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



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Wisconsin Schools Struggle With Declining Enrollment

Many Wisconsin school districts are planning to close or consolidate due to declining enrollment, reported Wisconsin Public Radio.

“The schools are not filled up. There are fewer teachers, fewer kids and a challenge to provide a quality educational experience,” La Crosse Superintendent Aaron Engel told WPR.

Engel said the district’s elementary schools are at about 70% capacity, while its middle and high schools are at about 65%. A combination of declining birth rates and people moving has contributed to the dropping enrollment.

Wausau schools have lost around 700 students over the past two decades, according to WPR. That decline in enrollment leads to less funding from the state and a lower threshold on how much the district can raise from taxpayers. □

Despite Pandemic Funds, Mental Health Gap Persists

Wisconsin schools have recently increased their number of social workers, counselors and psychologists. Despite these pandemic-era gains, Wisconsin schools remain below the recommended ratios of students to mental health professionals, reported the Milwaukee Journal Sentinel.

The American School Counselor Association recommends one mental health counselor for every 250 students. The latest (2021-22) school-counselor-to-student ratio in

Wisconsin was 378 to one.

This leads to half of Wisconsin parents struggling to obtain mental health services. The gains made with pandemic relief funds are temporary for many districts.

“It’s really hard to hire permanent school staff members with that grant funding, because who’s going to want to come and work in the district when they don’t know if they’re going to have a position the following year?” Oshkosh Director of Pupil Services Matt Kaemmerer told the newspaper. □

STAT OF THE MONTH

378

The number of Wisconsin students per school counselor.

The American School Counselor Association recommends one mental health counselor for every 250 students. *Source: American School Counselor Association*

25 Schools Get \$560K in Fab Lab Grants

Twenty-five Wisconsin schools will receive more than \$560,000 in digital fabrication laboratory (fab lab) grants from the Wisconsin Economic Development Corporation.

“If we want our kids to be successful, we need to make sure they have the skills and tools they need to join the 21st-century workforce,” Gov. Tony Evers said in a press release. “Fab labs are important tools to help students gain the skills, expertise and equipment necessary to become the industry leaders of tomorrow.”

Lac Courte Oreilles Ojibwe School is the first tribal school to be awarded a Wisconsin Economic Development Corporation fab lab grant and will receive nearly \$20,000 to create a fab lab facility.

“Fab labs... [are] a win for Wisconsin employers who will be able to find workers with the right skills to allow their companies to grow and thrive,” WEDC Secretary and CEO Missy Hughes said in a press release.

To view the complete list of districts awarded grants, visit tinyurl.com/bdmh9wfr. □

Meal Debt Soars Nationwide

A recent survey from the School Nutrition Association found school districts had more than \$19 million in unpaid meal debt, with the Midwest and Great Plains having the highest rates, reported Wisconsin Public Radio.

The school year started with a switch from pandemic-era free meals to a paid system. The increasing meal debt is a

strong indicator that families might be struggling to afford school meals.

Initial data shows schools served almost 130 million fewer free or reduced-price meals in the fall of 2022 compared to the same time right before the pandemic.

The United States Department of Agriculture proposed a new rule to expand

the Community Eligibility Provision. It allows districts with many high-need students to serve free meals to all their kids, without requiring families to apply.

The USDA also wants to lower the threshold of high-need students from 40% to 25%, which would allow more schools to qualify for the program. □



Looking Back as We Move Forward

In my final weeks as the executive director of your association, it feels natural to reflect on change and tradition.

I would like to think some of my lasting contributions have come while guiding this association and our members through periods of upheaval and disruption.

In my first Viewpoint column, back in October 2005, I noted that the WASB had become a leader in collective bargaining. Several years later, the passage of Act 10 would fundamentally reshape teacher contracts and our role in negotiating them.

After the law was passed, I remember the WASB working quickly to help school board members understand how it would affect their district and how to communicate these changes with their own communities. It was also a new world for the WASB, as collective bargaining had been a central role of our legal staff.

Then, as now, I viewed my role as serving as the voice for our members — as expressed through the Board of Directors — while empowering staff to do their essential work every day.

Later, as the end of the '10s approached, we looked forward to celebrating a milestone: 100 years of service to school board members.

Since our founding in 1921 by school board members, there had been so much fascinating history to celebrate. At the same time, I wanted us to focus on the future; though we had come far, we had to remember that for many of our students we have not come nearly far enough.

We would end up being focused, of course, on the unprecedented challenges posed by a global pandemic that dominated the day-to-day life of educators and their leaders.

I remember hundreds of school board members and administrators joining our online updates on how to adapt to virtual instruction. Our centennial convention, in 2021, would be the first after the pandemic struck. Once again, my goal was to create an environment where staff could do work that our members found meaningful.

Though it feels natural to look back on what's different, I know that our core mission has not changed. I can't predict the next natural disaster or legislative transformation, but I can say that our tradition of being a member-directed association is in good hands.

Many of you have met our association's next executive director, Dan Rossmiller, and found him to be a

conscientious advocate for school boards. You may have read his monthly Capitol Watch columns in these pages.

The WASB does not give political donations, so for 16 years as government relations director, Dan has traded on the strength of his arguments and the unity of our members. I look forward to more of you getting to know him as I have.

During our New School Board Member Gatherings in April, I was reminded of our bright future when I and other staff met newly elected school board members eager to learn about their role. I know we will continue to be a resource you can rely on.

In my first Viewpoint, I looked forward to what would be my first Fall Regional Meetings, where we travel the state to learn from and update our members. On those trips, I would have great experiences and make lasting friendships with our exceptional board members and the equally great people they choose as administrators.

These are some of my fondest memories of the WASB. Thank you for giving me a window into the good work you and your schools do every day. ■

“Then, as now, I viewed my role as serving as the voice for our members — as expressed through the Board of Directors — while empowering staff to do their essential work every day.”



REPORT TO THE MEMBERSHIP

Built on a tradition of providing high-quality service to member districts, the WASB is proud to be at your service. With your membership, you have a statewide voice in public education and your district benefits from valuable member services. The following are highlights of the WASB's work for you in 2022-23.

LEGAL AND POLICY SERVICES



PROVIDED TIMELY LEGAL UPDATES

through regular webinars, the monthly **Legal and Legislative Video Update** and the electronic **Legal and Policy Newsletter**.

RESPONDED TO 4,476

law-related inquiries from members in **360 districts** and provided direct legal services to **106 districts**.

UPDATED AND REVISED

numerous **WASB legal and policy publications**, including the New Board Member Handbook, the Employee Handbook, the Policy Resource Guide, The FOCUS, Policy Perspectives and the School District Election Schedule.

WASB INSURANCE PLAN



Provided timely, insurance-related updates

THROUGH WEBINARS AND ELECTRONIC ALERTS.

ADDED TO **ARCHIVAL LIBRARY** of insurance-related resources.

CUSTOMIZED LEADERSHIP SERVICES

DIRECTLY SERVED 61 SCHOOL DISTRICTS

with **customized consultations** (e.g., leadership and roles and responsibilities, governance, leadership coaching, and superintendent evaluation) and assisted many other districts with informal consultations.

Continued to provide districts with access to the **ANNUAL BOARD DEVELOPMENT TOOL** at no cost in partnership with School Perceptions and provided facilitation services on the tool for districts wanting to set goals based on the results.

Trained districts in the **SUPERINTENDENT EVALUATION FRAMEWORK** to assist boards in fostering a productive board/superintendent relationship.

Developed presentations for Fall Regional Meetings, State Education Convention, Spring Workshops and the **SUMMER LEADERSHIP INSTITUTE**.

SEARCH SERVICES

COMPLETED 15 SUCCESSFUL PERMANENT superintendent searches and two interim superintendent searches.

COMPLETED 1 PERMANENT agency administrator search.

Aided numerous other districts through presentations and advice.



HIGHLIGHTS OF 2022-23 SERVICES

By making so many programs and services available to you and your district, the WASB is an investment in your district's ability to meet your student achievement goals. Visit us online at [WASB.org](https://www.wasb.org) or contact the association toll-free at (877) 705-4422. The WASB is here to serve you.

ADVOCACY & GOVERNMENT RELATIONS

Hosted nearly
**220 school board members at
WASB DAY AT THE CAPITOL
ADVOCACY EVENT**

and scheduled more than **110 meetings**
with legislators and their staff
(out of 132 legislative offices).

Provided weekly budget-focused
CAPITOL CHAT WEBINARS
at noon on Fridays from the
introduction of the state budget bill
until passage of the budget bill.



Held monthly WASB
**LEGAL AND LEGISLATIVE
VIDEO UPDATE WEBINARS.**

Provided five in-person evening
**LEGISLATIVE ADVOCACY
TRAINING WORKSHOPS.**

Updated the
WASB ADVOCACY TOOLKIT,
a best practices guidebook
with practical advice.

SOCIAL MEDIA/MEMBER OUTREACH



AVERAGED
5,000 UNIQUE USERS
on the WASB website — [WASB.org](https://www.wasb.org) — each month.

