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



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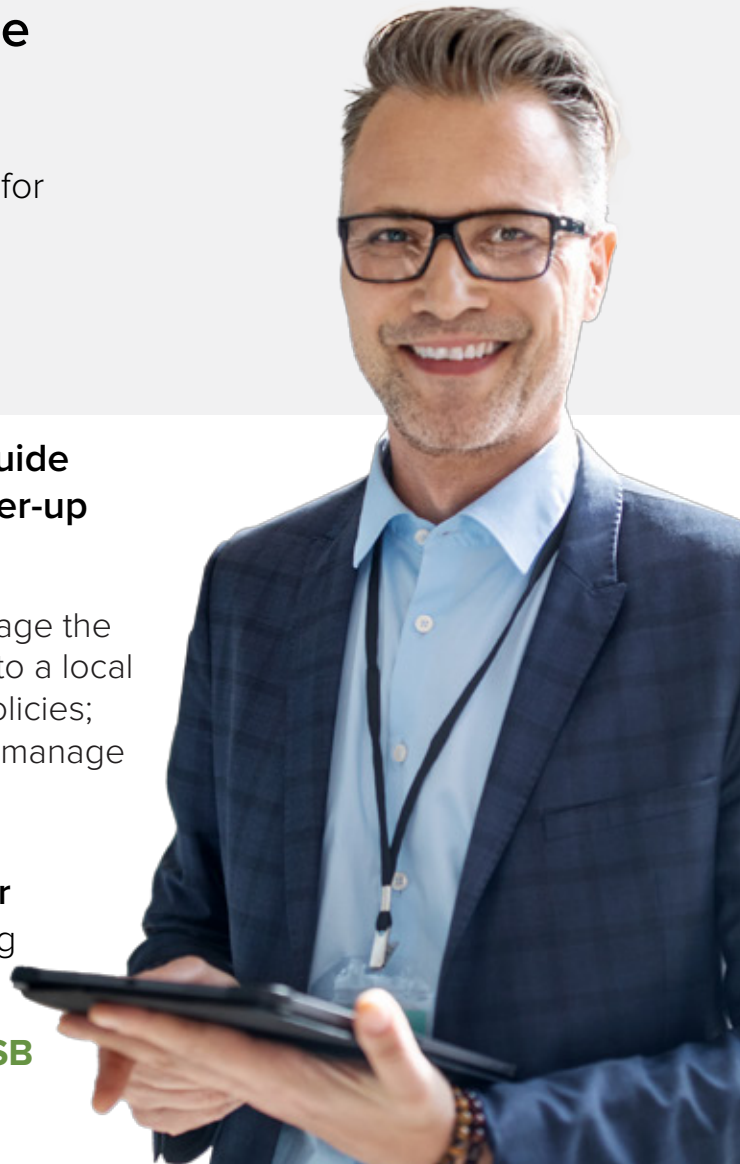
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New Wi-Fi Standard May Help Schools

A new wireless internet standard may be bringing faster speeds to the nation's K-12 classrooms, EdTech Magazine reported in February.

It's called "Wi-Fi 7," and it can reach speeds of up to 46 gigabits per second, compared with 10 gigabits per second on Wi-Fi 6.

Whatever type of wireless connection a school has, upgrading to Wi-Fi 7 may be the best bet, Siân Morgan, research director at Dell'Oro Group, told the magazine.

"This will give them the longest equipment life and the best student experience in the future, once Wi-Fi 7 becomes more widely available on laptops and smartphones," Morgan said.

Though only the newest devices have Wi-Fi 7 access points, it is backward compatible, meaning it will work with older devices. □

Girls Volleyball, Wrestling Growing in Interest

The state tournament for high school girls volleyball has expanded to five divisions as participation in the sport increases.

Stephanie Hauser, executive director of the Wisconsin Interscholastic Athletic Association, told Wisconsin Public Radio that there are about 430 girls volleyball teams and 66 boys volleyball teams in Wisconsin.

"We are excited about both, because there's been growth in both sports," she said.

