

School News

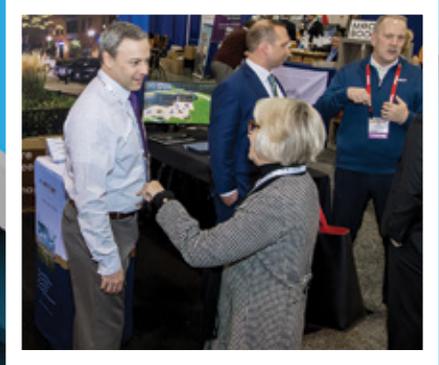
WISCONSIN

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Official publication of the Wisconsin Association of School Boards, Inc.

WHAT NOW?

Supporting student mental health before, during and after
the return to in-person instruction

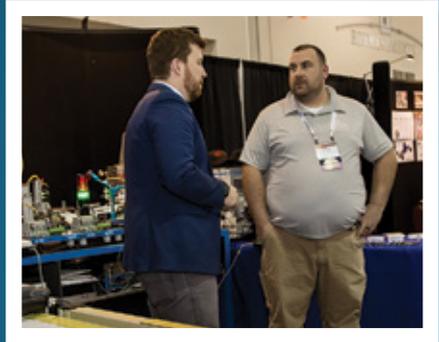


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Menominee Nation Enlists Students to Mark Earth Day With Plantings

The Menominee Nation, stewards of a 235,000-acre forest for over 150 years, is marking Earth Day's 50th anniversary in April by partnering with educators to spread knowledge about responsible forest stewardship.

The Menominee Nation is organizing a series of activities that look ahead to the future of environmental stewardship under the theme of "The Next Fifty Years."

Among those efforts is the Canopy Project. Working with the Wisconsin Rural Schools Alliance, they are looking to enlist Wisconsin's schoolchildren to plant 5,000 trees.

A major goal is to teach children what a sustainably managed forest looks like. "We feel that we have the world's greatest sustainable forest in Wisconsin," said Nels B. Huse, who helps the tribe with millwork and marketing. Details on the project were expected to be released by early April.

The Menominee Nation's partners include the University of Wisconsin-Stevens Point and its K-12 Forestry Education Program. The program has created lesson plans, available online, around forest sustainability for every grade level.

In addition, the Milwaukee School of Engineering is working on new digital tools to explore and learn about forests, Huse said.

"We have pioneered forestry practices that keep our trees healthy and productive," the tribe says. "Now, we want to share our knowledge to help every person become a responsible forest steward." ■

Child-Care Industry Shrinks Amid Pandemic

The combination of higher costs to meet safety protocols and lower revenue from declining enrollment has caused hundreds of child-care centers to close or scale back, a new report says.

The University of California Berkeley Center for the Study of Child Care Employment found that the child-care industry shrank by 20% in the first six months of the pandemic, costing nearly 200,000 workers their jobs.

"Even as many providers try to keep their doors open to ensure their financial security, the combination of higher costs to meet safety protocols and lower revenue from fewer children enrolled is leading to job losses and program closures," the authors wrote. "Many of these closures and lost jobs are expected to become permanent."

In 2019, the median wage for

child-care workers in Wisconsin was \$10.66, about \$1 per hour less than the nationwide median. Median hourly wages for Wisconsin preschool teachers were \$12.23; kindergarten teachers earned a median \$32.76 per hour.

The report notes that Wisconsin was one of the few states to offer additional payments to early childhood educators during the pandemic. The state relaxed eligibility requirements for a pre-existing stipend (called REWARD) and granted awards toward workers who were furloughed or working reduced hours.

The report argues that policy changes could help child-care workers and the parents who depend on them. It identifies seven broad policy areas, such as income supports including tax credits and minimum wage increases. ■

STAT OF THE MONTH

20%

Percentage decline in the child-care industry during the first six months of the pandemic, costing nearly 200,000 workers their jobs.

Source: UC Berkeley Center for the Study of Child Care Employment

Wisconsin Teens Get Free Access to Financial Planning App

The non-profit Secure Futures is providing Money Path, a new app to help with financial planning, free to 140,000 Wisconsin teenagers. The app allows teens to "explore how their decisions about college, career, budgeting and saving will impact their long-term goals and lifelong financial success," according to Secure Futures.

The company's business director, Patrick Rorabeck, said students who used the app were surprised by what

they learned. "A lot of comments on how eye opening it is, seeing what their student loan debt could look like once they graduate college. And how that fits into their budget based on the salary for the career they chose," he said.

The nonprofit is sponsored by Heartland Advisors, an independent investment firm based in Milwaukee. To learn more about Money Path, visit securefutures.org/money-path. ■



This Budget Season, Focus on Shared Priorities

School board elections are days away and new members take office in just a few weeks. In this time of transition, I'd like to take a moment to thank a group that's sometimes overlooked.

Departing board members, you stepped into your role with the expectation, even eagerness, of sacrificing to make a better community. And that was in ordinary times. Our extraordinary last year has asked more of you than you could have imagined when you first ran for office.

But you didn't back down from the challenge. From my perspective, you've continued to navigate by the guiding lights that have long served board members so well — dedication to children and responsiveness to your communities.

Those principles didn't change nor did your mission, even as the pandemic threw up unprecedented barriers.

Over the past year, your board may have found these shared values to be a safe harbor in turbulent waters. Even when you and your colleagues didn't agree on everything, members could count on each other's earnest desire to help children.

Now, as a state budget is being debated in Madison, these same principles apply. You have a stronger voice and a more effective coalition when you unite around the values you share.

Our government relations team has translated those values into four budgetary priorities.

As I describe each priority, I'll point out how the governor's budget proposal stacks up.

First, seek spendable resources for school districts that meet or exceed inflation. The governor's proposed budget increases revenue limits by \$200 per pupil in the first year and \$204 per pupil in the second, coupled with providing an additional \$612.8 million in state general aid to school districts over the biennium.

Second, we support a significant increase in special education categorical aid, of which the governor's budget proposes a \$709 million increase which equates to a 45% reimbursement for eligible costs in the first year and 50% in the second.

Third, we advocate for a significant increase in mental health funding to meet the growing needs caused by the pandemic. The governor's budget adds \$46.5 million over two years to school mental health categorical aid.

Finally, we need to address the dip to pupil counts due to the pandemic. A temporary disruption caused by a public health crisis should not constrain schools and learners when they need support most. We support the governor's proposal to allow districts to use the greater of 2019 and 2020 pupil counts.

Overall, we believe the governor's budget prioritizes K-12 education. While we may disagree on some specifics, focusing on the big picture will help us reach the goal of a final state budget that appropriately invests in our public schools.

As the budget negotiations continue, there will be opportunities for distraction and division. Those

opposed to our priorities may be tempted to divide education leaders on geographic and partisan lines.

We know board members don't all hold the same opinions. (If you did, we wouldn't need school boards at all.) But we believe that most of our members can support the four priorities we've outlined.

The same values that served your board during a pandemic can help you advocate for your students on a statewide level. It's happened before. The last state budget approved was widely recognized as a compromise that was good for schools overall, and we can repeat that success if we stick together.

I have one final appeal to stick together around common ideals. Many of you will read this before the April 6 election for state superintendent, district referendums and school board members.

Our governance is strongest when more people make their voices heard. I encourage you to vote and ask others to do the same.

To our departing board members — on behalf of the WASB, thank you for your service. It's been an honor working with you.

For those of you welcoming new members this month, encourage them to attend the new board member online training sessions later this month. Refer to page 27 or the WASB website for more information. We look forward to meeting them and helping them learn about school board service. ■

While we may disagree on some specifics, focusing on the big picture will help us reach the goal of a final state budget that appropriately invests in our public schools.



WHAT NOW?

Supporting student mental health before, during and after the return to in-person instruction

Kate McCoy, Ph.D.

On Thursday, March 12, 2020, I was at the front of a conference room presenting data on youth mental health to representatives of Wisconsin’s local and tribal health departments when someone announced that the governor was about to declare a state of emergency due to the COVID-19 pandemic. We switched off my slides and watched. The rest of the meeting hastily adjourned as health officials — phones suddenly buzzing — headed back to their communities to face a new and uncertain reality.

Now, a year later, youth mental health is again coming to the fore in the context of a national effort to safely return as many students to in-person instruction as possible. While experiences across Wisconsin schools vary, schools can meet the mental health challenge of this time by knowing a bit about the state of youth mental health before the pandemic, what has changed since then and insights from long-standing research.

■ Student mental health before COVID

The talk that I had prepared for that day in March 2020 was based on Wisconsin’s 2019 Youth Risk Behavior Survey results. Those results confirmed many of the messages that schools, families and young people have voiced in recent years: student anxiety has become its own pandemic and, in many cases, student mental health needs exceed the available resources. Almost half of the student respondents reported significant anxiety in 2019, and one in four reported signs of depression.

While any student can experience mental health challenges, the numbers show the most concern for students facing other significant life stressors or traumas, such as poverty, multiple moves, health conditions, experiences of violence, or belonging to a non-majority or marginalized group (e.g., students of color, LGBT students).

A Pew Research Center study showed that adolescents’ sources of stress reflected Maslow’s hierarchy of needs: non-poor students listed performance pressures (e.g., academics, extracurricular activities and social media) as their biggest source of stress, while students in poverty listed those performance pressures as secondary to more immediate concerns about their families’ basic needs.

Youth suicides — even among children and young teens — have been on the rise. In early 2020, before fear of COVID scared most patients away, emergency department visits for child or adolescent mental health were rising precipitously.

■ The COVID effect

It will likely be years before we have a full picture of how the pandemic has affected young people’s mental health during this time of crisis and beyond. Adult studies have shown that adults in general, and younger adults in

particular, have taken a hit to their mental health. Early reports from around the world indicate increased use of emergency mental health services for children and youth.

While exact numbers are not yet available, much of the COVID landscape bodes poorly for youth mental health. Social isolation, loss of healthy routines and extracurricular experiences, and reduced physical activity are immediate, situational stressors. Reduced access to health care, therapy and other services pose an added challenge for some students.