FOLLOWED BY MORE THAN
3,600 TWITTER USERS
WASB tweets are seen, on average,
more than **375 times per day.**
FOLLOWED BY MORE THAN
1,500 ON FACEBOOK.

RECOGNIZED
131 BUSINESSES
throughout Wisconsin on the
WASB Business Honor Roll.

Continued releasing
monthly episodes of the
WASB CONNECTION PODCAST.

MEETINGS & EVENTS

RECORDED
**84 VIDEOS, WEBINARS,
WORKSHOPS**
and other online events with
3,428 total plays.



ADDED TO THE
ONLINE LEARNING PLATFORM
with introductory and advanced modules that
provide a comprehensive source of online
governance and legal trainings for members.

STATE EDUCATION CONVENTION

WELCOMED ABOUT
**1,600 SCHOOL BOARD
MEMBERS AND SCHOOL STAFF**
with **three general sessions,**
more than **95 breakout sessions**
and **229 exhibitors.**



2023 SUMMER LEADERSHIP INSTITUTE

Safe Schools, Healthy Students

Our summer conference will feature speakers on preventing student injury, student mental health, school safety and much more. Join your colleagues from around the state this **July 14-15 at the Hyatt Regency Green Bay.**

Register today at WASB.org.



Keeping Students Safe at School

The role of supervision and instruction in preventing injury and minimizing legal liability

by Ted Hayes, senior risk manager, M3 Insurance



Ted Hayes

Doing everything we can to keep children safe on school premises is a foundational commitment we make to families. In addition to the pain and trauma of injury, an injured student cannot learn and succeed in school.

There are also legal liabilities to consider.

When a student is injured on school premises or during a school-sponsored event, the student, their parents/guardians or both can initiate a lawsuit to recover medical costs incurred from treatment of the student's injuries. Additionally, the suit may include a request for payment for pain and suffering.

The suit will be made against the school district; however, the

instructor responsible for the care of the student at the time of injury may be named in the lawsuit as well. Attorneys representing the injured student/parents hope that the school district or instructor has allowed the injury to occur, or the instructor has failed to do something that may have prevented the injury. In other words, acts of commission or acts of omission.

■ Supervision concerns

An important area of concern when dealing with liability is proving proper supervision. Supervision is the first, and generally the most common, area recovery is sought. An attempt may be made to show that the school district or the instructor failed to supervise adequately. This may entail determining if there were not enough supervisors present or the supervisor(s) were not

providing an appropriate level of supervision.

The following concerns should be addressed when developing school district supervision guidelines:

- **Number of students to be supervised.** There is no magic number as to how many students one instructor may adequately supervise. It goes without saying that when the number of students increases, so should the number of supervisors.
- **Size of the area to be supervised.** Are your instructors supervising a small classroom or a large outdoor play area? A larger area where students are present may require more supervision.
- **Age of the students.** Students at certain ages may require additional supervision.
- **Nature of the students.** Students



with special needs may require additional assistance or supervision.

- **Nature of the activity.** Are the students quietly working at their desks? Are they using power tools? Potentially hazardous activities such as chemistry labs and technology education will require focused supervision.
- **Instructors should be positioned so they can see** the entire area and avoid turning their back to the majority of the students. A teacher should try to position themselves so they can always see most of the students.
- **Do not leave students in a hazardous area** (technology class) unsupervised for any amount of time. If the teacher must leave the room, potentially dangerous activities should be shut down until the teacher re-enters.
- **Keep supervision mobile and moving around the supervised area.** For example, playground supervisors should not congregate in one area.

Ensure your supervision is mobile and moving to observe the majority of students at all times.

■ The importance of proper instruction

The next important area of teacher liability deals with the facilitation of proper instructions, warnings and equipment inspections. In many liability cases, recovery will attempt to show that the school district or the instructor failed to properly instruct or warn students of a hazard or danger. In cases where injury is a result of equipment failure, recovery may also attempt to show that the

failure occurred because the school district/instructor failed to properly inspect or maintain the equipment to ensure that it was in proper working condition.

The following should be remembered in when implementing proper practices for instructions, warnings and equipment inspections:

- **Have complete instructions been given?** It doesn't matter if it's for an activity in gym class or on how to use a table saw — proper instructions must be given to all students involved.
- **What books, manuals and instructional papers have been used to serve as the basis for these instructions?** If it involves using a piece of equipment or machinery, always try to utilize the instructional materials provided by the equipment manufacturer.
- **Were safety tests given with a mandatory 100% grade?** Only when students answer all questions correctly can they be allowed to use certain types of equipment or machinery.



Potentially hazardous activities such as chemistry labs and technology education will **require focused supervision.**



At a minimum, coaches must provide proper supervision, training and instruction.

They must warn players of all known or potential dangers of the sport with reasonable care.

- **Are written rules posted on and around the equipment or machinery?** Most commonly seen in science, chemistry and technology education classes, safety rules should be posted and reviewed with students.
- **Have all recommended safety measures been taken?** Ensure students are following proper safety protocols, listening to teacher instructions and wearing proper personal protective equipment if warranted.
- **Never force a student to do something they are scared of or do not want to do.** Many injuries have

occurred when students are forced to perform an activity, often in physical education classes.

Proper supervision and instruction are critical in all school activities. School district should constantly review their procedures throughout the year.

■ Coaches' liability

It has been established in high school athletics that the school district and the district's coaches generally are not responsible for ensuring the health and safety of the student-athletes.

Additionally, school districts and coaches have not been held strictly liable for the injuries sustained by

student-athletes in the course of participating in athletic practices or events. The voluntary nature of athletic participation usually allows the district and coaches to avoid liability from injuries that are considered part of a normal practice or athletic event.

However, it's important that the school district and coaches understand they have a duty to their student-athletes and must do everything practical to minimize or eliminate the risk of injury.

The duty owed to the student-athlete includes:

- Ensuring that adequate instruction is provided.



Learn More at

SUMMER LEADERSHIP INSTITUTE

Join **Ted Hayes** of M3 Insurance at the WASB Summer Leadership Institute this July in Green Bay for his session, “Preventing Student Injury: What School Board Members Should Know About Liability.”



- Supplying proper personal protective equipment.
- Ensuring a reasonable selection/matching of participants.
- Providing proper supervision of the practice or event.
- Following proper post-injury controls to guard against aggravation of injuries.

Coaches may breach their duty to the student-athlete by intentionally injuring the athlete or engaging in conduct that is totally outside the ordinary realm of activity involved in coaching/teaching the sport. A few years ago, I observed a basketball coach who concluded the daily practice by rolling a basketball across the center of the court. Selected players would begin at opposite ends of the court and, when the whistle blew, race to midcourt and dive headfirst for the ball. The “loser” of the activity was required

to run wind sprints. It’s easy to see that having two student-athletes run full speed and dive headfirst at each other is a serious injury exposure. Activities such as this should never be allowed.

At a minimum, coaches must provide proper supervision, training and instruction. They must warn players of all known or potential dangers of the sport with reasonable care. The more dangerous the sport, the greater the responsibility to provide supervision, training and instruction.

Lastly, coaches must ensure that proper personal protective and safety equipment is provided.

Coaches must also ensure that proper instruction is provided regarding the use of the equipment.

Doing what we can

Teachers and coaches may never be totally free of all potential liability, but they can protect themselves by always using reasonable care and ensuring that all students or athletic participants under their supervision are prepared (instruction and training) and protected (personal protective equipment and instruction) before an activity begins. ■

Ted Hayes is a senior risk manager at M3 Insurance.

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WHY SCHOOL COUNSELORS MATTER

The power of proactive and preventive
emotional well-being skill development

by Stacy Eslick, executive director, Wisconsin School Counselor Association



Stacy Eslick

When talking with groups about what school counselors do, I often make an analogy to the medical field.

Counselors are

often like a family physician or primary care doctor with a passion for public health.

Serving all students in a school community, counselors cross a wide spectrum of student needs while working to enhance kids' well-being — academically, professionally, socially and emotionally.

Similarly, doctors have patients who display varying levels of healthy behavior outside the clinic. Some patients undergo annual checkups and follow all the prevention protocols and recommendations for healthy lifestyles. Others are less diligent, for a variety of reasons.

There are various levels of care. Health systems are making pointed efforts to engage patients in preventive care. Primary care doctors identify and refer patients to specialists for advanced care. Finally, there's the emergency room, which manages true emergencies but is not a cost-effective or efficient way of delivering primary care.

Some students have access outside of school to proactive and preventive services — or even specialist services — that help them transition into adulthood. However, many students do not have this access or have challenges in building these skills. This is where school counselors need to put their public health thinking hats on.

School counselors help those students develop by:

1. Analyzing data and trends over time. Schools are rich in student data. If they are collecting it, they should be using the information to better support students.
2. Putting the data into action. After the data review, school counselors use this information in coordination with the school counseling student standards to determine what proactive and preventive school counseling services and programs are needed. They collaborate with their school administrator to incorporate this into the larger school support systems.
3. Analyzing the results. Counselors collect formative (what students think) and outcome (attendance, discipline, achievement) data to reflect and revise interventions and programs.

