Legal and Ethical Standards Related to Attendance at the State Education Convention

Many school districts will be sending administrators and school board members to Milwaukee to attend the annual WASB/WASDA/WASBO State Education Convention in January 2019. Administrators and board members are obligated to comply with the legal and ethical standards established for local public officials that affect their participation in convention-related events. This Legal Comment will discuss the Open Meetings Law and the Code of Ethics for Local Public Officials as these laws relate to and govern the actions of administrators and board members while in attendance at the convention.

Open Meetings Law

Convention participants whose districts send more than one board member to the convention should consider how Wisconsin’s Open Meetings Law may impact their ability to participate in convention-related activities. The Wisconsin attorney general has issued a number of opinions that offer Open Meetings Law guidance to board members with regard to their attendance at conferences, workshops, seminars and conventions, including, but not limited to, the annual State Education Convention.

The fundamental purpose of the Open Meetings Law is to ensure that the public has access to full and complete information regarding governmental affairs. In order to advance this purpose, meetings of state and local governmental bodies, including school boards, must be held in locations reasonably accessible to members of the public and must be open to all citizens at all times unless otherwise expressly provided by law. The Wisconsin Supreme Court has held that a “meeting” of a governmental body, including a school board, occurs whenever: (1) there is a purpose to engage in governmental business, and (2) the number of members present is sufficient to determine the governmental body’s course of action (i.e., a quorum, including a walking quorum, negative quorum, etc.).

The Wisconsin attorney general was asked to issue an opinion as to whether the social nature of many activities offered at the convention makes attendance at the convention outside the scope of the Open Meetings Law. It is well-established that a “social or chance encounter” of members of a governmental body is not a meeting of the body requiring public notice and accessibility pursuant to the Open Meetings Law. Any presumption that the members are present to engage in governmental business is rebutted when members meet in a social setting or by chance. However, according to the attorney general, the attendance of board members and administrators at a convention, conference or seminar does not constitute a chance encounter because such attendance is pre-planned. Moreover, such attendance is not a purely social gathering because such conferences, conventions and seminars are designed for board members to discuss issues related to the responsibilities, authority, power or duties delegated to or vested in the board.

Nevertheless, the attorney general also concluded that attendance at the convention did not necessarily constitute a “meeting” of the board. According to the attorney general, discussions at the convention generally involve concerns common to all school districts, rather than discussions about a particular district’s business. As such, even if the number of board members present is sufficient to determine the board’s course of action, the purpose of the gathering is not to engage in the business of the particular district, but rather to take advantage of the convention-related activities. Therefore, the attorney general has concluded that attendance of a quorum of a board at the convention, by itself, does not result in a “meeting” of a governmental body, as defined in the Open Meetings Law.

The attorney general warned, however, that when a quorum of a
When a quorum of a board or any committee or subunit of a board is present during the convention and all related activities, including the ride to and from the convention, board members must not discuss business specifically related to the district.
provided to the official without charge or at less than fair value. This is true even if the event is identified in the convention program or in the convention materials. That said, the district official may attend such an event and avoid a Code of Ethics violation by paying the vendor the full cost of the meal, refreshments and entertainment offered at the event.

District officials may accept educational or informational materials, prizes or other giveaway items at the convention for the purpose of conveying the item to the district for the use or benefit of the district. However, if the district official wishes to keep the item for himself or herself, the item must be of nominal or insignificant value, in contrast to an item of merchantable value, in order to remain compliant with the Code of Ethics. The statute does not establish a specific dollar value as a “merchantable” value. The determination of whether an item has more than token or inconsequential value is left to the official’s discretion. That said, the Wisconsin Ethics Commission has opined that some tote bags, caps, t-shirts, mugs, pens, rulers, refrigerator magnets and key chains containing a company logo are likely to be of inconsequential value; while other items, including jackets and watches, are likely to have more than inconsequential value, i.e., merchantable value.

Finally, district policies may address the issue of the receipt of gifts by district officials. Accordingly, before an official accepts a prize or other giveaway item from a vendor exhibiting at the convention, it is important for the official to review and apply the district’s policy on the subject to determine whether he or she may keep the item.

### Conclusion

The convention offers the opportunity for administrators and board members to obtain new information about the latest products, services and developments in education. However, in doing so, it is important for them to be aware of the rules and requirements of the Open Meetings Law as well as to understand and recognize how the Code of Ethics for Local Public Officials regulates when they may accept food, drink or other items of value, without charge or at less than fair value, and when such acceptance will be problematic. Moreover, under no circumstances should receipt of any such items influence the decisions of the district officials. Finally, it is also important for administrators and board members to review board policies for additional, more restrictive rules about convention attendance and participation, and to direct any additional questions or concerns to the district’s legal counsel.

### End Notes

This Legal Comment was written by Michael L. Iulka, Steven C. Zach and Brian P. Goodman of Boardman & Clark LLP, WASB Legal Counsel.

1. For additional information on related topics, see Wisconsin School News: “The Government Accountability Board” (March 2008); “Completeness with Wisconsin’s Open Meetings Law, Part I” (September 2004); “Completeness with Wisconsin’s Open Meetings Law, Part II” (October 2004); “Board Duties and Obligations and Potential Ramifications for Non-Compliance” (April 2016); “Recurring Issues for School Board Members: School Board Member Conflicts of Interest, Ethics, and Incompatibility of Offices” (May 2013).
2. Wis. Stat. sec. 19.81 et seq.
7. Wis. Stat. sec. 19.82(2); see also Wisconsin School News: “Meeting or Chance Encounter? The Wisconsin Supreme Court Interprets the Open Meetings Law” (September 1993).
10. 1992 Wis. Eth. Bd. 31 (November 25, 1992), wherein the Ethics Board concluded that a vendor should not sponsor a river cruise for local public officials if more than an insignificant number of the officials attending are responsible for making or approving purchasing decisions that could involve the vendor’s goods. In January 2009, the Government Accountability Board reaffirmed 1992 Wis. Eth. Bd. 31 (November 25, 1992).
11. 1993 Wis. Eth. Bd. 8 (November 3, 1993). In November 2008, the Government Accountability Board reaffirmed 1993 Wis. Eth. Bd. 8 (November 3, 1993), and the opinion has subsequently been transferred to the Wisconsin Ethics Commission.

Legal Comment is designed to provide authoritative general information, with commentary, as a service to WASB members. It should not be relied upon as legal advice. If required, legal advice regarding this topic should be obtained from district legal counsel.