Meanwhile, girls wrestling, first sanctioned three seasons ago, continues to grow.

"We've gone from just over 450 in year one ... to over 1,200 girls wrestling in high school in our state," Hauser told WPR. "It is very exciting. Starting last year, the girls were featured at the state championship at the Kohl Center alongside the boys, so that growth is very exciting. We also are seeing some growth in the boys numbers." □

STATE LOSING SCHOOL BUS DRIVERS

The number of licensed school bus drivers fell by 17.7% from 2007 to 2022, according to a February report from the Wisconsin Policy Forum.

By comparison, the number of total commercial drivers licenses declined by 8% over the same period, Wisconsin Policy Forum Researcher Tyler Byrnes told Wisconsin Public Radio.

Meanwhile, some of the people who still have a license to drive a school bus may have moved on, he told WPR.

"Either they still have the licenses and they've retired, or they've picked a different vehicle to drive," Byrnes

said. "If somebody can stop driving a school bus and start driving a delivery truck and make more money or have better hours, you might understand why they might make that choice."

The pandemic and temporary school closures had a significant impact on bus drivers, Cherie Hime, executive director of the Wisconsin School Bus Association, told WPR.

"People were leaving for other CDL jobs that were available and driving while schools were closed," she said of the 3,062 lost licenses. "They didn't want to wait to start driving again. They needed income at that time, so they needed to keep moving." □

STAT OF THE MONTH

17.7%

Drop in licensed Wisconsin school bus drivers from 2007 to 2022.

Source: Wisconsin Policy Forum

From Scratch: Wisconsin Schools Pursue Fresh Foods

Despite challenges with staffing, ingredients and capacity, Wisconsin districts are finding innovative ways to incorporate from-scratch cooking and fresh ingredients into their recipes, Legal Reader reported.

Districts such as Howard-Suamico are adopting a "speed scratch" approach by incorporating some pre-prepared foods into scratch recipes to save time. The goal is to strike a balance between practicality and nutrition.

Some schools are incorporating hydroponic growing towers created by companies such as Fork Farms. Students grow fresh produce indoors

year-round, helping them learn about growing food and encouraging healthier eating habits.

Meanwhile, districts are joined by other partners interested in student nutrition.

The Milwaukee-based Sustainable Kitchens helps schools use local ingredients in their cafeterias and involves students in developing recipes.

The Department of Public Instruction works with state agriculture officials to host monthly Marketplace Meetings, helping districts communicate their needs to local suppliers. □



Spring Support for New Board Members

The month of April brings the spring election and, with it, changes to the composition of school boards. It is a time to say goodbye and extend a heartfelt thank you to board members whose board service is ending. We thank you for your board service and your support of the WASB.

School board service is a high calling and not always as appreciated as it should be. On behalf of the WASB, I want to wish all departing school board members the best in their future endeavors.

April is also a time to welcome newly elected board members to the world of school board service. I hope you find your board service rewarding and fulfilling. We are here to help you in your new role, and we hope to earn your trust and support.

To help get new school board members off to a great start, the WASB will hold New School Board Member Gatherings in each of the WASB regions later this month. These gatherings, hosted by WASB regional directors and WASB staff, offer new board members essential information they will need to be effective from the beginning of their terms.

I heartily encourage all school board presidents and district administrators with newly elected or recently appointed board members to bring them to the New School Board Member Gathering in your region. Find details about where and

when your region will host a meeting in Association News on page 26.

April will also bring the results of 90 local school district referendum questions. For many districts and boards, the success or failure of those ballot requests will have significant implications for educational programming and facilities. For those of you who had successful referendums, I offer congratulations and trust that you will use the additional resources in ways your communities will embrace. For those of you who did not enjoy success, I wish you well as you go back to the drawing board to rethink your district's priorities and how to meet them.

Last month, I reflected on the State Education Convention held in January in Milwaukee. The many breakout sessions offered during the convention provided a wealth of opportunities for board members to learn and grow. The bulk of those sessions were provided by WASB member school boards and administrators, sometimes in partnership with business partners or other districts. We depend on our members to bring ideas and energy to the convention offerings.