Many schools are currently facing rising rates of student mental health concerns. The latest statewide Wisconsin Youth Risk Behavior Survey found that more than 50% of stu-

dents are reporting anxiety.

There are not enough school-employed mental health staff (school counselors, school social workers, school psychologists) or community mental health providers to meet these needs on an individual basis. When using the Multitiered System of Support model and the DPI Mental Health Referral Pathways as a guide for creating services and supports for students, it becomes clear that managing and coping with anxiety should be addressed at the universal level (tier 1).

If counselors are working individually with 50% of our students, there is no way to ensure every student has access to the skills needed to meet school counseling standards.

This would be like sending 50% of a clinic's patients to the emergency room, which would overwhelm the system. Rather, the medical system is most efficient when it utilizes primary care to deliver education and preventive skills. ■

Stacy Eslick is executive director of the Wisconsin School Counselor Association.

Learn More at

SUMMER LEADERSHIP INSTITUTE

Join Stacy Eslick, Wisconsin School Counselor Association executive director, and **Cindy Bourget**, 2023 Wisconsin School Counselor of the Year, at the WASB Summer Leadership Institute this July in Green Bay for their session on "The Power of Proactive and Preventive Emotional Well-Being Skill Development."



Cindy Bourget



The latest statewide Wisconsin Youth Risk Behavior Survey found that **more than 50% of students are reporting anxiety.**

Putting the School Safety Puzzle Together

Climate, training, funding, planning and engagement of family and community are pieces of a comprehensive school safety framework

by Scott Johnson, La Crosse School District, Tom Wohlleber, Wisconsin School Safety Coordinators Association and Steven Eichman, West Allis-West Milwaukee School District



Scott Johnson



Tom Wohlleber



Steven Eichman

School safety cannot happen in isolation; it is the work of the entire school community. This effort requires leadership and coordination by the school

board and school administration with involvement and participation from all sectors of the school community.

School safety is a multi-faceted issue with no one solution for improving it in each of our communities. While there is not a universal safety plan, schools can emphasize common actions to address the foundational elements of school safety. An effective, balanced approach incorporates these foundational elements:

■ Building a positive school climate, culture

A school's culture should value, promote and develop healthy, positive relationships with and between students, staff and parents. Building positive relationships that foster a safe supportive learning environment and student connection is the responsibility of all who touch a school.

Second only to family, school is the most important stabilizing force in the lives of young people.

The school environment provides a natural setting to foster positive relationships among students, adults

and peers. Building positive relationships within the school environment involves certified staff, classified staff, students, community and family members. A strong school safety culture begins with students and staff enjoying a strong sense of belonging in their school and "ownership" of that community.

- Establish a culture of inclusion and respect that welcomes all students. Reward students when they show thoughtfulness and respect for peers, adults and the school.
- Make sure students interact safely.
- Enlist the help of all school staff.
- Set a tone of respect in the classroom.

■ Getting community, family engaged

Stakeholder participation in the school safety planning process is crucial to building support and buy-in. Key stakeholders should include, at a minimum, local emergency responders, students, school & district staff, parents, local emergency management, public health, hospital representatives and mental health providers.

Families should be involved in a school safety effort, including through communication, relationship-building and embracing cultural connections.

A safe learning environment is essential for all students. Without it, they are unable to focus on learning the skills needed for a successful education and future.

School violence affects every student. These concerns have grown exponentially over the last several years as incidents of bullying and violence, both within and outside the school system, have greatly increased.

Schools are now facing a new set of challenges, as we work to protect our students, staff and visitors from the devastating, long-term impact of school shootings and other violence.

School safety plays a crucial role in youth's development and academic success. Students who feel safe at school tend to have better emotional health and are less likely to engage in risky behaviors. That sense of safety contributes to an overall feeling of connection. School connectedness is measured as feeling happy, safe, close to people, a part of school and believing teachers treat students fairly.

Consider funding, training

More and more, lawmakers are leading the charge for funding changes. Across the nation, multiple safety bills are being passed and many have associated grant funding. This results in being able to fund critical school safety needs without having to compete with other important academic or operational priorities.

School personnel, including school-based law enforcement, should receive training on a variety of issues to help them prevent, prepare for and respond to violence and student behavioral issues that can compromise both actual and perceived levels of safety among students and staff. Such training may also help provide support to students on these issues. Though the trainings vary, they may be focused on preventing an issue before it becomes an imminent threat or responding to a threat or crisis when it arises.

School safety requires a framework composed of technology, training, education, resources and community engagement to meet the needs of the whole child. Student training regarding school safety should be conducted using a “do no harm” approach. Schools should make every effort to avoid traumatizing students when conducting safety drills or exercises.

Make a comprehensive plan

Comprehensive safety plans at the district and school levels serve as the primary guide or roadmap for most aspects of school safety. The plans should incorporate the five mission areas of Presidential Policy Directive:

- **Prevention:** The capabilities necessary to avoid, deter, or stop an imminent crime or threatened or actual mass casualty incident. Prevention is the action schools take to prevent a threatened or actual incident from occurring.
- **Protection:** The capabilities to secure schools against acts of violence and manmade or natural disasters. Protection focuses on ongoing actions that

protect students, teachers, staff, visitors, networks and property from a threat or hazard.

- **Mitigation:** The capabilities necessary to eliminate or reduce the loss of life and property damage by lessening the impact of an event or emergency. Mitigation also means reducing the likelihood that threats and hazards will happen.
- **Response:** The capabilities necessary to stabilize an emergency once it has already happened or is certain to happen in an unpreventable way; establish a safe and secure environment; save lives and property; and facilitate the transition to recovery.
- **Recovery:** The capabilities necessary to assist schools affected by an event or emergency in restoring operations and the learning environment.

As districts and schools plan for and execute response and recovery activities through their safety plans, they should use the concepts and principles outlined in the National Incident Management System. Incident Command System, which provides a standardized approach for incident management, is a critical element.

Some other important components, procedures or protocols that should be included or addressed in safety plans include:

- Behavioral Threat Assessment
- Active Shooter/Assailant

- Emergency/Crisis Communications
- Reunification
- Continuity of Operations

Safety: Physical and psychological

Appropriate facility improvements, equipment, systems and technology that address safety/security needs or issues can be identified through a comprehensive safety & security risk assessment process.

Meanwhile, psychological, social and emotional safety focuses on student and staff emotional and behavioral well-being. The process through which children and adults acquire the knowledge, attitudes and skills they need to recognize and manage their emotions, feel and show empathy toward others, establish positive relationships and make responsible decisions.

While the time and resources required to provide safe schools for our students and staff can be significant, this investment far outweighs the risk of the alternative. Rallying around the effort to improve school safety is an excellent opportunity to bring the communities we live in together.

Scott Johnson is the buildings and grounds manager/safety coordinator for the La Crosse School District and 2023 WSSCA president.

Tom Wohlleber is the executive director of the Wisconsin School Safety Coordinators Association.

Steven Eichman is the facilities manager for the West Allis-West Milwaukee School District and a WSSCA director.

Learn More at

SUMMER LEADERSHIP INSTITUTE

Join **Scott Johnson**, president of the Wisconsin School Safety Coordinators Association, at the WASB Summer Leadership Institute this July in Green Bay for his session on “**Understanding Your District’s School Safety Plan: What Should I Know as a Board Member.**”





PREVENTING School Violence

Confidential tipline and threat assessment can help prevent tragedies in schools



by Trish Kilpin, Wisconsin Department of Justice Office of School Safety



Trish Kilpin

In the aftermath of recent school shootings across the U.S., school leaders may feel helpless and worried about preventing violence in their schools. We are not

helpless. School violence is preventable.

Well-documented effective intervention strategies are available to guide violence prevention work. To prevent violence and promote safety, school leaders must commit to implementing and maintaining research-based model practices.

Threat reporting tiplines, such as Speak Up, Speak Out Wisconsin, and a behavioral threat assessment and management approach are two practices known to be effective.

Speak Up, Speak Out tipline

Providing students access to a tipline was recommended in the aftermath of the Columbine High School tragedy in Colorado. Prior to the 1999 shootings, students had information that was not shared with people in a position to help.

Since then, research confirms the effectiveness of tiplines in school violence prevention. When a threat

reporting system, like Speak Up, Speak Out Wisconsin, is in place at a school, students are more likely to report warning signs of concerning behavior. Furthermore, there is less overall violence in the school.

A foundational element of school safety is creating climates that discourage secrecy and promote seeking help. All youth must have access to trusted adults in their school. When information is shared with adults, they need to respond effectively and efficiently.

Sometimes adults may not be available to youth in their moment of need, or a student may struggle to



To prevent school violence, communities must reduce barriers to reporting concerns.

Speak Up, Speak Out provides that opportunity.

verbalize their concern to an adult. Speak Up, Speak Out Wisconsin is essential, providing immediate, accessible, 24 hour-a-day confidential adult support and intervention 365 days a year. The tipline harnesses the power of bystanders, addresses concerns early and provides opportunities for intervention.