Luckily, those immediate, quarantine-specific concerns pose mostly short-term risks that will be addressed as more students safely return to in-person school. Perhaps the greatest concern is what is happening within families and households during this time. As of December 2020, 45% of all U.S. households had experienced some loss of income due to COVID-19, leaving one in 10 homeowners and nearly one in five renters behind on housing payments.

Families who are the most economically vulnerable are also the most vulnerable to COVID for two reasons. First, their work, housing and transportation situations generally involve more viral exposure for both parents and children. Second, the overwhelming stress of financial instability and the inability to afford the ingredients of good health (e.g., healthy food, less polluted neighborhoods, gym memberships and quality health care) mean that people with low-incomes had worse health going into the pandemic. The result has been a perfect storm of crises where many families have experienced hospitalizations, deaths, and trouble staying housed and putting food on the table. Long-standing structural inequalities have made this especially true for families of color. Approximately one in six white families (16%) and nearly one in three Black (31%) and Latino (29%) families “are experiencing three or more co-occurring economic and health-related hardships as a

result of the pandemic.” Thus, while many students might not know anyone who had a severe case of COVID-19, other students may have had multiple traumatic experiences and losses, including potentially to their own health.

These stressors are hard on families. By June 2020, more than a quarter of parents said their mental health had declined from the pandemic. Quarantine, job loss, illness and fear all raise the likelihood of family violence, substance abuse, family separation and poor caregiver mental health. These are called “adverse childhood experiences” that, if not buffered with protective factors, can affect children’s mental and physical health all the way into adulthood. The more stressors that adults face — such as lack of child-

challenging situations, most people respond well to encouragement, routine, structure, social contact and the opportunity to face the types of challenges that actually have a clear solution. Most students who disengaged during remote instruction are likely to re-engage once in person. Students who were anxious about social media posts or getting the highest score on tests or in sports before the pandemic may now have a broader perspective and greater appreciation for their own resilience — especially if adults help them make those connections.

Even students who have faced extraordinary upheaval during this time are not broken. Drawing on past experiences of resilience helps communities facing the highest risks also report relatively high levels of opti-



The conditions that encourage learning are the same conditions that encourage strong mental health.

care, the need to work long hours in person, fear of losing one’s job, struggles to make ends meet, their own personal health crises or the need to care for loved ones as well as their children — the harder it becomes to hold it together and keep these signs of strain at bay.

A path forward

Looking at the various fallouts from COVID leaves many educators wondering how they can meet “this tidal wave of need.” Schools are already expected to do so much. How can exhausted educators acknowledge increased student needs without feeling overwhelmed by them?

The good news is that what’s best for mental health is, in many cases, exactly what schools do best, and the conditions that encourage learning are the same conditions that encourage strong mental health. Even under

mism during this time. At the individual level, whether or not a child’s crisis becomes internalized as trauma has a lot to do with the social support and messages that the survivor is given about why the event happened and what it says about them. Educators can provide an invaluable service by helping students understand this historic moment, and by letting them know that experiences of financial hardship, family strain, loss and grief are common for many young people right now. Highlighting examples of people in the curriculum who also survived a historic crisis or childhood adversity and went on to do great things can help young people see a future for themselves beyond this moment. Encouraging opportunities for creative self-expression — whether it’s a self-portrait or a science project imagining how students could discover vaccines or treatments for a

Leaning too early or too heavily into “catch-up” mode could backfire by increasing staff and student anxieties without re-establishing trust, adequately addressing pandemic-related fears and concerns, and giving teachers and students a chance to re-establish a workable rhythm.

future pandemic — can help students rewrite their mental stories away from despair and toward meaning. The Pandemic Journaling Project has classroom resources for projects based on real pandemic experiences. We know that people engage the most with learning that they see as relevant to their lives; the pandemic provides innumerable angles that educators can use to re-engage young learners.

More important than what specifically schools do is how they do it. Obviously, teachers need to feel physically safe and administratively supported to do the hard work ahead. It’s tempting to push educators to make up for lost instructional time by speeding up their lesson plans, assigning more homework or testing more frequently. But leaning too early or too heavily into



“catch-up” mode could backfire by increasing staff and student anxieties without re-establishing trust, adequately addressing pandemic-related fears and concerns, and giving teachers and students a chance to re-establish a workable rhythm.

Effective schools need to address any “relational loss” brought about by, or revealed during, months of school disruption, and to be intentional about transitioning students back into the classroom. Students who are depressed, whose families are in crisis, who have felt cut off from school or who expect mostly negative experiences from school (frustration, failure, discipline, bullying, discrimination) are likely to need extra support to help them keep showing up — physically and mentally. Our data and other research show that these students likely feel the lowest sense of school belonging. Yet, those are the students who need that belonging the most right now.

Prioritizing strong school relationships has short- and long-term benefits. In the short term, estab-

An advertisement for Osmo For Schools. The background is a bright blue gradient. At the top left is the Osmo logo with the text "Osmo FOR SCHOOLS". Below the logo is the text "Perfect for Distance Learning!". In the center is a white tablet on a stand displaying a math game with numbers and colorful shapes. Below the tablet are several colorful geometric shapes (triangles, squares) and two small cards with numbers 6 and 3. At the bottom are two cartoon characters: one orange and one blue, standing on a white and yellow wavy ground. On the right side, there is text: "Only at schools.playosmo.com", "Durable, washable plastic pieces!", "Teachers Guide!", and "Professional Development!".

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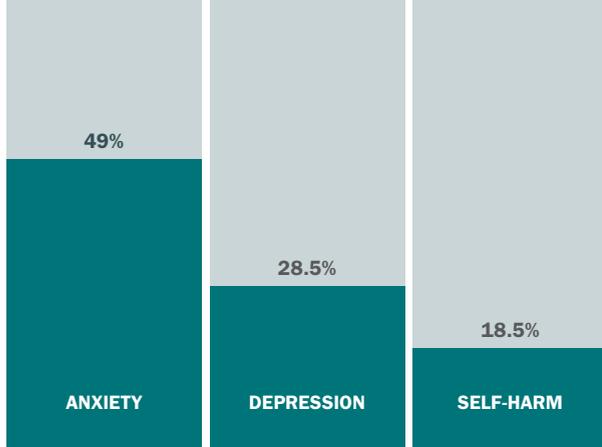
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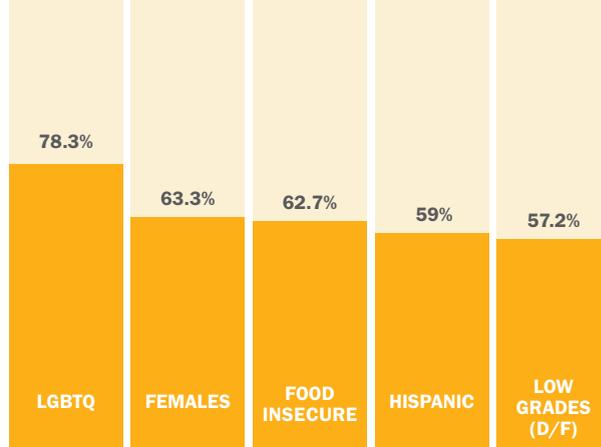
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Rates of self-reported anxiety, depression and self harm



Rates of self-reported anxiety (by select groups)

lishing a warm, welcoming environment for students helps them to lower their immediate anxieties, follow school rules and norms, seek help when needed, power through frustration, and generally lean into their lessons. Schools that succeed in helping all students feel included, seen and challenged have better academic outcomes and fewer social, emotional and mental health issues.

Schools that take this opportunity to intentionally hone their sense of a strong and inclusive school community also help their students and staff in the long term. Such schools show through their actions that students

are safe, that the world is not as crazy as it may sometimes seem, that there are adults who believe in them, and that they have a future. These messages make a world of difference when it comes to helping kids succeed, stay healthy, stay in school and, ultimately, stay alive.

■ Learning from the moment

The pandemic also provides learning opportunities for educational leaders at all levels. Learning disruptions of the past year come after decades of rising academic standards, and both learning and mental health thrive in

healthy relationships. At this moment, when the bottom has fallen out of the lives of so many young people, perhaps we can look at some of the adjustments forced on us during this pandemic — such as flexible expectations, a better awareness of the stresses on families, and especially appreciation for the value of in-person time and spontaneous student-teacher connections — as lessons that we can continue to apply well after all of our teachers and students are safely back to in-person instruction. ■

Kate McCoy, Ph.d., is a consultant with the Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction's Student Services/Prevention and Wellness Team.

SCHOOL INCLUSION and BELONGING

and their impact on grades by self-reported factors:

- Have a teacher to talk to
- Participate in extracurriculars
- Feel like they belong in school



Percentage of students responding "yes" to factors, grouped by self-reported grades they achieved

1. Kwai, Isabella and Peltier, Elian. "What's the Point? Young People's Despair Deepens as COVID-19 Crisis Drags On." New York Times, Feb. 14, 2021. The CDC also notes youth emergency department visits for mental health experienced less of a decrease than other types of emergency department visits during the pandemic, indicating a very persistent need. (MMWR)
2. Airgood-Obyrcki, Whitney and Hermann, Alexander. "Interactive Tool Illustrates the Disparate Impacts of the Pandemic." Joint Center for Housing Studies at Harvard University, Feb. 8, 2021.
3. Child Trends.
4. Patrick, Stephen W., Henkhaus, Laura E., and et al. "Well being of parents and children during COVID-19." Pediatrics, Oct. 2020, 146 (4) e2020016824; DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1542/peds.2020-016824>
5. Gilman, Azure. "How much will it cost to reopen schools, catch up kids, and save public schooling long term?" The Hechinger Report, Feb. 12, 2021.
6. Graham, Carol. "The Human Cost of the Pandemic: Is It Time to Prioritize Wellbeing?" The Brookings Institute, Nov. 17, 2020.
7. See e.g. Van der Kolk, Bessel. "The Body Keeps the Score."
8. Hamlin.