Each year, starting on April 1, we issue a call for proposals to our members asking them to submit proposals for convention breakout sessions. I encourage your board and administration to think about what

you might want to share with your colleagues around the state and to submit a proposal.

If you did not find sessions that met your needs and expectations or reflected your district's concerns or issues, here is your chance. If you think your district is employing innovative approaches and practices you want to share, here is your opportunity. This is also a great chance for you to share your successes.

This month's issue takes a special look at school infrastructure, with articles on how to plan for the impacts of inflation on building projects, the potential benefits of the design-build construction method, and the role of glass and other transparent building materials in modern school design.

Another article looks at the impact and potential harm of cellphone use on students' attention spans.

Before closing this column, I want to provide you with advance notice of a series of WASB Spring Workshops that will be presented in early-to-mid May. These workshops will be held at various CESA (Cooperative Educational Service Agency) offices and aim to help boards navigate challenges while focusing on student learning. Watch for more information coming soon. As always, the WASB is here to help you be the best boards you can be. ■

I heartily encourage all school board presidents and district administrators with newly elected or recently appointed board members to bring them to the New School Board Member Gathering in your region.



Seeing is Learning

The value of transparency in today's schools

by Chris Michaud, Practice Leader – Design, EUA

Think back to your primary and secondary schools — what do you remember about the building? You are probably thinking of concrete block-walled classrooms and rows of seats facing the teacher. The only views of the rest of the school were of windowless corridors lined with lockers. There were few opportunities to see your peers learning or to know what was happening outside your classroom.

Fortunately for today's students, many schools have evolved from teacher-centered to learner-centered teaching models. Students have more agency in their education and exercise more active relationships with their peers and teachers. Technology has helped this shift, providing students enormous latitude to where, when and how they learn.

Curricular offerings are also changing, bringing fun and exciting

options to students across all subjects — from career and technical education to the arts, and everything in between. These courses expose K-12 students to subjects historically reserved for post-high school education.

Emphasizing collaboration, exploration and autonomy, my colleagues and I at EUA design student-centered learning environments. Every space in the school is a place for learning, not just “the classroom.” Transparency is



Corridors next to the core classrooms at Sheboygan Falls Middle School allow students to break out into small groups or work independently while still being within sight of their teachers.

fundamental to making this work, as visibility between areas encourages exploration, promotes learning and makes it easier for teachers to supervise students and respond to incidents.

Districts must balance various educational, environmental and safety factors when considering how much glass to use in their new or renovated schools. Three recent projects demonstrate how districts can promote transparency without compromising security.

■ Learning on display

One of the most apparent benefits of transparency is the ability to put learning on display. Many of today's schools — especially high schools — are venues for introducing students to potential career paths. They can stimulate career exploration by offering peaks into the STEM, tech ed, culinary or art rooms, sparking curiosity and encouraging students to explore new subjects.

Middleton High School adopted a

“learning street” model that features windows into classrooms and encore spaces. These classrooms surround one of the school's commons areas, so there is plenty of exposure and opportunity to engage students. Whether eating lunch, studying or just walking by, students can watch their peers 3D print a model in the robotics lab, design a prototype in the fab lab or make pastries in a professional kitchen environment. Visibility into these classrooms encourages students to explore the courses and associated careers, opening doors to previously unknown opportunities.

Students learn by watching others. When they see their peers engaged with teachers or learning activities, they are more likely to be excited about the lessons. A student might walk past a classroom where they had a class earlier that day and see another student approaching the problem differently. The observation might spark an idea and encourage the student to reengage with the lesson's content.

Like Middleton High School, Sheboygan Falls Middle School incorporated a learning street throughout the center of the building. Off the main corridor are “side streets” that lead to neighborhoods for every grade level, each with a cluster of classrooms around enlarged circulation areas. The circulation areas are extensions of the classrooms and include collaboration zones, small-group instruction rooms and student storage spaces. Glass walls between the classrooms and circulation areas allow students to leave the four classroom walls while still under the teacher's supervision.