Students are often aware when a peer is unsafe, struggling, engaging in concerning behaviors or planning to commit school violence. Incidents of targeted school violence are not impromptu, impulsive acts. Instead, the offender decides to resolve upset with violent means, and the individual undertakes a clear process of planning and preparation for violence, in which threats or behaviors can be identified and reported.

The Safe School Initiative, a collaborative report by the United States Secret Service's National Threat Assessment Center and U.S. Department of Education, examined 37 previous acts of school violence. Findings revealed that 93% of perpetrators of school violence exhibited behaviors that concerned others.

If concerns had been reported, these attacks may have been prevented. In 81% of these previous acts of targeted school violence, at least one person had knowledge of the attacker's plan. More than one person had such knowledge in 59% of the incidents. Of those with prior knowledge, 93% were peers of the perpetrator. Despite students having advanced knowledge that a peer was planning a school

attack, the attacks still happened.

To prevent school violence, communities must reduce barriers to reporting concerns. Speak Up, Speak Out provides that opportunity.

First launched in September 2020, this program receives tips about a wide variety of concerns, including student bullying, harassment, suicide threats, child abuse, drug use, self-harm and planned school attacks. The highly trained analysts have responded to more than 6,500 tips of concern about school-aged youth. Every tip is delivered to the corresponding school.

When a lifesaving or criminal concern is reported, it is also delivered to local law enforcement.

Schools using Speak Up, Speak Out must promote it regularly and encourage youth to seek help. If you are interested in launching the program at your school, contact schoolsafety@doj.state.wi.us and you will be provided with materials for roll out. This program is free to all schools in Wisconsin. Schools launching Speak Up, Speak Out have the opportunity for reimbursement of up to \$500 per school building of promotional items.

OFFICE OF SCHOOL SAFETY ONLINE RESOURCES

In addition to these strategies, the Office of School Safety stands ready to assist in all comprehensive school safety work in Wisconsin, including:

- School safety guidance:
speakup.widoj.gov/general-school-safety-guidance
- Support for annual submissions of school safety documents required by Wis. Stat. § 118.07.
- Support and best practice recommendations for school safety drills and emergency operations plans.
- School safety grant opportunities:
doj.state.wi.us/office-school-safety/school-safety-grants
- Trainings:
doj.state.wi.us/office-school-safety/training-opportunities
- Critical incident response interventions to promote recovery:
speakup.widoj.gov/critical-incident-response

To receive information on training opportunities, grant announcements and school safety alerts, subscribe to the OSS newsletter at public.govdelivery.com/accounts/WIDOJ/signup/22829.

All OSS services can be accessed through **Speak Up, Speak Out Wisconsin**.



In previous acts of school violence, students often demonstrated warning behaviors of concern prior to engaging in an attack.

Continued from page 15

■ Assessing threats

The use of Behavioral Threat Assessment and Management, sometimes referred to simply as “threat assessment,” is based on the U.S. Secret Service’s practices while protecting public figures.

In some states, maintaining trained threat assessment teams and regularly employing threat assessment practices is required by law. In Wisconsin, threat assessments are promoted as a model practice, used to assess if a student poses a threat at school. The primary goal of a threat assessment is violence prevention.

When a student makes a threat to school safety or demonstrates behaviors of concern, the threat assessment process is used to determine next steps. When concerned about imminent danger, school staff must first follow their emergency operations plans and comply with the Wis. Stat. §175.32(2) requirements of mandatory reporting threats at schools. Their next step is to conduct a threat assessment.

Youth may make statements, post images or engage in concerning behaviors related to school violence. When adults are made aware of a concern, threat assessment helps determine if a student poses a threat to their school community. In previous acts of school violence, students often demonstrated warning behaviors of concern prior to

engaging in an attack.

Information is gathered with a carefully constructed threat assessment process and threat assessment protocols, such as the Wisconsin School Threat Assessment and Management Protocol. Then a multidisciplinary team of trained professionals convenes to determine the level of concern posed by a student.

The information is used to craft the student’s intervention plan. The student’s compliance with the plan is continuously monitored. The threat assessment process provides intervention opportunities beyond “zero tolerance” and exclusionary discipline while creating safe learning environments.

More information on creating comprehensive school violence prevention plans, including information on establishing and employing multidisciplinary threat assessment teams, can be found in the “Enhancing School Safety Using a Threat Assessment Model” resource from the National Threat Assessment Center.

Schools have access to free training on identifying and preventing targeted violence. “Foundations of Targeted Violence,” a 70-minute self-paced eLearning module, is developed by the Wisconsin Department of Justice Office of School Safety in partnership with the Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction and Homeland Security’s National Threat

Evaluation and Reporting Office.

Participants learn the warning signs and risk factors associated with targeted violence, and where they can report concerns. School staff receive confirmation of completion once they have taken the course. Another online training, “Essential Elements of School Threat Assessment,” focuses on threat assessment in a school.

Free threat assessment training opportunities are available to all school communities. The Office of School Safety’s training is designed to provide participants with a foundational understanding of behavior threat assessment and management in schools.

This training includes the following topics:

- Threat assessment fits in the framework of comprehensive school safety
- Research and findings related to threat assessment
- Themes and core concepts of threat assessment
- Key aspects for creating school-based threat assessment teams and process
- Determining the appropriate response to concerning behavior
- Potential strategies for threat management

Multidisciplinary teams are encouraged to attend the training, which typically includes school administrators, school safety coordinators, school resource officers, pupil service mental health staff, special education staff, teachers and school nurses. Receive threat assessment case consultation by contacting schoolsafety@doj.state.wi.us.

The cost of school violence is high. Exposure to trauma and adversity in childhood raises the risk of numerous emotional, physical and cognitive long-term health problems. Society must prioritize preventing school violence and the corresponding harmful effects traumatic events have on children. ■

Trish Kilpin, MSSW, is director of the Wisconsin Department of Justice Office of School Safety.

Trust in Times of Crisis

How school leaders can build strong relationships through communication

by Tracy Habisch-Ahlin, Hudson School District, and Sarah O'Donnell, Stevens Point Area Public School District

Trust is a critical currency for school districts. When families, staff and community members trust a school district, they are more likely to be engaged in the educational process, support district initiatives and feel confident in the district's ability to make good decisions.

How your school district communicates with stakeholders before, during and after a crisis can significantly build or bankrupt your community trust account. Often, the crisis incidents within a school district are not the fault of the district, but they are the district's problem.

A school district's capacity to respond to a crisis almost always

reflects the safety, crisis preparedness and communication resources in place before the crisis. As school leaders, it is crucial to have a plan in place for crisis communication. We'll outline the steps to take before, during and after a crisis to maintain trust and effectively communicate with your school community.

■ Before the crisis

There is a public relations adage, "Make friends before you really need them." School communications and community relations are all about building connections long before a crisis occurs.

Your school district does amazing

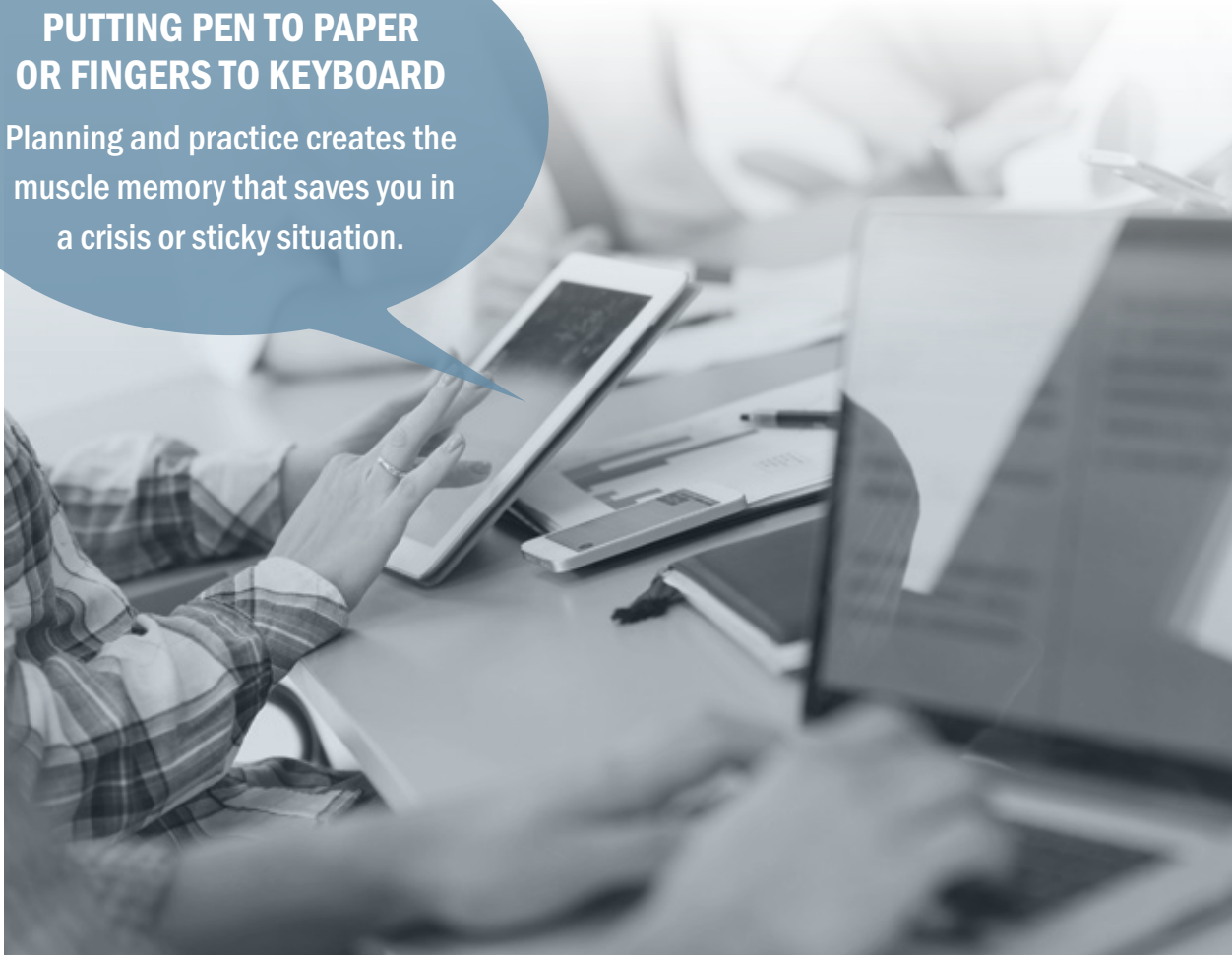
work each day. Sharing your stories is a powerful way to build positive relationships with families, business leaders and the community. Stories connect people and these connections benefit your students and school community. Each story adds to the trust account you are going to rely on in crisis.