The Case for COVID-19 TESTING in Schools

Reopening, and staying open, safely and responsibly | Dirk Steinert, MD



Salvaging sports seasons, prom and graduation amid a pandemic. Offering peace of mind to faculty and staff. Instilling confidence to return to in-person learning after a holiday break. Finding ways to bring kids back to the classroom safely and responsibly.

For those reasons and many, many more, schools are increasingly turning to COVID-19 testing as an added layer of safety, as they look to reopen, and stay open, during the pandemic.

There are plenty of other reasons why this makes common sense — why schools and school districts across the state and country are increasingly seeing regular, comprehensive, onsite testing as a critical safety measure to slow the spread of the illness.

Nearly every public school in Minnesota is testing. The New York City Department of Education instituted mandatory random weekly testing in all reopened school buildings starting in December. The Cali-

fornia Endowment recently funded \$2 million in rapid antigen tests for nine school districts there. The San Antonio Independent School District in Texas is offering free COVID tests to all students and staff.

And that is just a sampling.

More and more schools and school districts across the country — large and small, urban and rural — are investing in testing as part of their pandemic response.

They are doing so because it works.

The federal Centers for Disease Control on Feb. 12 issued new guidance for schools, calling it “critical for schools to open as safely and as soon as possible, and remain open” — and, as they do, “adopt and consistently implement actions to slow the spread of SARS-CoV-2 both in schools and in the community.” This includes testing. According to the CDC, “When schools implement testing combined with mitigation,

they can detect new cases to prevent outbreaks, reduce the risk of further transmission, and protect students, teachers, and staff from COVID-19.”

At Novir, we have tested thousands of Milwaukee-area students, faculty and staff since last fall. The reason why is simple: The measures we have all been taking for months to slow the spread of COVID-19, while all important, are not enough.

We must go beyond masking, physical distancing, hand washing, sanitizing and staying home when sick. Testing needs to be part of that calculation, even now as more and more get vaccinated for coronavirus.

A lot has been written about the “Swiss cheese model” of combating COVID-19, that it takes multiple layers of protection — in this case, layers of Swiss cheese — to block the spread of the virus. Testing is one of those cheese slices.



I also like the three-legged stool analogy. The three legs of the stool to beat COVID — in addition to the safety measures we all know — are effective testing, simple treatments and reliable vaccinations to slow the spread of illness, reduce risk and eventually end the serious threat of illness and death. All play an important role.

“It is better to vaccinate than to vacillate,” and that goes with all vaccines, including the flu. Vaccines are like seatbelts. They don’t prevent you from getting in the car accident. They protect you when you’re in one.

Testing may prevent you from getting in an accident in the first place.

For leaders, that precautionary measure is invaluable. Investing in workplace safety is one of the most important jobs of any manager. “How do I ensure safety for those around me, both physically and psychologically?” Testing is an important part of that — and it will remain that way until we get over 90% of people vaccinated or with consistent, strong immune responses from having had the illness themselves.

Said one Milwaukee school

leader: “We wanted to add another layer of protection for our students, families and staff members. Baseline testing really gave us peace of mind to open back up, and we received a lot of comments from staff who appreciated that.”

Said another: “Rapid testing gives us another way to protect our community.”

- **Rapid antibody:** This finger-prick blood test detects if you have produced antibodies to COVID-19, helping you understand if you have ever had the virus with even mild or no symptoms — and if the vaccine was effective. A positive result also indicates a longer lasting ability for the body to fight COVID. Results

Baseline testing really gave us **peace of mind to open back up**, and we received a lot of comments from staff who appreciated that.

Indeed, a school is a community, and we should treat it that way. We owe it to everyone to keep that community safe, and help reopen, and keep open, our schools for in-person learning. We owe it to test them for COVID-19.

Now, to answer a few commonly asked questions.

What tests are there? There are three, and they all play a role in a comprehensive COVID-19 testing program ...

are returned in 15 minutes. This is often used as a baseline test, performed at the start of a testing program.

- **Rapid antigen:** This diagnostic test is a quick and less-expensive option to detect the surface protein of the virus with a sample collected using a nasal swab or sputum, with results in 10 minutes. We recommend performing these tests regularly, as often as every two to three days if risk is high, to every two weeks if risk is low.



- PCR: “Gold standard” polymerase chain reaction diagnostic tests, more costly than the others, detect live virus — often, in school testing programs, to confirm positive or inconclusive antigen tests. A sample collected with a nasal swab delivers results in less than 48 hours.

Are they effective? Yes. Of course, no test is perfect, and the value of a comprehensive approach to testing lies in the ability to interpret the

unsettled as to how long COVID antibodies remain after you get the vaccine, and the continued discovery of new variants of COVID-19 also raises questions about “what’s next?”

Can we do this ourselves? Maybe, but many are finding this to be too complex and costly to do on their own, and especially when it comes to developing and executing a comprehensive program. As one Milwaukee school leader put it: “Testing was always important to us. We even

to the city, county and state? A testing company can handle all of this for its school partners.

What is the process like? It’s surprisingly efficient. Novi uses a software program that digitizes registration, delivery and reporting of results. Tests are often completed in less than 30 minutes, from registration to receiving the result via email or text.

What does it cost? It depends, especially with schools that choose a comprehensive, customized solution that works for them. With a full-service program, rapid antigen and antibody tests can cost around \$80, all in. PCR tests may cost double that. There are plenty of ways to bring this cost down while still delivering a testing experience that works for your school.

How do we pay for it? There is good news here. Existing CARES funding — through ESSER and GEER grants — can cover the full cost. One district paid for its testing program through its self-insurance reserves. A donor funded testing for another school.

There are countless questions that come with any testing program, and the biggest is often “why?” The answer comes back to the aim of education.

At its core, COVID testing seeks to deliver on a key goal of any school and school district — knowl-

At its core, COVID testing seeks to deliver on a key goal of any school and school district — **knowledge transfer.**

results in a way that enables a community to have the most reliable and safe approach to returning to work, school, and eventually normal life.

Is there a role for testing during the vaccine rollout? Absolutely, and potentially beyond. This is for several reasons. First of all, surveys are showing more than 30% of people are declining to get vaccinated, and it’s unclear if and when children will get vaccinated at all. There have also been delays in getting shots in arms of teachers and staff. Science remains

purchased our own equipment thinking we could do this ourselves ... but realized this was going to be difficult.”

Some logistics questions we hear a lot: How do we register people? What is best practice for testing event setup? Where do we buy tests? Which tests, and when? How do we properly administer each of the tests? How do we inform people of their results? How do we manage results at large? How do we handle positive results? How do we report our results



edge transfer. Through testing comes knowledge, and through knowledge comes safety. Testing is there to deliver that knowledge and safety. ■

Dirk Steinert, MD, is the chief medical officer for Novir, a Milwaukee-based biotechnology company focused on early detection of

life-threatening infections, including COVID-19. Dr. Steinert has over 25 years of clinical practice. He is an active clinician, is board-certified in internal medicine and pediatrics, has held various clinical leadership positions, primarily with the Ascension system in Wisconsin, and serves as medical liaison to two school districts.

Learn more about Novir at www.novir-usa.com/schools. Convention registrants can watch a recording of Novir's panel discussion on testing on the State Education Convention website at WASB.org.



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TRANSFORMING LEARNING

Don't let school interfere with your laughter

Peter Jonas, Ph.D.

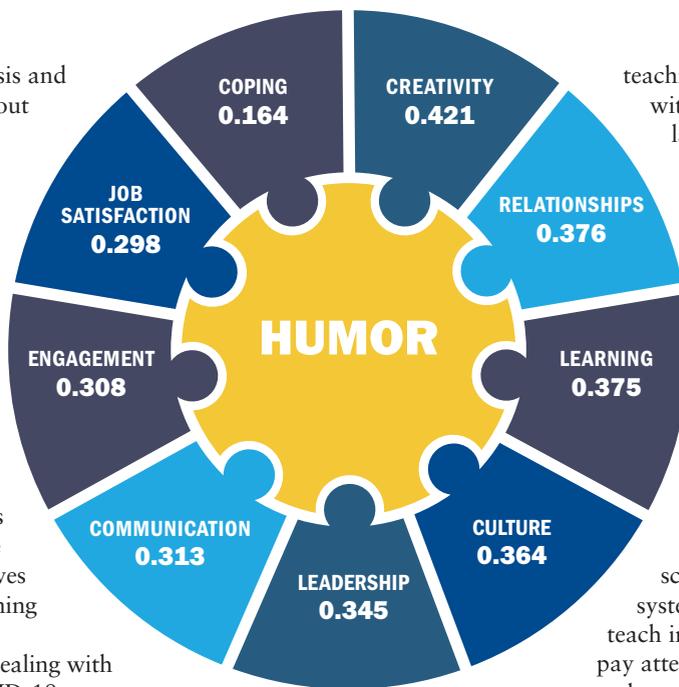
Schools are in crisis and there is no way out — or is there? COVID-19 has forced everyone to pivot into uncharted territory, but the process is difficult when individuals are stressed.

E.B. White said, “Analyzing humor is like dissecting a frog. Few people are interested, and the frog dies of it.” However, researcher and author Peter Jonas has identified nine areas where humor significantly improves various aspects of the learning environment.

Every school board is dealing with the delicate issues of COVID-19, in-person learning and the safety of teachers and students. These are obviously important issues, filled with stress and anxiety, but it does not mean that everyone needs to be stoic all the time. Research indicates that having a positive attitude — or even a solid sense of humor — can reduce stress; build relationships between school board members, teachers, staff, parents and students; and enhance the learning environment.

Humor’s universal appeal has made it an important element of every civilization since the beginning of time. It is appreciated by everyone and is not confined by language, ethnicity, age, time or place. Although not confined by these factors, humor is defined within them. Despite its worldwide presence, humor does not seem to be taken seriously by leaders or organizations. This is puzzling given the plethora of empirical evidence demonstrating its significant implications for individuals and organizations.