EUA also helped the school extend its learning environments by adjoining many encore classrooms to the cafeteria and commons area. Culinary arts students can bake cookies during class and sell them right outside the classroom door during lunch or after-school events. Overhead glass garage doors offer views of the adjacent spaces and the flexibility to do projects requiring more room. The nearby furniture supports these spatial connections because it is specifically designed and selected to accommodate both dining and learning. Now more than just a lunchroom, the cafeteria can be used for learning throughout the day.

■ Supervision

Studies show that bad behavior decreases when teachers can see students in multiple spaces at once. Students are less likely to misbehave when they know their teachers or peers are watching them.

Middleton High School and Sheboygan Falls Middle School have many spaces outside the core classrooms for students to work independently or in small groups, reinforcing their autonomy and developing self-directed learning skills. These spaces are successful because they are open, visible and connected, allowing teachers to simultaneously monitor what is happening inside and outside their classrooms. The design team brought the spaces together for active supervision and eliminated

hidden areas that could not be easily monitored.

Transparency between spaces also helps teachers gain reaction time. They can respond faster to incidents and are more likely to have support from other teachers who witnessed the event.

Consider two students who are about to fight. These altercations often begin with tense talking and chest-thumping that may take minutes before physical action ensues. The more awareness nearby teachers have about a potential situation, the faster they can react and intervene.

“The glass provides the opportunity for staff to see what’s going on in the hallway — which is helpful and needed for supervision,” says Pam Hammen, principal of Verona Area High School, another building that benefits from transparency between the classrooms and corridors. “The more supervised the area, the better the behavior.”

■ Safety and security

Transparency improves learning experiences, but more of it in schools raises an important question: How do districts create open and visible spaces that still allow students to shelter in place if there is a threat? It is a complex problem that requires districts and their architects to ensure student safety on a day-to-day basis and for worst-case scenarios.

It is possible to design first-floor spaces with a second means of egress. Students can leave the building directly from the learning environment if an incident occurs. But what if the classrooms are located on the upper floors?

Verona Area High School arrived at a unique solution: The core classrooms are designed as a connected kit



The floor-to-ceiling windows in the Verona Area High School’s library provide plenty of natural light and help students orient themselves in the building.

of parts linking classrooms, small group rooms and breakout learning areas. Within the classroom areas, EUA incorporated large, sliding markerboard panels that can be moved in front of the corridor glass, obstructing views into the classroom when required.

The classrooms are also connected via pass-through doors, which have multiple benefits. Most importantly, the doors provide a secondary exit out of a room if there is an immediate threat causing students to flee. Rooms with several access points and visibility to adjacent spaces also help alleviate stressed students who have experienced trauma or have acute fears of confined spaces. From an

educational perspective, students and teachers can easily move between classes and share resources.

■ Additional benefits

Beyond its impact on learning, supervision and safety, transparency is essential for increasing access to daylight. Incorporating open spaces and interior windows in schools allows sunlight to penetrate further into the building.

Studies show that access to natural light improves the overall wellness of students and staff. A Hescong Mahone Group study found that students with more access to natural light in their classrooms progressed

Verona Area High School classrooms feature pass-through doors that can serve as secondary exits during emergencies.



Rooms with several access points and visibility to adjacent spaces also help alleviate stressed students who have experienced trauma or have acute fears of confined spaces.

20% faster on mathematics and 26% faster on reading tests over one year than students with minimal daylight exposure.

Transparency can also impact wayfinding. This is especially important for larger school buildings. When students can visually connect to a familiar landmark outside, they are more likely to understand where they are within the building, alleviating the anxiety of feeling lost.

A tailored approach

There is no one-size-fits-all approach to increasing transparency in schools. The best solutions arise after districts do their homework in close partnership with their architect. When planning a renovation or new building, districts should tour

other schools and review precedents to understand what will work for their schools. They should also solicit student, staff and community input to inform decisions.