Failing to plan is planning to fail. This is true in crisis communication, as it's difficult to craft messages in the middle of a crisis.

Have a communication plan in place that includes a library of draft responses to potential crisis situations. The rate at which information is spread, often inaccurately, across

PUTTING PEN TO PAPER OR FINGERS TO KEYBOARD

Planning and practice creates the muscle memory that saves you in a crisis or sticky situation.



social media and other online platforms requires school districts to be ready to react quickly and accurately. Having some basic thoughts written in advance will go a long way in creating statements that maintain perspective and inspire trust.

Crisis preparedness training should also include communication responsibilities, such as who can serve as the spokesperson to the media or who is authorized to approve messages to staff and families. If your school doesn't have dedicated communications staff, consider training staff who will be asked to serve on a communications response team during a crisis event. Emphasize the role they play in maintaining and building trust.

■ During the crisis

While some incidents are easy to recognize as a crisis, others may not be so obvious.

It's essential school leaders are aware of any event or situation that could potentially harm or disrupt the district, school or stakeholders. For instance, natural disasters that damage facilities and safety incidents such as bomb threats or acts of violence are obvious examples of a crisis. However, a district's legal issues, financial issues or reputational crises may not be as apparent. It's crucial to be vigilant and identify any potential crisis situations early on.


While different types of crises may require nuanced responses, there are a set of axioms related to crisis communication:

- 1. Be the one to break your bad news.** Delaying your response can sow seeds of doubt and likely put the school district on the defensive.
- 2. Be honest.** "Here is what we know. Here is what we don't know or can't share at this time."
- 3. Be vulnerable.** Communicate with compassion and empathy.
- 4. Be forthcoming.** "This is when we will communicate additional information. This is what we will do in the future so this doesn't happen again."
- 5. Be consistent.** Your board and your school district have one message. Get as many facts as possible so you can respond in a timely manner and stay on message.



**FEED THEM
OR THEY WILL HUNT.**

It's OK to not have all the answers about an incident. It's OK to say, "I don't know the answer to that at this time."



Love means never having to say you're sorry. Not so much in public relations. Even in situations that are not the fault of the school district, saying you're sorry for the inconvenience or anxiety the crisis has caused is good public relations.

If the school district is at fault, consult with your legal counsel if needed and develop a message that is honest about what you can share at this time. Admit mistakes when you can, and let people know how you will fix things moving forward.

Feed them or they will hunt. It's OK to not have all the answers about an incident. It's OK to say, "I don't know the answer to that at this time."

However, not having any answers will cause people to look for answers on their own. When people go looking for answers on their own, it is likely they will find inaccurate information. Unfortunately, this results in the spread of false information and, in some cases, an illusory truth effect takes hold.

If the false information is easier to understand than the school district's message, people have a tendency to believe the false message. A repeated illusory truth becomes very hard to change in people's minds.

Stand for something, but make sure it is the high ground. It takes a lot of skill and willpower to be a listener. Social media comments test this skill. It's a good idea to stop and

walk away from social media before engaging in a hot topic thread. It's easy to get pulled into the mud, but engaging in a word battle with internet trolls is a no-win situation.

School board members can help their school districts by letting administration know when they are seeing a story that is getting traction or if they are seeing misinformation. In turn, the administration can share accurate information.

■ After a crisis

Following a crisis, it's important for school leaders to continue communicating with stakeholders to ensure they have the information they need and to address any remaining concerns. This follow-up communication can take many forms, such as providing updates on recovery efforts, offering counseling services to affected students and staff, or answering questions from concerned parents or community members.

By staying in touch with stakeholders, school leaders can demonstrate their ongoing commitment to transparency and accountability, and help maintain or rebuild trust and confidence in the school district.

It's also important for school districts to conduct a post-crisis debrief to determine what went well and what could have been done better. This should be an honest and objective assessment of the district's crisis response efforts, including its

communication strategies. School leaders should ask themselves questions such as:

- Did we provide timely and accurate information to stakeholders?
- Were our messages consistent and clear?
- Did we communicate with empathy and compassion?
- Were we prepared for the crisis? Or did we have to improvise our response?
- Did we have the necessary resources and support in place to effectively communicate during the crisis?

By taking these steps, districts ensure they are better prepared to handle future crises and maintain stakeholder trust and confidence.

We live in a time when everything is communication. Our employees, students, families and communities expect immediate information. It is impossible to predict the next crisis. However, we can control the expectations, tools and resources our schools have to lead through a crisis. ■

Tracy Habisch-Ahlin is director of community relations and communications for the Hudson School District and past president of the Wisconsin School Public Relations Association.

Sarah O'Donnell is director of communications at the Stevens Point Area Public School District and the vice president of the Wisconsin School Public Relations Association.

AN ANTI-BULLYING BLUEPRINT

The DPI's new toolkit offers a template for prevention and response

by Libby Strunz, Department of Public Instruction and
Katharine Reid, Wisconsin Safe & Healthy Schools



Libby Strunz



Katharine Reid

Bullying is unacceptable, yet it's widespread in schools across Wisconsin and the nation.

A comprehensive approach to bullying can help schools reduce bullying and promote safe, positive and inclusive school environments.

In the 2021 Wisconsin Youth Risk Behavior Survey, 18% of Wisconsin high school students reported being bullied on school property in the previous year. More than 16% of Wisconsin high school students reported being cyberbullied through means such as texting, social media or video games.

LGBTQ+ youth are especially vulnerable to bullying victimization, experiencing bullying at rates more than double that of their heterosexual peers. While 14.2% of heterosexual youth report being bullied at school, 32.8% of gay, lesbian and bisexual youth report being bullied.

In addition, female students experience bullying at higher rates than

their male peers, and Asian students are at greater risk of cyberbullying when compared to other races/ethnicities.¹ To create safe school climates, schools must address bullying for all students while giving specific consideration to groups at increased risk for bullying victimization.

A new resource from the Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction, in partnership with Chad Rose of the University of Missouri's Bully Prevention Lab, gives districts additional tools to address bullying in their schools.

■ New tools for prevention, response

Given the profound negative outcomes associated with bullying, schools, in collaboration with students, families and community stakeholders, must establish comprehensive bullying programs that work to prevent bullying and respond appropriately when it occurs.

The Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction's Bullying Prevention Toolkit provides school districts with a framework and resources for bullying prevention and response. While not mandatory, the toolkit serves as a resource for schools who wish to strengthen their bullying prevention and response practices.

The toolkit recommends districts

establish a bullying prevention task force consisting of staff members with specialties in different areas. It may include administrators, pupil services professionals, teachers, behavior specialists and other educators. This task force leads bullying prevention efforts, reviews bullying reports, conducts bullying investigations (including data collection and interviews), communicates with caregivers and implements interventions.

It is crucial that this task force establishes a bullying prevention action plan to guide their work. This involves gathering data through a climate assessment of educators, students and families to better understand what types of bullying are occurring, where bullying occurs, how students report bullying or seek help, the perception of parents and other key information.²

■ 'Universal' means all kids

The foundation of a comprehensive bullying program is universal supports — education and support that all students receive.

