting, they are “elevating the importance of small subgroups of at-risk students, issuing progress reports to districts on achievement gaps, and relying on regional centers to help struggling schools.” It's serious work that takes time and commitment by everyone involved. There are no gimmicks or short cuts. And if the reports are accurate, by working together, they are making progress.

The achievement gap in Wisconsin is even worse than in Minnesota — in fact, by most measures, ours is the worst in the nation. But instead of focusing on improving it, we've been distracted by partisan

politics and adjusting to a myriad of state-imposed reforms coupled with cuts to state school funding.

Educators, administrators, and school leaders in Wisconsin must be able to focus their attention on what matters — improving the achievement of every student in this state. Issues like the achievement gap are broad, complex problems that involve numerous facets of society. We need serious partners, an improved school funding system, and stability from the state.

Something interesting and instructive occurred this past winter as the legislator-members of the Assembly Speaker's Rural Schools Task Force were able to view schools outside of their own districts. The school tours were a real eye-opener for these legislators, with many expressing surprise at the numerous challenges faced by rural schools

This situation impresses upon us the need to redouble our efforts to get local lawmakers into our classrooms — rural, urban and suburban. Show legislators your success stories — there are many — as well as your challenges.

After a school tour, have a sit-down with parents, business leaders and other public school advocates in your community to discuss with legislators the important education

issues for your community. As the school year winds down, and legislators being campaigning for re-election, craft a legislative advocacy plan for the 2014-15 school year that involves community outreach. Make certain legislators and candidates for state office have the opportunity to visit your schools — it's never too late to do so and it's vital information we must provide them. Review your communication efforts — are they telling the story of all of the great things that are happening in your schools as well as your challenges?

As some of the articles in this issue discuss, internal and external relationship building is key. And those relationships with your community members are vital in your advocacy efforts. Help them understand the importance of a fair and equitable school funding structure and why the state Legislature must give schools a chance to put all of the recent reforms into place before making further changes. If community members understand your needs, they can speak up on your behalf and be a powerful voice for public education.

By working together, we can make progress in narrowing our achievement gap and ensuring that every child succeeds. ■

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