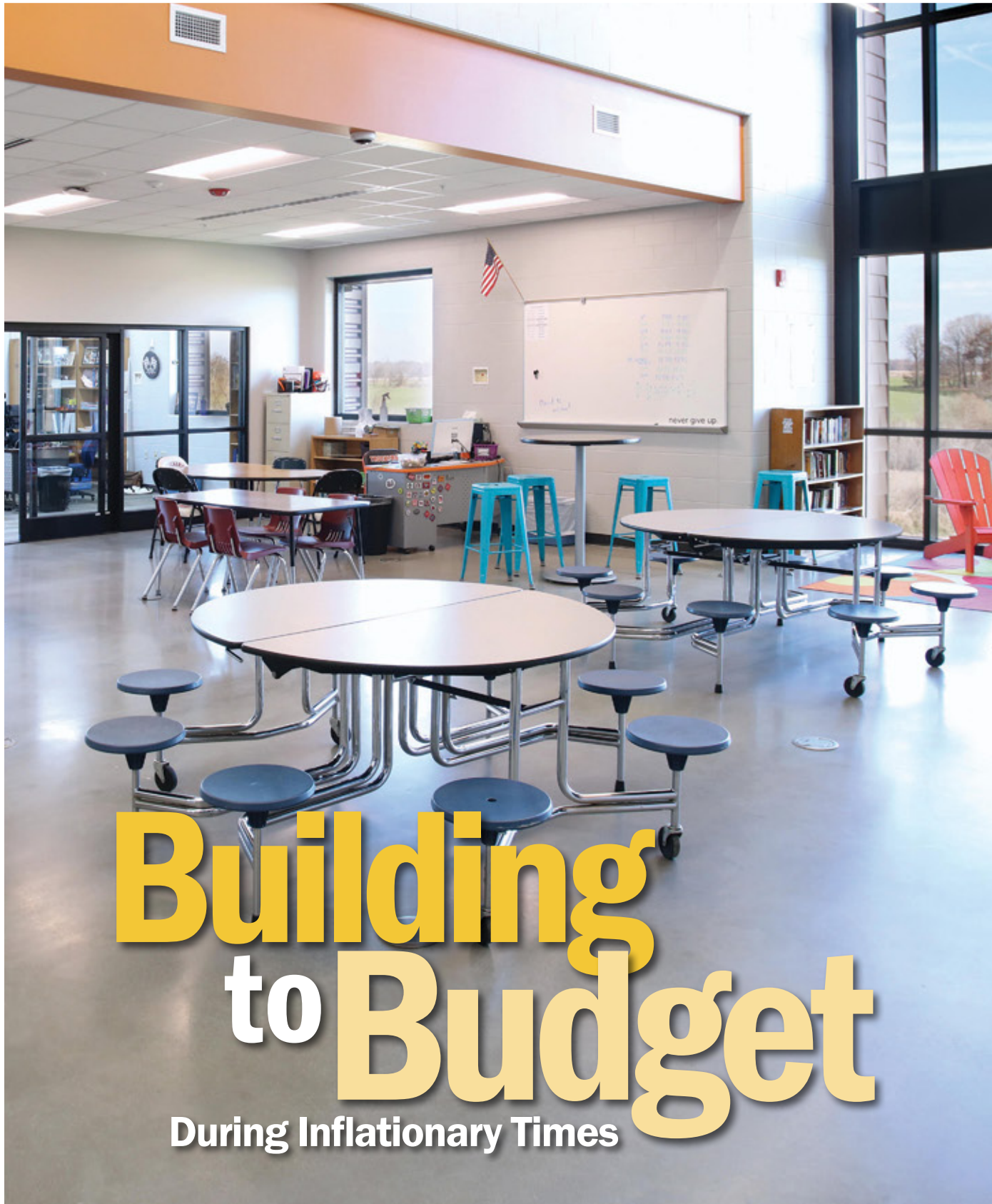
Remember that students and staff may need varying amounts of time to adjust to increased transparency in their schools, particularly if they are used to buildings constructed in the early- to mid-20th century. But in our experience, they get used to it quickly.