Recent research and meta-anal-



ysis into the effect of humor concludes that humor can not only transform learning, but it can also enhance leadership, reduce stress, build relationships and more. The research not only examines how humor can help education, but it also answers the question of “how much?” In other words, this research helps board members, teachers and administrators decide where they can get the most bang for their buck by estimating how much of an effect humor has on specific areas.

The illustration above lists each of the nine areas where humor has a positive effect. The numbers in each piece of the puzzle denote the statistically significant correlations with humor. For example, humor and creativity have the highest relationship with a .421 correlation and an effect size of .850, which means that using humor can enhance creativity from the 50th percentile to the 80th percentile. Taking this one step further, if you use humor when

teaching, the correlation is .377 with effect size of .777. In layman’s terms, this means that when you use humor when teaching, there could be as high as a 28-point percentile gain — just by connecting to humor.

It is interesting to note that children laugh 10 times more than adults every day. This is not because children have fewer significant problems, but because society frowns on humor in school and work. Too many systems in the United States teach individuals growing up to pay attention — and be serious — because there is no place for laughing at work. However, empirical research says just the opposite.

There are significant advantages for laughing. For example, there is greater job satisfaction and the turnover of employees decreases by 10% where the culture promotes laughing. Moreover, the University of Chicago completed a longitudinal study and found that people who have a sense of humor can live up to eight years longer. Individuals can see a 27-point percentile gain in their leadership when they use humor on a regular basis.

Humor is also useful in the board room. Accountemps conducted a survey and found that over 98% of the respondents in business believe that humor is “somewhat important” to “very important” for developing a positive culture within an organization. Robert Half International came to a similar conclusion in its 2017 survey showing more than 90% of the executives said that a sense of humor is important for career advancement and 84% said that



When you use humor when teaching, there could be as high as a 28-point percentile gain — just by connecting to humor.



When people are laughing, they forget about the thing that is causing stress.

people with a great sense of humor are more successful leaders.

The best part is that you do not have to be a comedian to be funny or enjoy humor. Research indicates that simple humor does the trick, with the recipient receiving basically the same benefits as the producer of humor.

Research indicates that humor does have a positive effect on reducing stress, mainly for two reasons. First, humor serves as a distraction. When people are

laughing, they forget about the thing that is causing stress. Humor also decreases stress hormones of epinephrine and cortisol while increasing the activation of the mesolimbic dopaminergic reward system. It can be an exhilarating, euphoric feeling when you laugh. Another psychological side effect of humor is that people realize that their negative situation may not be as bad as they think. People “high” on humor are well-equipped to deal

with anxiety and thus are more relaxed and able to cope with other issues, like COVID-19. Laughter really is the best medicine. Study after study indicates that having a sense of humor will not only reduce your stress, but it keeps you healthier and increase your life by as much as eight years (University of Maryland and University of Chicago studies). The bottom line is that just by laughing and having fun, you can decrease your stress by 16%, live longer, and improve your outlook by 25% (Jonas, *Transforming Learning: Don't Let School Interfere with your Laughing*, 2019).

The beauty is that humor is a natural tool. Everyone has a sense of humor — some much more than others. Research is conclusive that humor is a multiplier for positive learning, reducing stress, increasing job satisfaction, building relationships, enhancing creativity, building culture, improving communication, and engaging participants. This means humor needs to be taken seriously, because when you get people laughing, you can transform learning. ■

Dr. Peter Jonas is a senior consultant with Capacity Builders.

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WEST ALLIS-WEST MILWAUKEE SCHOOL DISTRICT

Improving outcomes

ALIGN • EMPOWER • PERSIST

Deidre Roemer

Over the past five years, the West Allis-West Milwaukee School District has laid the foundational building blocks that support improving student outcomes with consistent leadership, aligned action and systemic persistence.

“Our district moved from three failing schools and one high-performing school to no failing schools and eight high-performing schools. We’ve increased student opportunities for transcripted credits and youth apprenticeships,” explains Director of Leadership and Learning Deidre Roemer. “In addition, our ACT results are the highest they’ve been in five years and our data demonstrates that there is an increase in the number of learners who report having a trusted adult at school.”

Start with a plan

“When the district began its partnership with Studer Education, there was a real need to develop a plan that would help guide decision-making and focus the work of continuous school improvement,” said school board president Stephanie Emons. “The purpose for strategic planning was to define success for five years and plan how to get there. We needed a roadmap that would be concise, clear and doable.”

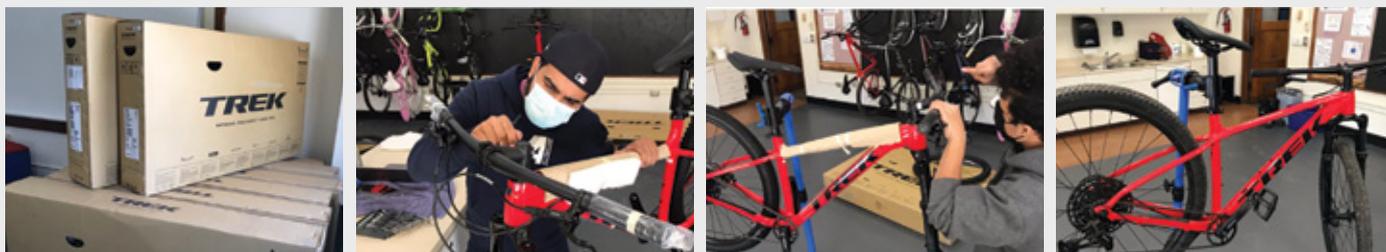
The broad collaborative process helped underscore the district’s commitment to developing and maintaining an organization built on trust and shared vision. In the end, a strategic plan with organization-wide, long-term goals and a small set of overarching strategies for continuous improvement was published. It con-

sisted of four building blocks for strategic improvement with identified annual success measures and strategies. “Our goal was to have the steps and support needed to help shift the learner experience,” adds Emons.

“Over time, we’ve updated our mission, vision and core values and integrated our plan with equity non-negotiables,” said Roemer. “As a leadership team, we have been working on deeper learning as the pathway to equity for the last three years. We developed our equity non-negotiables, which are the foundational beliefs that frame our work for all learners and our greater community.”

According to Roemer, shifting the learner experience involved as focus on inspiration, self-direction, persistence and accountability.

“Every child comes to school



Our learners have built hydroponics labs, bicycle shops, community closets and performance spaces.

with unique abilities and talents — we are all rich in heritage and lived experience,” Roemer says. “Our focus on equity is about providing a learning environment that promotes all learners developing a plan for personal success with the skills needed to achieve any goal.”

■ Leadership development

After the strategic plan was in place, the district worked with a coach to ensure all school and district leaders understood the plan and the steps in the continuous improvement cycle to measure success. “We needed leaders to know how to narrow their focus on a few key strategies that would contribute to our overall goals and could be measured in short cycles. We found specific, targeted checkpoints that we knew would provide the right level of support for all staff while shifting the learner experience. This included an alignment between the building blocks of the plan.

“We needed technology, facilities, business, human resources, communications, and our college and career readiness teams to work together closely at the ‘intersections’ of our strategic plan,” said Roemer. “We even made a very intentional shift in our language from ‘the district’ to ‘our district.’ It created a sense of belonging to a common goal that we were accomplishing together.”

■ Deeper learning

To support a shift in the learner experience, the district also focused on embedding deeper learning competencies into every classroom, at every grade level. “We are working to

prepare our learners to live life on their own terms after graduation,” said Superintendent Marty Lexmond. “Deeper learning embeds the skills needed for life success, such as content mastery, communication, problem-solving, collaboration, self-direction and, most importantly, academic mindset. We’ve worked hard on relationship building, too. We want our students to have such a strong sense of belonging that they want to push themselves to try new things and work hard to achieve their goals.”

“We even used a leadership team meeting to model a deeper learning experience. Leaders were put into teams and sent out across the city to do empathy interviews and report out what was learned,” adds Roemer. “We’ve also taken teams to observe other schools and we’ve brought in national speakers with specific insight to deeper learning and equity.”

Once leaders understood the work at a high level, they were able to personalize it to the needs of their specific schools and school communities. “They spend a lot of time doing empathy interviews with learners, staff, families and community members to ask questions about what we are doing well and what is possible for their school in the future,” said Roemer. “The plans include checkpoints for measuring success towards annual goals and a staff professional development plan that gets updated regularly. Our teachers and other support staff at each school need to develop their skills with the right balance of high expectations and the right support to achieve our common goals.”

■ Feedback

In addition to formal surveys each spring and fall, the district has implemented other opportunities for feedback. “Our leader and teacher meetings now often begin with a short panel discussion centered on a topic. We’ve had a team of special education teachers talk about their experiences. We’ve had a group of African-American students provide us with insight into their experience,” explains Roemer. “We ask participants to share things that are going well and things we should work on as an organization. It’s about making sure all voices are heard.”

■ Project-based learning

Many teachers have been trained in a learner-driven, evidence-informed practice that includes project-based learning as one way to embed the competencies in every classroom. Now, learners and teachers co-design projects that embed high levels of academic content with authentic learning experiences. “Our learners have built hydroponics labs, bicycle shops, community closets and performance spaces. We also have a program that supports student entrepreneurs with student-led businesses involving coffee carts, podcasts, t-shirt companies, healthy snacks and more,” said Roemer. “We hold student showcases too. They give our learners an opportunity to apply their communication and collaboration skills to present what they know to multiple audiences.”

Support

To support a shift in the learner experience, the district works hard to eliminate barriers. Each school has a licensed mental health therapist who sees learners through their insurance. This helped increase access to mental health supports and normalized it as accessible during the school day.

Rather than pulling students out for intervention, the district also shifted to a push-in model that brings the experts in technology, reading, math, inclusion, gifted and talented, and student services into classrooms to co-teach. This helps teachers grow their expertise while learners receive additional resources in the classroom. Restorative practices trainers have also been placed in schools. They work to create strong learning communities within each classroom and help provide teachers with the right tools to use in challenging moments. “All of these supports have helped push our learning communities to be more equitable and inclusive,” said Roemer.