The toolkit emphasizes that universal supports can be integrated into systems such as social-emotional learning and positive behavioral interventions and supports. Students who are skilled in

Reporting protocols are important for managing school bullying incidents and **ensuring the safety of students.**

social-emotional competencies — such as self-management and awareness, social awareness, relationship skills and responsible decision-making — are less likely to bully others or be bullied.

It is also essential that all students, families and educators receive ongoing training regarding:

- The school’s anti-bullying policy.
- The definition of bullying.
- Types of bullying.
- The differences between bullying and other types of conflict.
- How to respond to and report bullying that they experience or witness as part of prevention efforts.

In addition to these universal supports, a comprehensive program includes interventions for students who need additional support. This may include more targeted social skills instruction, functional behavior assessments and behavior intervention plans.³

How to respond, report and investigate

Another key aspect of a comprehensive bullying program is establishing protocols for students and families to report bullying, as well as protocols that the bullying prevention task force follows when investigating and responding to bullying reports.

Reporting protocols are important for managing school bullying incidents and ensuring the safety of students. All staff members, caregivers and students in the school system should be trained in the reporting process. Reporting can be made accessible to all involved by allowing reporters to share their concerns in a variety of ways, such as verbally, electronically or through a paper form, with an option for reporting anonymously.

Once a bullying report has been submitted, the bullying prevention task force should engage in the investigation and decision-making processes, which involve reviewing records, interviewing students and

staff, communicating with caregivers, determining if bullying occurred and developing an intervention and follow-up plan.

The toolkit provides detailed procedures, fillable forms, template letters and other resources to help schools establish and carry out these processes in a consistent and equitable manner.⁴

The role of families

Because families have a key role in this work, the toolkit also provides several resources for family engagement and communication, including templates for a school-family partnership letter, a bullying investigation notification, bullying investigation decision letters, and guidance for caregivers when talking to their children about bullying.

As part of prevention efforts, schools should educate caregivers about the school’s anti-bullying policy and how to respond to and report bullying that their child is experiencing. In addition, it’s clear districts have clear communication with caregivers during the course of a bullying investigation.⁵

Visit the Wisconsin DPI’s webpage to access the Bullying Prevention Toolkit, fillable forms, letters and other tools and resources. Find it at dpi.wi.gov/sspw/safe-schools/bullying-prevention. ■

Libby Strunz, MS, is a school mental health consultant with the Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction.

Katharine Reid, MS, NBCT, is statewide project coordinator of Wisconsin Safe & Healthy Schools.

1. <https://dpi.wi.gov/sspw/yrbs>
2. Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction (2023). *Bullying prevention toolkit*.
3. Rose, C. (2022). Awareness and prevention of school-based bullying online training program [Online modules]. University of Missouri Bully Prevention Lab. <https://dpi.wi.gov/sspw/safe-schools/bullying-prevention>
4. Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction (2023). *Bullying prevention toolkit*.
5. Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction (2023). *Bullying prevention toolkit*.

WHAT IS BULLYING?

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention defines bullying as “any unwanted aggressive behavior(s) by another youth or group of youths, who are not siblings or current dating partners, that involves an observed or perceived power imbalance and is repeated multiple times or is highly likely to be repeated.”

Three consistent components of bullying are:

- An imbalance of physical or emotional power,
- repeated across time or student who was bullied, and
- intent to cause physical or emotional harm.

Bullying can be physical (e.g., hitting, kicking), verbal (e.g., name-calling, threatening) or social/relational (e.g., purposeful exclusion, spreading rumors). It can occur in person or electronically, while damage to property and theft can also be forms of bullying.

Children who are bullied are more likely to experience academic struggles and negative mental health outcomes, including lower self-esteem, anxiety and depression, when compared with peers who have not experienced bullying victimization. These effects can extend into adulthood.

Furthermore, children who bully others are more likely to abuse drugs and alcohol, drop out of school, and engage in physical violence and early sexual activity as adolescents. As adults, they are more likely to continue to abuse drugs and alcohol, have criminal convictions and be abusive toward their children and intimate partners.

TYPES OF BULLYING

- Verbal
- Physical
- Cyber
- Property Damage
- Relational



THE ESSENTIAL ELEMENTS of Governance



Patti Vickman



Cheryl Stinski

The effectiveness of a school board is crucial to the success of the school district.

With the growing complexity of education and increasing demands placed on schools, it is essential to have competent, ethical and accountable school boards that provide strong leadership and make informed decisions that contribute to the success of schools.

A 2013 study by UW–Milwaukee researcher Michael Ford, “The Impact of School Board Governance on Academic Achievement in Diverse

States,” concluded that “the way in which school boards govern does affect district level performance.”

Ford studied survey data from six states, including Wisconsin, and found that “Specifically, school boards that engage in strategic planning, view their superintendent as a collaborator, and mitigate conflict, perform better on academic outcome indicators.”

Effective school board governance is crucial to ensuring that schools are operating efficiently, effectively and in the best interest of students, staff and the community. Michael Fullan and Davis Campbell, in “The Governance Core,” describe a governance system as “the school board and superintendent working together as a cohesive, unified team with a common vision, driven by a shared moral imperative” to educate all children.

The quality of school board

governance can drive the quality of education and the overall well-being of the community, making it a crucial component of the education system. To help school boards better accomplish this responsibility, the Wisconsin Association of School Boards updated its governance framework to clarify the essential elements of the governance process.

In designing this framework, the WASB relied upon several professional research studies and resources that address quality school board governance. The framework reflects the needs of Wisconsin schools and aligns with feedback received from a recent WASB school board membership survey.

The survey asked school board members and administrators to rank five governance topics from most to least important. Board governance and operations was deemed the most



How the WASB's new framework helps school boards connect their work with the success of students

important topic by a two-to-one margin; the next-highest response was board and superintendent relationships.

The WASB Essential Elements of Governance framework aims to provide a clear and comprehensive guide for effective school board governance.

The five essential elements of governance in the WASB framework are:

1: Governing for high levels of learning for all children: Effective governance supports school strategies to improve learning for all students and models a cultural belief that the district can make a positive difference will be made for all children.

This central element involves developing policies, allocating resources and supporting district

leadership and staff to ensure that every student has access to high-quality education and opportunities for success, regardless of their race, ethnicity, socioeconomic status or other factors. Governing for high levels of learning for all children requires a commitment to ongoing learning and improvement, and a willingness by the board and superintendent leadership team to address the causes of any learning gaps.

2: Quality leadership: The second element focuses on advocacy, ethical governance, board policy, board and superintendent roles and responsibilities, collective board/superintendent relationships and board operations for effective governance culture.

School boards exhibiting quality leadership must understand their roles and responsibili-

ties while establishing clear expectations for district leadership and staff. The board is responsible for the ends and the superintendent is responsible for the means. Quality leadership includes designing board operations to maximize efficiency and efficacy, along with setting policies and goals that align with the vision and mission of the school district. Board members model ethical behavior and are chief advocates for the district and its students.

3: Strategic focus on the future: The third element emphasizes planning the district's future and ensuring its strategic plan addresses the district's mission, vision and moral imperative to educate all children.

A strategic focus on the future requires a forward-thinking board that identifies opportunities, anti-



pates future challenges and allocates resources accordingly. Boards are more successful in their governance responsibilities when individual board members understand the difference between strategic focus as a board and day-to-day administration by the superintendent and staff.

A strategic plan should be stakeholder-driven and developed in collaboration with the district's leadership team. The plan includes specific, measurable and achievable goals along with objectives to reach those goals. It must be regularly reviewed and updated to ensure it remains relevant and aligned with the district's evolving needs. Effective strategic leadership also requires communication, collaboration and teamwork between the school board and the district's other stakeholders.

4: Accountability: The fourth element focuses on continuous improvement, academic account-

ability, fiscal accountability, leadership assessment and succession planning.

Accountability involves establishing clear performance expectations for district leadership and staff, and regularly monitoring and evaluating progress toward those expectations through data-based decision-making.

Fiscal and academic accountability are critical. Board members make sure that the district's budget is allocated in a way that supports student learning and achievement as outlined in the strategic plan while being responsible to the community's taxpayers.

Furthermore, succession planning ensures ongoing stability and growth related to the development of effective leadership within the district.

Accountability requires transparency in decision-making, open communication with stakeholders, and a commitment to continuous improvement in all aspects of the organization. This commitment also includes the board's ability to continually improve its own governance through board professional development and self-evaluation.

5: Communication and engagement: The fifth element is essential for building relationships, promoting transparency and fostering trust between the board, superintendent and other stakeholders.

Communication and engagement highlight the need to actively engage with parents, students, staff and community members to ensure that their voices are heard and their needs are addressed. Board members model effective two-way communication and promote the development of communication skills like active listening, empathy and

RESEARCH AND RESOURCES USED IN DEVELOPING THE FRAMEWORK

A Commitment to All Children: A Focus on Excellence and Equity; Center for Public Education Study; Ford and Ihrke Studies; Iowa Lighthouse Study; Marzano and Waters Study; The Governance Core

Effective communication and engagement supply the buy-in necessary to achieve the district's vision and the **resources and support necessary for student learning.**

cultural responsiveness.