“I remember that during the design process, I wondered if having glass between the classroom and hallway would distract the students,” said Principal Hammen. “The design team assured me that this novelty would last a few weeks, then just become how it is. The team was right. I do not see students distracted by hallway traffic.”

Increasing transparency, elevating schools

As districts continue to adopt the philosophy that learning can happen anywhere, their spaces are changing to accommodate evolving learning objectives. Once treated solely as a means of circulation, today’s corridors are now extensions of the learning environment.

Transparency enables these spaces to be engaging and functional, but increased visibility poses essential questions about safety and security. In close collaboration with their stakeholders, districts can achieve a best-case scenario where students see active learning while teachers and administrators can see them, ensuring everyone’s safety. ■



Building to Budget

During Inflationary Times



Clintonville Public School District
Most school building projects that are completed on time and on budget have benefited from coordinated planning from the start.



Matt McGregor
 Director of project management with Hoffman Planning, Design & Construction, Inc.



Sean Duncanson
 Senior project management with Hoffman Planning, Design & Construction, Inc.

In the intricate landscape of school district construction, aligning the design and execution with budgetary constraints often proves to be a daunting task. Building during a fluctuating economic cycle poses an especially complex set of concerns.

When your district is conducting pre-referendum planning — with construction slated for two or three years in the future — how do you ensure that your budget addresses prospective financial shifts?

Superintendents, school board members and other school leaders must recognize that, in the planning and implementation process, particular items will likely need to change to accommodate scheduling or meet budget. Considerations such as inflation and supply chain issues, not to mention availability of skilled workers, have substantially impacted the construction environment. The following four considerations can lead you on the path to success.

Strategic prioritization

It's important to establish a clear hierarchy of objectives from the project's inception. Some portions of the project may be non-negotiable, so it's critical that your team is aware of the district's objectives. Keep in mind that if everything is a priority, nothing is a priority. Be practical and forthcoming about what matters most.

Clearly define which items are non-negotiable. Some districts' proj-

ects are focused on strengthening student safety, while others strive to improve a specific curriculum or improve facility infrastructure. Conversations with key stakeholders in the planning stages will provide a much-needed guide for your construction priorities.

Embrace flexibility

In the construction world, adaptability serves as a linchpin for success, especially amid the current economic conditions. Be mindful that, due to supply chain irregularities, installation of particular components may not follow the typical order of construction sequencing that would logically provide maximum efficiency. For instance, a ceiling grid may be installed before walls are painted, deviating from conventional practices. While not ideal, as it may cause minor issues or a small amount of rework in the future, it keeps the project moving. Another example might include a readiness to install the HVAC units, but the power supply is not yet operational. If the units are ready and the installers are available, we might proceed. It's not the order we desire, but we must be agile and remain ready to adjust continuously.

It's vital for the project team to know where they have the capability to be flexible, and what activities must occur precisely as scheduled or planned. It needs to be evident what must be completed to ensure a school



Clintonville Public School District

To be successful, a project team must understand where they have the leeway to be flexible, but also realize what must be completed first to ensure a school can open on schedule.

can open on time, and what items can be addressed at a later date.

Constructing sequencing

Breaking down the project into discernible segments offers a pragmatic approach toward managing complexities and uncertainties. This provides the district with the options necessary to modify scope or pivot to stay on budget or schedule.

Holistically looking at your school’s master plan will allow you to envision how you might shift if circumstances call for it — moving projects to a different season, for example — while possibly utilizing your same referendum budget, or other funding sources. Supplementary funding sources have included Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief funds, interest earnings and capital improvement funds, such as Fund 46 or Fund 10.

It’s common for districts to break up large school projects by grade, or sometimes by classroom. Site work is regularly considered a separate portion, but it can further be broken out into areas such as playgrounds and parking. When challenges and obstacles appear, it’s simpler to adjust if these have previously been divided up.

Effective communication

In the intricate web of construction endeavors, effective communication is the cornerstone of collaboration, taking on heightened significance during tumultuous times. Always communicate potential issues to the entire project team to engage more minds in generating solutions.