“We continue to evaluate what we are doing well and celebrate each bright spot while looking for ways to tweak our practice or add a layer of support to our system. The constant cycle of reflection with a focus on recognizing our strengths first has helped us all to take small steps each day to achieve our common goals,” adds Lexmond. “It’s not about what’s wrong. It’s about what’s possible.”

Persistence

We’ve taken purposeful steps to reach our goals,” said Emons. “It’s about adding a layer of support instead of starting something new. We haven’t completely changed our practice, we’ve shifted it slightly to ensure we are providing our learners with the education they deserve. We know our experiences can be applied to other systems for improved results. Leadership, deeper learning through equity and support — our data show the plan is working.” ■

Deidre Roemer is the director of leadership and learning at the West Allis-West Milwaukee School District.



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MSA traffic impact analysis identifies the roundabout as a school corridor solution.



AN ENGINEER'S GUIDE TO SOUND

SCHOOL PLANNING

Brian Huibregtse

When we talk about school planning and design, we start with the student experience inside the school building. What layout best funnels students through the halls, classrooms and common spaces? What mechanical systems are

in place to provide the healthiest conditions and most efficient use of energy? What security measures are in place to protect these young people?

Yet, internal building function is just one component of a healthy and safe learning environment. As a

transportation and traffic engineer, it's my job to think outside of the school footprint and to analyze the entire surrounding area as one inter-related, holistic system. We look at traffic patterns and roadway conditions, adjacent travel corridors,

Communities and school districts that take an early, proactive role in planning for new, expanded or renovated schools save on long-term costs and unforeseen expenses.

intersections, signals, crosswalks, pedestrian and bicycle routes. We also critically analyze the zones surrounding the school building and how all forms of movement function throughout the space. Ultimately, it is our job to make these spaces as safe and user-friendly as possible, with room to accommodate growth.

There are a couple of key analysis tools that we as transportation and traffic engineers use in building or upgrading schools: traffic impact analyses and site circulation analyses. These are important to use at the onset of the planning process in order to bring the school district’s vision to life and to ensure the vision is an honest match for the budgetary dollars set aside for the project.

Traffic impact analysis

A traffic impact analysis is a comprehensive evaluation of both “before” and “after” operational traffic impacts to a road system as related to proposed development or redevelopment of property — such as building or renovating a school. A TIA takes a close look at the traffic movement, volume and circulation of vehicles within the study area and helps identify capacity deficiencies, opportunities and solutions. It also evaluates the impact of the proposed development or redevelopment on the roadways in the immediate proximity of the project. The goal here is to take a broader, bird’s-eye view of the project site to ascertain how the transportation network functions as one cohesive unit and what infrastructure can be put in place now to accommodate growth and change in the future.

Schools have unique characteristics compared to traditional businesses, as they see their peak daily

traffic volumes occurring within two 30-minute windows — one in the morning, and one at the end of the school day. These peaks can be so significant that an intersection that operates efficiently even during times of the heaviest daily commuter traffic can be overwhelmed at the start or end of the school day. These overcapacity conditions result in vehicle queueing that blocks intersections — sometimes many intersections in a row along a transportation corridor. This blocking impedes the safe, effective use of traffic signals, tests drivers’ patience and increases the possibility of drivers making poor decisions. It can also endanger the safety of other drivers, bicyclists and pedestrians along the path of transit.

This is where a traffic impact analysis comes in. A TIA should be conducted by a transportation profes-

sional with training and experience in traffic engineering and transportation planning. Depending upon the complexity of the proposed school development or redevelopment, a TIA can take approximately two to three weeks to complete, but the entire process with government reviews and approvals can take up to three months. The final TIA report summarizes the study objectives, proposed development or redevelopment plans, existing traffic conditions and volumes, projected traffic volumes and routes, site access constraints, traffic queuing concerns, multimodal considerations, speed and sight distance evaluations, traffic control and signaling needs, and design considerations and recommendations.

One of the largest challenges to conducting a TIA is that, in most cases, authorities other than school

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districts have jurisdiction on the roads that access the school. It is these authorities that may require the TIA to be completed if new access or permitting is being required, or if existing access is being changed. This can result in road or intersection improvements that meet the operational and safety standards of these outside parties, but not necessarily the needs of the schools or school districts involved. This is why it is imperative for schools and district stakeholders to be involved early in the planning process, to make sure improvements align with their desire to provide safe and functional routes to and from a school — whether by bus, vehicle, bicycle, foot or any other mode of transportation.

Site circulation analysis

A site circulation analysis can be done in tandem with a traffic impact analysis for a new school or as a stand-alone project for an existing school. Here, we examine the movement and patterns of all modes of transportation within a school zone proper: parking areas, bus loading and unloading zones, student drop-off and pick-up areas, pedestrian and bicycle crossings, accessibility, and the interconnectivity between them all. Sidewalks, curb ramps and transit stops are evaluated. We look at pedestrian and bicycle count numbers to ensure



safe, multimodal use throughout the school property. As part of the process, it is also important to perform an Americans with Disabilities Act audit of all public right of way within the school zone to ensure full compliance and equitable access.

The underlying reason to do a site circulation analysis is to make sure you are providing the safest environment possible for students, staff and parents. We generally follow four main industry principles while evaluating and providing recommendations at a school site.

Separate pedestrians, vehicles and buses: Provide separate areas for parent loading zones and bus loading zones; design parking lots for vehicles and pedestrians; and

designate clear walking areas for pedestrians to reduce conflict zones.

Organize the student loading process:

Educate students, staff and parents on the loading zone procedures for efficiency and enforcement of policies.

Assign parking areas:

Designate a short-term parking area away from the loading zones that visitors and parents walking students into the school can use to make sure they do not interfere with loading operations.

Restrict circulation options:

Define a driver's route into and out of the school campus to reduce delays and improve efficiency and overall safety.

Early planning and budgeting

Why is all of this important? Communities and school districts that take an early, proactive role in planning for new, expanded or renovated schools save on long-term costs and unforeseen expenses. They also earn the trust of their communities and the voters who help move projects forward.

An increasing number of school projects now go to public referendum and vote. Fortunately, many of them gain support. On Nov. 3, 2020, Wisconsin voters approved an incredible 84% of school referendums on their ballots — a whopping 43 out of 51 across the state. With safety always being a top school

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priority, it is highly recommended that districts that are anticipating site upgrades or have identified issues of concern pertaining to school zone circulation complete a site circulation analysis prior to a referendum being drafted so that improvements can be accurately accounted and budgeted for.

The cost of roadway improvements outside of the school zone can also catch districts off guard. A local authority may require improvements to a public intersection prior to allowing any access or permitting for a school project. In most cases, construction estimates for the school-specific project include only minimal costs for associated roadway improvements — costs that may not have even been vetted at the time of the referendum. A simple modification, such as adding a turn lane and widening the affected pave-

ment, can add up to well over \$200,000 in cost. This is why we recommend that districts discuss with the local authorities their desire for a TIA and, if required, have it completed prior to determining a final referendum cost. Construction budgets are always a challenge and costs can certainly fluctuate. However, trying to find an additional \$500,000 to complete the improvements required for a safe intersection can be extremely diffi-

cult to do once a referendum has already passed. Furthermore, bringing the project back to the ballot in subsequent years can lead to referendum fatigue and the risk of losing critical voter support.

In order to do a school project the right way, without compromising quality or safety, school districts can — and should — take the lead on accurately planning, studying and budgeting for the right improvements at the right time. ■

Brian Huibregtse joined MSA Professional Services, Inc. in 2005 and is a trusted resource for traffic engineering and transportation design. He is a licensed professional engineer in Minnesota and Wisconsin and is also a certified professional traffic operations engineer. Brian has spent most of his career working on traffic impact studies, operational analyses and safety assessments for locations across the Midwest, helping to make communities safer places to live, work and play.

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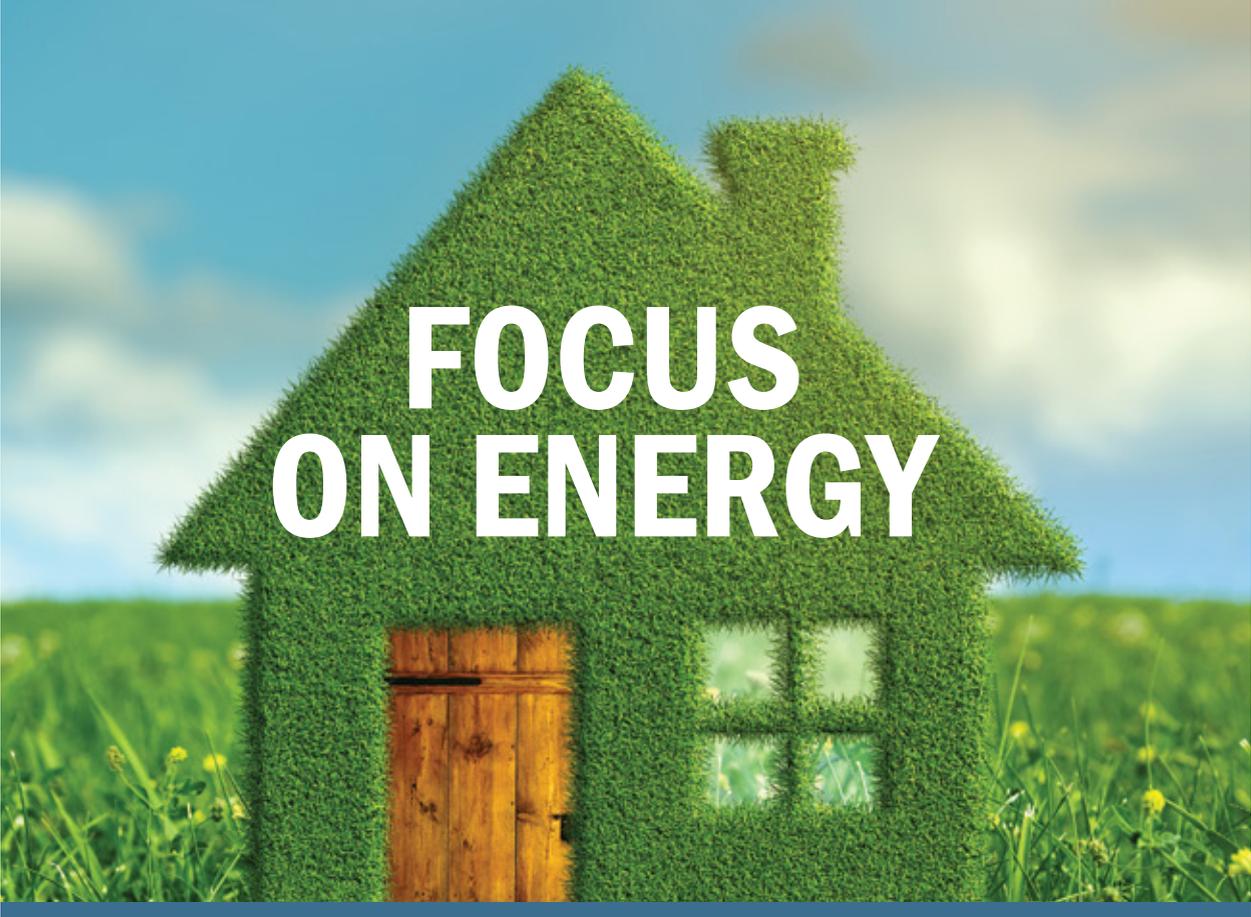
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FOCUS ON ENERGY