Engagement requires strategies for asking for and responding to feedback and regularly sharing information about district policies, initiatives and progress toward goals. It involves communication and collaboration with external organizations and agencies, including local government, businesses and nonprofit organizations. Effective communication and engagement supply the buy-in necessary to achieve the district's vision and the resources and support necessary for student learning.

High-quality school board governance helps educational institutions

operate effectively, efficiently and in the best interest of students, staff and the community. The WASB Essential Elements of Governance framework provides a clear and comprehensive guide for effective school board governance that supports high levels of learning for all children, quality leadership, strategic focus on the future, accountability, communication and engagement. By adopting and implementing these essential elements, school boards can make a positive difference in student learning, create successful schools and promote the overall well-being of the community. ■

Cheryl Stinski is a governance consultant with the WASB.

Patti Vickman is a search and governance consultant at the WASB.

Learn more about **THE ESSENTIAL ELEMENTS OF GOVERNANCE**

Professional development in the various elements of the framework is available through a variety of WASB seminars, conference presentations and the

Summer Leadership Institute: Safe Schools and Healthy Students

in Green Bay on July 14-15.

Boards can also schedule personalized training by working directly with one of the WASB's governance consultants.

To schedule such a training, please contact Ben Niehaus, WASB director of member services, at bniehaus@wasb.org.

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2023 WASB SUMMER LEADERSHIP INSTITUTE

Safe Schools, Healthy Students



JULY 14 & 15 HYATT REGENCY | GREEN BAY

Join us for this two-day conference with a dual focus on school board governance and the wellness and safety of students. Our keynote speaker, Dr. Dipesh Navsaria from the UW–Madison School of Medicine and Public Health, will discuss children’s health, including the critical importance played by relationships during the first thousand days of life.

FRIDAY, JULY 14

Friday Welcome and Keynote: Relationships as Reason and Route: Understanding Brain Development and Relational Health

Dr. Dipesh Navsaria will discuss the critical importance of the first thousand days of life and the key role human relationships and interactions play during that time. Using practical examples and research, he will review the concepts of toxic stress and how early adversity leads to lifelong issues. The newer concept of relational health will be covered as a strengths-based concept. Broad policy and programmatic principles that may help address the issue will also be discussed.

Friday sessions: Focus on student safety, including physical and mental health.

- Youth Mental Health Post-Pandemic: A Focus on Anxiety and Depression
- Designing Safe and Welcoming Schools: A Panel Discussion
- Best Practices in Communicating in Times of Crisis
- Cultivating Your District’s Relationship With the School Resource Officer
- Preventing Student Injury: What School Board Members Should Know About Liability
- The Power of Proactive and Preventive Emotional Well-Being Skill Development
- Understanding Your District’s School Safety Plan: What Should I Know as a Board Member
- Cybersecurity and Citizenship: Keeping Kids Safe and Districts Secure in the Online Era
- A Preview of the WASB Essential Elements of Governance

Friday’s sessions will be led by Wisconsin experts at school districts and their partners.

FRIDAY, JULY 14 | SPECIAL DINNER PRESENTATION

Our Innovative Past Can Help Bridge Today’s Gaps

In this optional Friday dinner presentation, author Phil Hauck will discuss innovative strategies that transformed Wisconsin industries and created growth in the thousands of employees. He’ll also ask why innovation has appeared to have slowed today and what lessons can be learned from the past.

Phil is a former Wall Street Journal reporter who spent 30 years facilitating CEO groups.

SATURDAY, JULY 15

Saturday sessions: Focus on board governance, including the law, finance, onboarding and communication.

- Governing for Continuous Improvement
- Onboarding New School Board Members
- Fundamentals of School Finance
- Communication and Engagement for Excellence
- Governing for High Levels of Learning for All Children
- Public Record Laws and Public Comment Periods
- WASB Legislative Update

Saturday’s sessions will be led by WASB staff and consultants.



For full session descriptions, a complete agenda and registration agenda, visit the event website at WASB.org.



2023 BUSINESS HONOR ROLL

■ The WASB is now accepting nominations.

School boards can submit the names of up to five local businesses, including newspapers and other media, that have been helpful to their school district over the past year.

Nominated businesses will be posted on the WASB website, and districts will be provided a sample press release and personalized certificate to give their businesses.

Visit WASB.org to nominate a business by Friday, August 11, 2023.

2024 WISCONSIN STATE EDUCATION CONVENTION



January 17-19, 2024
WISCONSIN CENTER
MILWAUKEE

June Is Last Month to Submit 2024 State Education Convention Proposals

The **Joint State Education Convention**, to be held in Milwaukee, Jan. 17-19, 2024, presents your opportunity to highlight innovative programs and talented students.

If your district has results worth sharing, consider submitting a proposal. We are looking for a student video team, breakout sessions and School Fair proposals that feature innovative projects and initiatives.

Proposals are due Friday, June 23.

Visit the [WASB.org/convention](https://www.wasb.org/convention) page to learn more and submit a proposal.



WASB Connection Podcast

On the latest **WASB Connection Podcast**, we talked to Summer Leadership Institute Keynote Dr. Dipesh Navsaria about what the latest science says about childhood health. He explains how the trauma children experience in their first thousand days or so can echo throughout their life. Repeated exposure to toxic stress can change the brain, he says, in ways that manifest in the classroom.

.....
“The parts of the brain that are there for scarcity and safety become larger, because they keep having to be activated, and the parts of their brain that would be thinking about long term or their future or reasoning or learning or love... those get tamped down because, again, the most important thing is survival.”

— UW-Madison School of Medicine and Public Health Associate Professor of Pediatrics Dr. Dipesh Navsaria

.....
Find the episode on the WASB website or wherever you find podcasts.

Dan Rossmiller Selected to Lead WASB



Dan Rossmiller, who has served as the WASB's director of government relations since 2006, has been chosen unanimously by the WASB Board of Directors to be the association's next executive director.

“I'm honored and humbled by the opportunity to serve Wisconsin school board members in this new capacity,” said Rossmiller, who will become the association's fourth executive director effective July 1.

WASB President Rosanne Hahn, a Burlington school board member, praised Rossmiller as a conscientious voice for school boards and public education.

“We look forward to more of our members getting to know him as we have,” she says.

Hahn also said Rossmiller is a thoughtful advocate who “has repeatedly shown his commitment to unify our members under a common vision for public education.”

Rossmiller succeeds John Ashley, who retires after nearly 18 years as executive director.

Thanking Ashley for his service, Hahn said the Board of Directors and Wisconsin school board members “couldn't have asked for a more effective and considerate leader these past 18 years.”

Rossmiller graduated from the University of Wisconsin-Madison with a bachelor's degree with honors and graduated from the University of Wisconsin Law School.

While in law school, Rossmiller began a 22-year career in the Wisconsin Legislature serving in a variety of roles.

Before joining the WASB, Rossmiller served for three and a half years as the public affairs director for the State Bar of Wisconsin.

During his 16-year tenure as government relations director, Rossmiller headed the WASB's state and federal lobbying program and worked closely with the WASB Policy and Resolutions Committee. He served on the bipartisan Blue Ribbon Commission on School Funding.

Upcoming Online Events

▶ LEGAL AND LEGISLATIVE MONTHLY UPDATE JUNE 21 | 12 p.m.

WASB attorneys and government relations staff provide a complimentary monthly update on recent legal and legislative issues. Find the link to join on the Online Events page. *No registration required.*

We Heard Your Advocacy

As state budget work intensifies, your message has been clear, consistent



As I write this in mid-May, debate over the state's 2023-25 state budget shifts into high gear. However, because lawmakers have not yet tackled the K-12 education related portion of the budget, I am not able to write about the outcome of those votes. Instead, I will reflect on the state budget.

By the time you receive this issue, the Legislature's budget-writing Joint Finance Committee may have completed its work on K-12 education and completed its votes. If so, the budget bill will have moved on to the two houses of the Legislature for final approval. If not, it will be close to completing its work.

In either case, you likely will have learned at least some of the key details from other sources, but I encourage you to subscribe to the WASB Legislative Update blog and to tune in to the various free webinars the WASB governmental relations team offers — including the complimentary weekly Friday noon Capitol Chat and monthly Legal and Legislative Video Update — to get more information and details. I also encourage you to attend the WASB Summer Leadership Institute this July in Green Bay for a complete overview of the budget provisions.

Schools are being challenged as never before, and the need for school boards to make our collective voices heard has never been greater. Inflation is at a 40-year high, the challenge of teacher supply intensifies and mental health needs are rising among our students.

I want to thank board members and other school leaders for their budget advocacy, especially those who testified in person or submitted written comments to the Joint Finance Committee. I was struck by the unity of the messages I heard being conveyed to lawmakers and to this committee.