Driving building upgrades with practical energy management

Laura Lane

Improving energy efficiency in schools should be a priority for all school districts. Wisconsin districts collectively spend more than \$175 million per year on energy costs, their third-largest operating expense.

Research by the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency shows a relationship between facility performance and absenteeism as well as staff turnover and occupant health in schools. When facilities work well, students can focus on learning without being distracted by drafty classrooms or experiencing sleepiness caused by high humidity levels. Developing a practical energy management strategy allows districts to operate equipment efficiently while keeping students and staff comfortable.

Practical energy management provides your district with a proactive approach to assessing and reducing energy costs. The process starts before an energy audit and

continues beyond consideration and implementation of energy conservation measures. These actions meet goals to improve energy efficiency, reduce energy expenditures and optimize capital investments while reducing environmental impacts and maintaining conservation efforts.

Establishing an effective energy management program starts with a multi-disciplinary team of stakeholders within the organization. Identify a group of motivated, cross-functional participants with a passion for conservation and a vested interest in positive facility outcomes. These stakeholders should support the energy team goals and approve energy team action plans. Energy team members should include a diverse mix of technical and non-technical staff with a thorough understanding of how the facility is used and a willingness to lead and educate others.

Every energy team should have one

In 2018, Focus on Energy worked with over half the school buildings in Wisconsin to collect and analyze building and utility data. These schools reduced their energy use by 23% compared to benchmarks from 2006, resulting in over \$40 million reinvested into the educational system. Refer to the Focus on Energy 2018 School Benchmarking Study Final Report for more Wisconsin-based school energy use statistics.

Visit focusonenergy.com/schoolbenchmarking for next steps in continuing the benchmarking journey.

For more information, call 800-762-7077 or visit focusonenergy.com.

or two leaders, or “energy champions.” These individuals assist with maintaining communication across team members, organizing regular meetings, setting and keeping the agendas and tracking action items. Organizations must keep in mind that effective energy planning is a long-term commitment requiring team members to be creative and flexible.

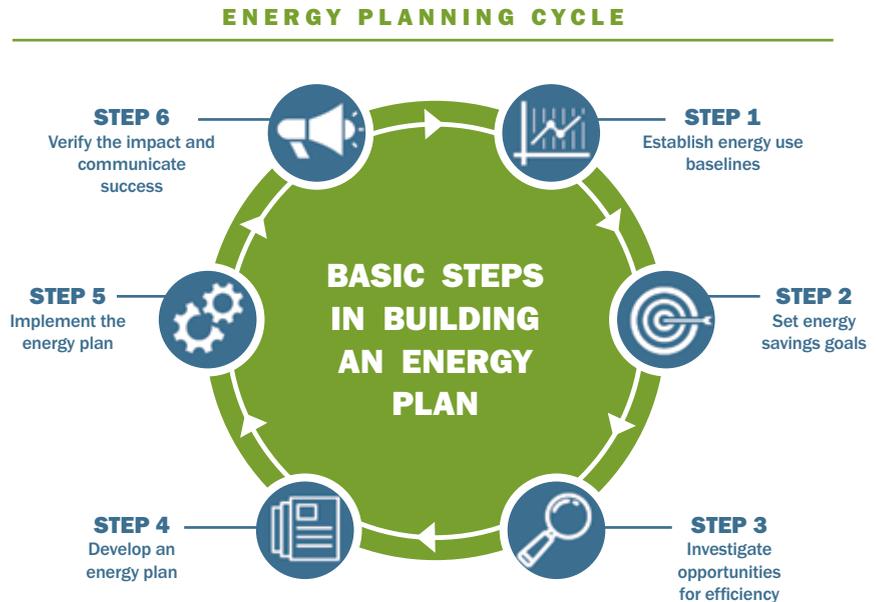
Local utility representatives and energy advisors from Focus on Energy can bring additional technical expertise. Together, they can identify energy savings opportunities, develop long-range facility plans and promote energy-saving achievements at your facilities.

After establishing the energy team, you are ready to develop a practical energy plan. The energy planning cycle (right) illustrates how to implement a practical energy plan that continually builds upon success. Ultimately, success depends on the commitment to continuously revisiting and improving an energy plan.

Tracking utility consumption and cost is critical to establishing a plan for a district. Understanding utility consumption will provide an energy performance baseline from which to monitor and track progress. Studies show the process of investigating energy use and improving awareness among staff can provide measurable energy cost savings ranging from 3–5%. Talk with your utility representative about getting your data in a usable spreadsheet format. Some utilities will also provide interval data showing trends in consumption over time.

Ripon Area School District has exemplified this level of energy awareness. “I spent the majority of my first year, in 2017, in this position investigating opportunities for energy savings. This process doesn’t always happen overnight,” said Brian Appleman, building and grounds manager.

To build on its energy awareness, Ripon also participated in the Wisconsin School Benchmarking Study in late 2018 and then conducted a district-wide energy audit in 2019. The findings have prompted the district to implement several ener-



gy-efficient projects. Over the past two years, Ripon has upgraded much of its lighting to LEDs. The district also recently completed extensive boiler replacements and controls upgrades that took effect this winter. Additionally, Ripon has replaced a domestic hot water heating system and added variable frequency drives to the air handlers.

“As their energy advisor, I expect to keep their Energy Star Portfolio Manager® account up to date for next year to help assess their energy savings and provide opportunities for additional improvements in their buildings,” Focus on Energy advisor Joe Kottwitz said.

The long-term success of a district’s energy management strategy requires engagement, involvement and stakeholder buy-in. Districts can

ensure continued energy savings and reduced expenses by promoting energy efficiency commitment to faculty, staff, students and community members. Energy management is a continuous effort in building a long-term culture around proactive energy savings to support future generations of students. It’s important to evaluate an energy management plan at least every two years to keep it up to date and track your progress.

For more strategies on building a practical energy management plan, check out the Energy Best Practices Guide for School & Government Facilities. Visit focusonenergy.com/ guidebooks to download an electronic copy. ■

Laura Lane is a marketing specialist for Focus on Energy.

Focus on Energy is Wisconsin utilities’ statewide energy efficiency and renewable resource program funded by the state’s investor-owned energy utilities and participating municipal and electric cooperative utilities. Focus on Energy works with eligible Wisconsin residents and businesses to install cost-effective energy efficiency and renewable energy projects. Focus on

Energy’s information, resources and financial incentives help to implement projects that otherwise would not be completed. Its efforts help Wisconsin residents and businesses manage rising energy costs, promote in-state economic development, protect the environment and control Wisconsin’s growing demand for electricity and natural gas.

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Deadlines vary. Breakout session proposals are due Friday, June 25, 2021.



Patti Welch Retires After 41 Years

The WASB congratulates Patti Welch of the WASB staff on her retirement. She has stepped down after more than 41 years of service at the WASB.

Welch worked diligently as an administrative assistant, web developer and graphic designer. Through her decades of service, Welch touched nearly every aspect of WASB services. In addition, she assisted the Wisconsin School Public Relations Association for years. We are grateful for her dedicated commitment to Wisconsin school districts and congratulate her on retirement. □

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The WASB's recorded webinars and online workshops for board members cover a wide range of topics — from the basics of school law for new board members, to advanced trainings on how to run effective board meetings, understand the school district budgeting cycle and resolve conflict effectively.

To make it easy for board members to access this content, the WASB is creating an Online Learning Platform. It will include access to many of the recently recorded WASB webinars and online workshops for

board members. The easy-to-use format groups the trainings into introductory and advanced categories.

Additional WASB webinars and online workshops for board members will be added as they are recorded, including content that is being developed specifically by WASB staff to train school board presidents, clerks and treasurers on their roles.

The Online Learning Platform will be available as an annual district subscription, giving the full board, district admin-

istrator and one administrative assistant access to all of the content for a full year. Watch for more information to be released in the coming weeks.

NOTE: The WASB Online Learning Platform will NOT include access to individual breakout sessions recorded at online events hosted by the WASB, such as the 2021 Virtual State Education Convention, or include training that is intended primarily for school district staff, such as the recent WASB Title IX trainings.

Upcoming Webinars

New School Board Member Trainings

Webinars: April 20, 22, 27 and 29

The WASB offers two complimentary webinars designed to help new school board members get comfortable in their role. Both webinars will be recorded and available to view on demand.

The content covered in the two webinars will be similar to the content usually provided in the traditional April New Board Member Gatherings and May Spring Workshops.



WEBINAR: Legal Roles & Responsibilities

Tuesday, April 20 7-8:30 pm

Thursday, April 29 12-1:30 pm

To be effective leaders, school board members must be cognizant of their legal roles and responsibilities. In this webinar, an experienced WASB school attorney will take a deeper dive into key areas of Wisconsin law, including open meetings, public records, conflicts of interest, and a board's power and duties.

No registration required. Find the link to join on the WASB Online Events page.

WEBINAR: Key Work of School Boards

Thursday, April 22 7-8:30 pm

Tuesday, April 27 12-1:30 pm

Research shows that the more effective the board, the better a school district's students perform. In every decision and every action, the school board governance role centers on improving student learning outcomes. In this webinar, learn about the five core areas school boards should focus on to be effective – vision, accountability, policy, community leadership and board/superintendent relationships.

No registration required. Find the link to join on the WASB Online Events page.

ADDITIONAL UPCOMING WASB WEBINARS

WEBINAR: School Board Re-Organization Meeting

Tuesday, April 13 12-1 pm

School boards are required to hold their organizational meeting on or within 30 days of the fourth Monday in April. This presentation will review requirements for the organizational meeting and the orientation of new school board members.

No registration required. Find the link to join on the WASB Online Events page.



WEBINAR: Hiring Teachers

Wednesday, April 28 12-1 pm

This presentation will provide an overview of the general process of hiring teachers. It includes information about the purpose of position descriptions; vacancy notices; application forms; the interview process (including virtual interviews); reference checks; contract provisions pertaining to layoffs, furloughs and the number of contract days; and state and federal laws as they relate to employment discrimination.

Registration required. Find more information and the registration link on the WASB Online Events page.

RECURRING WEEKLY WEBINAR: Capitol Chat

Fridays: April 2, 9, 16, 23 and 30 12 pm

WASB government relations staff members Dan Rossmiller and Chris Kulow host a live webinar each Friday at noon to update members on the latest legislative developments and take questions.

No registration required. Find the link to join on the WASB Online Events page.

RECURRING MONTHLY WEBINAR:

WASB Legal and Legislative Video Update

Wednesday, April 21 12 pm, Wednesday, May 19 12 pm

WASB attorneys and government relations staff provide a complimentary, monthly update on recent legal and legislative issues.

No registration required. Find the link to join on the WASB Online Events page.



It's Budget Advocacy Season

Making our schools' budgetary needs heard

It's that time again. Deliberations over the state's biennial budget, which sets state funding levels for the next two years, will dominate the state Legislature's focus for the next several months. For K-12 education to fare as well as possible in this debate, we need our school leaders to tell their district's stories so schools are not lost in the shuffle of competing budget priorities.

The influx of one-time federal COVID relief funding may complicate our story-telling, but the disruption caused by COVID also provides a unique opportunity. Our schools are not just learning centers. They provide opportunities for children to develop socially and emotionally as well as receive nutritious meals and health services. The pandemic has served to re-emphasize the value and importance of local public schools to our communities, our families and our economy. We need to tell our story.

■ Advocacy opportunities

Budget-related listening sessions and hearings have been scheduled by Gov. Tony Evers and the legislature's Joint Finance Committee. These are prime opportunities for you to tell your district's story to an important statewide audience that is focused on the state budget.

The governor's sessions are a series of online events focused on different issue areas. K-12 education will be covered under the "What's Best for Our Kids" session. We encourage you to join this virtual session if you can. It is important for the governor's budget messaging to get some feedback from school board members and administrators.

The JFC has announced three in-person hearings. All hearings will

begin at 10 a.m. and follow the guidelines of the local county health department or the University of Wisconsin campus. See page 29 for the dates and locations.

There will be a statewide virtual option on Wednesday, April 28 for those unable to testify in person. (Pre-registration will be required.)

There's also a JFC Budget Input website to find information on how to provide input or submit testimony on the budget. This website is also the place to register in advance for the virtual hearing. The web address is on page 29.

We encourage you to attend an in-person hearing, if you feel safe doing so, or utilize the virtual option. Either provides an excellent opportunity for school leaders to communicate their priorities and viewpoints on the proposed state budget to members of the JFC. In addition, local legislators often attend hearings to listen to the testimony of area residents.

In addition, many lawmakers hold "budget listening sessions" in their districts. These events, when in-person, are often scheduled in public spaces such as libraries and city, village or town halls. They give people opportunities to meet one-on-one with the lawmakers who represent them in Madison. These listening sessions provide an excellent opportunity for you to tell your district's story and provide detailed information. You can bring along community members such as parents, grandparents and others to talk about the value and importance of your schools.

■ Budget messaging

If you do contact your state legislators or attend a budget hearing or listening

session, what will your message be?

In the past, we've seen lawmakers try to use issues that affect school districts differently as a wedge to divide public school leaders and divert them from shared goals. When this strategy succeeds, we end up arguing against ourselves. Instead of everyone rowing the boat together in the same direction, this can lead to everyone rowing in their own way. Some of the issues that can divide us include open enrollment and setting funding levels based on a district's mode of instruction (in-person, hybrid or virtual).

It will be important for school leaders to avoid taking the bait and staying on a unified message that can benefit all districts.

We suggest a united front focused on the four shared priorities:

1) Inflationary increase (revenue limits and/or per-pupil aid)

We encourage school leaders to seek an increase in spendable resources for school districts that meets or exceeds the rate of inflation. "Spendable resources" can come in the form of an increase in revenue limits and general aid, an increase in per-pupil aid or a combination of these approaches. The important thing is that all districts receive such an increase and that none are left behind.

2) Special education reimbursement

We seek a significant increase in the state's commitment to reimburse districts for special education costs. Under revenue limits, when the state fails to increase special education aid to match increases in the cost of special education services, districts must dip into revenue-limited general funds to make up the shortfall in special education funds. As a result, regular education programs have to be cut. Because all districts

educate students with disabilities, all districts will benefit from an increase in state special education aid.

3) Mental health categorical aid

Prior to the pandemic, we know many students had unmet mental health needs. The pandemic has caused additional stress on students and families, increasing mental health concerns. We seek additional funding for school-based mental health services with a greater emphasis on categorical aids that don't pit districts against each other, as tends to happen with competitive grants.

4) Pandemic-related enrollment drop

We seek recognition that the dip in pupil-enrollment counts, while likely temporary, will have lasting negative effects on school district funding — reducing district revenue limits and eligibility for per-pupil categorical aid. School districts should, for example, be able to use the greater

of 2019 or 2020 pupil counts in the three-year rolling average to determine revenue limits and per-pupil aid in the 2021-22 and 2022-23 school years.

This does not mean you should not talk about broadband expansion, sparsity aid or other items important to your district. If you are looking for somewhere to focus your attention, we feel these are the biggest issues from a statewide perspective.

Republicans in the state Legislature have criticized the amount of spending in the governor's budget proposal; however, they have been largely mum on school funding priorities, except to be vocal about in-person vs virtual instruction. It is important that school leaders clearly define our shared school funding priorities. If we don't do so, legislators will substitute their priorities for ours. ■

Gov. Evers' Badger Bounceback

VIRTUAL SESSION: "What's Best for Our Kids."

Thurs., April 8, 6 p.m.

Wisconsinites interested in participating can register on the governor's website.

Session will be live streamed on the governor's YouTube page.

Joint Finance Committee Public Hearings

IN-PERSON: 10 a.m. to 5 p.m.

- Fri., April 9 at UW-Whitewater
- Wed., April 21 at Rhinelander (Hodag Dome)
- Thurs., April 22 at UW-Stout

STATEWIDE VIRTUAL: Wed., April 28

(Pre-registration will be required.)

JFC Public Comment Website:

<https://legis.wisconsin.gov/topics/budgetcomments/>

Other Budget Listening Sessions

- Check for budget listening sessions in your area with your state legislators.
- Look on their websites or newsletters or call or email their office and ask.



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Overtime Issues Under the Fair Labor Standards Act

Districts, in their capacity as employers, are subject to local, state and federal employment laws in addition to the multitude of laws that govern school district operations related to the education of students. One of the federal employment laws is the Fair Labor Standards Act which, among other things, requires employers to pay overtime to certain classes of employees. However, districts are not subject to the requirements of the state overtime pay law. This Legal Comment will provide an overview of the general rules for overtime pay under the FLSA as well as the most common FLSA overtime exemptions applicable to district employees. In addition, this Legal Comment will review changes in district operations in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, including changing employees' job duties, which may impact employees' eligibility for overtime pay.¹

General overtime rules

Under the FLSA, the general rule is that an employee must be paid for all time that the employee "suffers or is permitted" to work by his or her employer. Unless an exemption applies, employees who work more than 40 hours in a week are entitled to overtime pay for those hours worked in excess of 40 hours. These employees are called "non-exempt employees." The employer determines which seven consecutive days constitute its FLSA workweek. Overtime wages for non-exempt employees must be paid at one and one-half times the employee's "regular rate of pay."²

An employee's regular rate of pay is not always the same as an employee's hourly wage rate. Instead, it includes "all remuneration for employment

paid to... the employee" unless an exclusion applies. For example, if a district pays a one-on-one student aide an additional \$50 a week in hazard pay for any week during which the employee has direct contact with a student (as opposed to a week of virtual or remote instruction), the total amount of hazard pay received by the employee in a week must be added to the employee's regular wages and then be divided by the total hours the employee worked that week to determine the employee's regular rate of pay for that week.