Over and over, I heard school board members and other school leaders asking for three main budget priorities:

- per-pupil increases in spendable resources for school districts that meet or exceed the rate of inflation
- a significant increase in Special Education Aid
- a significant increase in funding to meet student mental health needs

And those messages didn't go unnoticed. Joint Finance Committee members from both parties agreed

that the number one issue they heard about was education. As a result, when asked, many JFC members publicly acknowledged education as a top budget priority.

Lawmakers also heard strong calls from the state's lowest-spending school districts to raise the low revenue ceiling.

Public schools were not alone in calling for more money for education. Lawmakers also heard strong calls for more money from private voucher schools and from the parents of students who receive vouchers. Their cry for funding parity with public schools ignores that private schools need not provide special education services or pay for transportation of their pupils, obligations that currently fall upon public schools. Nevertheless, their voices were heard by lawmakers also.

For many weeks, JFC members, and particularly the co-chairs, have been publicly acknowledging that there will be increases in education funding even as they kept their cards close to their chest about the size of those increases.

If we succeed in achieving the funding goals we seek, it will be largely because of the advocacy of school board members, school leaders and parents from across the state.

Joint Finance Committee members from both parties agreed that the number one issue they heard about was education.

If we succeed in achieving the funding goals we seek, it will be largely because of the **advocacy of school board members, school leaders and parents from across the state.**

I thank those of you who have communicated with your legislators about your students' needs and explained how funding proposals would help you to address those needs. Your efforts are vital. ■

Author's note: For the past 16 and a half years, I have had the pleasure of serving as the WASB's government relations director. In that role, I have written and collaborated on writing many Capitol Watch columns for this magazine. However,

I will soon be transitioning to a new role here at the WASB, so this will be my last Capitol Watch column.

I am privileged to have been chosen as the WASB's next executive director to replace John Ashley, who is retiring on July 1. I know I have some big shoes to fill, and I want to thank John for leading the WASB with grace and good humor and for giving me an opportunity to grow and serve WASB members. I look forward to continuing to serve in my new role and will have more to say in my next Viewpoint column, in the

August issue.

I would be remiss if I did not also mention how grateful I am to have had excellent colleagues in my government relations role. I want to extend my thanks to Sheri Krause, Joe Quick and Chris Kulow for their help, patience, hard work and dedication.

If you are looking for up-to-the-minute details that can't make it in Wisconsin School News, I encourage you to please subscribe to our Legislative Update blog (wasb.org/legislative-update) for the latest news.



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Deadline: **August 11, 2023**



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5 Things Board Members Should Know About Public Records Requests

Transparency of records promotes public access to information and community trust in public officials. As public officials, school board members must understand the basics of Wisconsin's public records law, especially as that law applies to them. Public records requests allow members of the public to request a wide variety of records and do not require the identification of the requester or an explanation from the requester. These requests might require school board members to produce public records responsive to these requests, even records contained on their personal electronic devices.

1. What is the difference between record requests and information requests?

Legal records custodians are only required to produce records that respond to a public records request. They are not required to create a record if one does not already exist. Therefore, information that is not recorded or preserved in physical or electronic form is not a record subject to a request. If no public record is responsive to a given request, legal records custodians are not obligated to provide general information in response to that public records request. Deciding to

provide general information in response to requests for information is at the sole discretion of school district officials.

2. How is a public records request initially processed?

When a request is submitted under the public records law, school district officials, usually the district's legal records custodian or their designee, must review the request and determine which records might fall within the scope of the request. The term "record" is defined broadly under the law. A record is generally any material on which information is recorded or preserved, which has been created or is being kept by the school district.

Generally, most records created or kept by the district are subject to disclosure to the requester. There are, however, exceptions to this rule. For example, any record that is exempt from disclosure by federal or state laws, such as laws that require confidentiality of pupil and education records, are not subject to disclosure under the public records law. Additionally, any record that is covered by attorney-client privilege is not subject to disclosure. There are other express exceptions to disclosure that apply as well. If only part of the record is subject to dis-

closure, the legal records custodian may redact that part of the record but must then produce the remainder of the record.

Finally, before disclosing any records within the scope of the request, the district's legal records custodian must conduct a public interest balancing test to determine whether the records can be disclosed. Here, the legal records custodian will weigh the strong public interest in disclosure against the public interest in nondisclosure. Because the Wisconsin public records law contains a presumption of public access, the law generally leans in favor of public disclosure. Therefore, the legal records custodian should carefully identify any potential public harm in the records being released that might warrant not disclosing the record.

3. How to respond to a requestor.

Upon receiving a records request, the district's legal records custodian must respond to the request as soon as practicable and without delay. There is no specific deadline to respond to a records request. Any written response to a records request must be accompanied by an explanation from the legal records custodian as to why certain records were not disclosed. These reasonings will become the district's justification

Information that is not recorded or preserved in physical or electronic form is not a record subject to a request.

It is the subject matter of the record, not its location, that determines whether it is subject to disclosure.

should the request bring a subsequent legal challenge. Therefore, it is imperative that the legal records custodians ground their justifications in the law and include all applicable legal bases for not disclosing the records in the written response.

Regardless of the scope of the request, the legal records custodians should determine whether they will seek the payment of fees by the requester for costs associated with the public records request. The legal records custodian may charge the requestor for the actual, necessary and direct cost of copying records. In addition, the legal records custodian may charge for the actual, necessary and direct costs for locating the record, provided those costs exceed \$50 or more. However, the legal records custodian may not charge the requester for the cost of redacting the record. The legal records custodian may require prepayment if the estimated amount of fees will exceed \$5. The legal records custodian must then reconcile the estimated costs with the final costs incurred by the district in responding to the request.

4. Important policy considerations for board members and districts.

School board members must remember that they are treated as “local public officials” rather than “employees” under Wisconsin’s public records law. All districts should make the distinction of which positions are filled by “local public officials” as opposed to positions that are filled by “employees.” In

some cases, the definition of local public official can encompass school board members, district administrators, business managers and principals. This definition should be included in board policies, as should the notice that designates the district’s legal records custodian. This notice must be prominently displayed at the district’s offices.

The distinction between local public officials and employees is critical for open records requests. In general, school districts are not required to notify a record subject before permitting access to a record containing information pertaining to that record subject. However, public officials, such as school board members, are entitled to augment the disclosure of a record that contains information relating to the local public official prior to the legal records custodian permitting access to the record (along with any augmentation). This rule only applies to individuals who are local public officials at the time the request is made — it does not apply to former local public officials.

Local public officials, such as school board members, are entitled to written notice, by certified mail or personal service, within three business days of the legal records custodian making the decision to permit access to a record containing information relating to a local public official. The notice must briefly describe the requested record and include a description of the right of the local public official to augment the record. The local public official

may augment the record within five business days of receipt, and the district cannot release the record before the time period for augmentation has lapsed. Finally, the district must release the record as augmented.

5. What kinds of information are subject to disclosure?

In fulfilling their roles, many school board members communicate with colleagues, district employees and members of the public regarding district business via a variety of electronic means such as email, text messages, and social media. However, board members must understand that these communications can be subject to a request for records under Wisconsin’s public records law. Any public records that are in the board member’s possession, even if not necessarily created by the board member, may be subject to disclosure. This can include email, texts, calls and social media correspondence stored on the board member’s personal electronic devices. It is the subject matter of the record, not its location, that determines whether it is subject to disclosure.

Depending on the totality of circumstances, it may be appropriate for the legal records custodian to redact certain personal, financial, health, or other similarly sensitive information. Purely personal records are not subject to disclosure under the public records law. However, board members mixing personal and district communications on personal electronic accounts and devices can

create legal and practical issues when requests are made for records that might be located on those accounts and devices. Additionally, it is the legal records custodian's decision, not the board member's decision, as to whether records in the possession of a board member should be released and whether any redactions are appropriate. Therefore, the legal records custodian may need to review emails, texts and other electronic messages on the board member's personal electronic account or device in order to determine if they are within the scope of a request and determine if they will be released.

Additionally, personal notes or notes that are informal writings or

drafts that relate to district business but are drafted solely for personal use, are generally not subject to disclosure under the public records law. However, if these notes or drafts are disseminated to others or memorialize a governmental body's activity, the notes generally become records subject to disclosure.

■ Conclusion

It is essential that board members understand Wisconsin's public records law, as many of their messages and other documents, even those on personal accounts or devices, are subject to disclosure in response to a valid request. Because the law leans heavily in favor of

disclosure, it is important for board members to be aware that these messages and documents regarding district business might become public. Additional guidance on Wisconsin's public records law can be found in the Wisconsin Public Records Compliance Guide (2019), a resource issued by the Office of Open Government at the Wisconsin Department of Justice. ■

This Legal Comment was written by Michael J. Julka, Brian P. Goodman, and Sarah Ghazi-Moradi of Boardman & Clark LLP, WASB Legal Counsel. For related articles, see Wisconsin School News: "Open Records Requests for Employee Investigation Records" (May 2017); "Disclosure of Records of School District Contractors" (June 2013); and "Electronic Communications Records and the Public Records Law" (Dec. 2010).

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



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