FLSA regulations were recently revised to clarify that the following benefits, among others, are not included in an employee's regular rate of pay:

- Paid time off
- Employer contributions to benefit plans
- Certain tuition benefits
- Cell phone reimbursements
- Organizational membership dues
- Substantiated travel costs

The FLSA allows districts to give non-exempt employees the option to take compensatory paid time off at a later time in lieu of overtime pay. Districts that permit the use of compensatory time in lieu of overtime pay must have an agreement with employees that details the parameters of the district's policy. This can be accomplished through a board policy, an employee handbook provision or by written agreements with individual employees. The amount of compensatory time is calculated by multiplying the number of overtime hours an employee seeks to defer by one and one-half. Districts may allow employees to accrue up to 240 hours of compensatory time (or

less as provided by the district's policy). Employees are entitled to use this leave on the date(s) requested by the employee, unless doing so would unduly disrupt the district's operations.

Legal requirements for exemption from overtime pay

Under the FLSA, only non-exempt employees are entitled to overtime pay. In order for a district employee to be exempt from receiving overtime pay (or, if offered by the district, compensatory time), the employee must (1) be paid a certain amount, (2) be paid on a salary basis, and (3) perform certain duties as outlined in the FLSA regulations. These employees are referred to as "exempt employees" under the FLSA.

Before discussing each of these three tests in turn, it is important to understand that "teachers" are an important and unique category of exempt employees. "Teachers" do not have to be paid a certain amount or paid on a salary basis. Employees qualify for the exemption from FLSA overtime rules as "teachers" if their primary duty is teaching, tutoring, instructing or lecturing in the activity of imparting knowledge, and if they are employed and engaged in this activity as teachers in an educational establishment. Exempt teachers include, but are not limited to, regular academic teachers, kindergarten or early childhood teachers, teachers of gifted children, teachers of children with disabilities, teachers of skilled and semi-skilled trades and occupations, teachers engaged in automobile driving instruction, home economics teachers, and vocal or instrumental music teachers.³ Additionally, a U.S. Department of Labor opinion letter explained that coaches qualify as teachers under the FLSA.⁴

■ Salary-level test

In order to be considered “exempt,” employees must be paid at least \$684 per week (or \$35,308 for a full calendar year).⁵ This salary level only applies in those weeks in which an employee works. Therefore, employees who do not work over the summer months do not need to be paid at least \$684 per week during that time. Additionally, academic administrative employees only need to be paid equal to the entry-level salary for teachers in the district. An academic administrative employee is someone whose primary duty is performing administrative functions directly related to academic instruction. This means work related to the academic operations and functions of a school, such as a district administrator, a principal, an assistant principal or a director of curriculum among others.⁶

■ Salary-basis test

The salary-basis test requires that, in order to be considered exempt under the FLSA, employees, including academic administrative employees, regularly receive a predetermined amount of compensation each week without regard to the quality or quantity of the work performed.⁷ The FLSA only permits districts to make deductions from an exempt employee’s pay in certain circumstances, including:

- 1) For absences of one or more full days for personal reasons, other than sickness or disability;
- 2) For one or more full days when an exempt employee is absent because of sickness or disability and the deduction is made pursuant to sick leave or paid-time-off policy (e.g., a district can deduct a full day’s pay from an exempt employee’s salary when the employee has used all of his or her district-provided sick leave benefits and misses another full day of work);
- 3) When an exempt employee is absent from work for less than

one week for jury duty, as a witness, or for military duty, the daily compensation received (from others) may be offset from the employee’s salary;

- 4) For a violation of a major safety rule, the employer may make partial-day deductions from salary;
- 5) For one or more full days as discipline for violation of workplace conduct rules;
- 6) For full days in the initial or last week of employment; and
- 7) For reduced or intermittent leave under the Family and Medical Leave Act, the employer may make partial day deductions.

These restrictions do not prevent an employer from deducting partial day leaves of absence from an employee’s sick leave or paid-time-off bank. To limit risk of an employee losing his or her exempt status for an improper deduction, boards should have an FLSA safe harbor policy that requires employees to report suspected improper deductions so that the district can promptly investigate and reimburse the employee for an improper deduction.

■ Primary-duty test

Finally, in order to be considered exempt, an employee must meet the “primary-duty test” established for one of a number of FLSA exemptions that are applicable to districts. Each of these exemptions require employees to have a “primary duty” that is the performance of exempt work. A “primary duty” is defined as “the principal, main, major or most important duty that the employee performs” based on a complete analysis of the employee’s employment.⁸ A job description identifying primary duties can be a helpful guide in establishing and proving that an employee is exempt under the FLSA, but a court or agency hearing a FLSA misclassification claim will look at the actual duties that an employee performs, not just a job description, when determining an employee’s primary duty.

■ Common “primary duty” exemptions applicable to districts

In addition to the exemptions that apply to teachers and academic administrative employees, there are several FLSA exemptions commonly applicable to other types of district employees.

Administrative employee. An administrative employee (not to be confused with an academic administrative employee) is one whose primary duty is the performance of office work or non-manual work directly related to the management or general business operations of the district and whose primary duty includes the exercise of discretion and independent judgment with respect to matters of significance.⁹

For example, the head of human resources in a district likely qualifies as an administrative employee because the duties of this position are directly related to district operations, and the employee likely exercises discretion and independent judgment on important district policies related to district employment. On the other hand, a payroll clerk might not meet the requirements of this exemption if the payroll clerk merely processes payroll in accordance with established law, policies and protocols.

Professional employee. An employee is exempt as a “professional” under this exemption if the employee’s primary duty requires knowledge of an advanced type in a field of science or learning customarily acquired by a prolonged course of specialized intellectual instruction.¹⁰ Registered nurses generally qualify as professional employees. However, licensed practical nurses and certified nurse aides generally do not qualify for this exemption because possession of a specialized advanced academic degree is not a standard prerequisite for these positions.

Executive employee. An employee is exempt as an “executive” if (1) the employee’s primary duty is manage-

ment of the district or a customarily recognized department thereof, (2) the employee customarily and regularly directs the work of two or more other employees, and (3) the employee has the authority to hire and fire other employees or the employee's suggestions and recommendations regarding employment are given particular weight.¹¹ For example, the head of a district's maintenance department might qualify for this exemption if her primary duty is the scheduling of maintenance tasks and the assignment of custodians to perform that work, provided that she supervises those custodians and her recommendation is given particular weight by the administrator or board that has the authority to terminate those custodians. By contrast, an employee with the title of head custodian might not qualify for the exemption if the employee's primary duty is the performance of maintenance, cleaning, clearing snow and other manual labor that is unrelated to the head custodian's minimal supervisory duties.

■ Potential FLSA issues related to COVID-19

To meet unprecedented operational needs during the COVID-19 pandemic, many districts temporarily adjusted their employees' work duties, restructured staffing needs and made other operational changes. Districts should evaluate the FLSA implications of those changes. Some employees who were previously exempt may no longer meet the primary-duties test necessary to retain their FLSA exemption. For example, to meet the need for enhanced deep cleaning of schools during the pandemic, the head of maintenance may now be required to perform significant cleaning duties that are more akin to the duties of a regular custodian rather than the primary duties of an executive employee.

The Department of Labor issued guidance specifically related to these pandemic-related situations. It provides that during the COVID-19 public health emergency, exempt employees may temporarily perform nonexempt duties that are required by the emergency without losing their exempt status, provided employers continue to comply with the salary-level and salary-basis tests if otherwise required to do so for those employees' positions.¹² However, the Department of Labor has not provided guidance as to how long an employee is allowed to perform these temporary duties and still retain exempt status. That needs to be determined on a case-by-case basis. For example, if the head of food services, who is normally an exempt executive employee, is required to prepare meals with the two non-exempt cooks in order to deliver meals to students during periods of remote or virtual learning, the employee will likely not lose his FLSA exempt status during the COVID-19 pandemic. However, if the district decides to continue utilizing the head of food services in a more hands-on approach to food services and cuts one of the district's regular cook positions, the employee is probably no longer exempt under the FLSA because his primary duty might no longer be considered the management of nutritional services and because he no longer supervises two employees.

■ Conclusion

If a court or agency determines that a district has misclassified a non-exempt employee as exempt, that district could be ordered to (1) pay that employee back pay, including overtime pay, for all hours worked, (2) pay additional damages equal to that back pay, and (3) pay the attorney's fees incurred by employee. Therefore, as a matter of normal practice, districts should regularly review their employees' FLSA exempt/non-exempt

status to make sure employees are properly classified under the law. This is particularly true given the unusual operational changes caused by the pandemic. Districts should evaluate the status of employees who have had changes made to their job duties, particularly those that are longer term. Additionally, districts should ensure non-exempt employees are properly compensated for overtime work. Finally, districts should make sure that their job descriptions are up-to-date and accurately reflect the primary duties of each position to ensure compliance with the FLSA and to assist in defending any claims that employees have been misclassified. ■

■ End notes

1. This Legal Comment was written by Michael J. Julka and Brian P. Goodman of Boardman & Clark LLP, WASB Legal Counsel. For related articles, see Wisconsin School News: "Selected Issues Regarding Wage and Hour Law" (Mar. 2011); and WASB Legal Notes: "New Regulations Impact Fair Labor Standards Act" (Summer 2004).
2. 29 C.F.R. Part 778.
3. U.S. Dep't of Labor, Wage and Hour Division, Fact Sheet #17D: Exemption for Professional Employees Under the Fair Labor Standards Act (FLSA), [dol.gov/sites/dolgov/files/WHD/legacy/files/fs17d_professional.pdf](https://www.dol.gov/sites/dolgov/files/WHD/legacy/files/fs17d_professional.pdf).
4. U.S. Dep't of Labor, Wage & Hour Div., Opinion Letter FLSA 2018-6 (Jan. 5, 2018).
5. 29 C.F.R. s. 541.600.
6. 29 C.F.R. s. 541.204.
7. 29 C.F.R. s. 541.602.
8. 29 C.F.R. s. 541.700.
9. 29 C.F.R. s. 541.200.
10. 29 C.F.R. s. 541.301.
11. 29 C.F.R. s. 541.100.
12. U.S. Dep't of Labor, Wage and Hour Division, COVID-19 and the Fair Labor Standards Act Questions and Answers, [dol.gov/agencies/whd/flsa/pandemic](https://www.dol.gov/agencies/whd/flsa/pandemic).



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