A prime example would be that subcontractors who regularly bid, install and service equipment can often offer valuable insights and

advice. Mechanical, plumbing and electrical engineers may be unaware that specified systems and fixtures might be tough to obtain. Subcontractors may have a keen knowledge of relevant supply chain issues, allowing them to offer effective alternatives. When administrators communicate with a multi-disciplinary team — including construction, engineering and design professionals — they benefit from everyone’s involvement. It’s also likely to increase the likelihood that the plan is executed effectively.

A case study in nimbleness

Clintonville Public School District in northeast Wisconsin provides an excellent example of how to align construction and execution. The district completed planning and pre-referendum work in 2020, bid the project in 2021 and built over the course of 2022 and 2023. This spanned the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, supply chain trials, labor challenges and inflation.

The district was aware that these issues could have harmed the project. Therefore, the district and the Hoffman Planning, Design & Construction team took the following measures to keep the project on track:

1: We emphasized the positive.

We looked for opportunities to engage students, teachers and the community. Considering the length of time that it takes to complete a project, stakeholders need to see, hear and experience progress. Keep them informed — consistently and continually. If all they experience is inconveniences and delays, they may create or share disinformation or misinformation.

With the Clintonville project, we made the raising and placing of the final beam a community-wide event. For a different school district, we asked students and staff to sign the concrete floor prior to placing the wood gym floor over it. These activities created energy, synergy and excitement.

2: We purchased materials early to ensure that critical items were available when needed.

We had to identify and obtain storage space that was larger than usual. This can be done either at the construction site or at a different location. Just remember that security is paramount.

We obtained extended warranties, considering that many materials wouldn't be utilized as quickly as usual. This gave the school district peace of mind and longer-term protection of their assets.

3: We proactively addressed lead-times for manufacturing of bar joist and decking.

During construction, it was ascertained that the lead time to obtain bar joist and decks was roughly 12-16 months. Early in the design process, we bought a manufacturing slot to make certain the materials would be available in time for con-

struction. This is an arrangement made with manufacturers that guarantees a slot, while providing time for the design team to determine the exact specifications that will be required. It takes forethought, established relationships with manufacturers, planning and communication.

4: We pivoted to accommodate challenges related to the chiller.

This project was scheduled around the cooling season needed for the building. With constant scheduling delays from the manufacturer, we had to be nimble and extend the project to the next season. Be sure not to start a project, or aspects of a project, until the essential materials or equipment are on site. Failure to do so can easily lead to frustration and, in some instances, significant challenges to facility operations.

Overcoming the hurdle

To prepare for issues, build in allowances, contingencies and inflation

factors, based on the complexity of your project and the current market. Tackle each obstacle and be certain to establish priorities, maintain flexibility, break your project into manageable portions and communicate continuously. Then, the budget hurdle will be one more challenge you've conquered as you guide your school district to greater success. ■

Matt McGregor is the director of project management with Hoffman Planning, Design & Construction, Inc. A University of Wisconsin-Stout graduate with a Bachelor of Science in construction, Matt has more than a dozen years of experience in the construction profession, which includes project collaborations with 12 different Wisconsin school districts. Matt can be reached at mamcgregor@hoffman.net.

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School District of Manawa

Districts' facility project goals have ranged from strengthening student safety to improving specific curriculum or enhancing district and community shared spaces.



WISCONSIN HEIGHTS

SCHOOL DISTRICT

A CASE STUDY IN DESIGN-BUILD





Following a 2018 comprehensive facilities assessment, enrollment study and ongoing community dialogue, the Wisconsin Heights School District sought to address failing infrastructure needs to accommodate current and future student enrollment growth.

The key to the project was determining what to do about its two aging elementary school buildings and address the challenge in a timely and cost-effective manner. After an extensive review of priorities and construction options, the district selected the design-build delivery method and Performance Services as the design-builder.

The project aimed to create a modern and optimal learning environment. The new addition and renovation project would address critical heating, ventilation and air conditioning equipment, including long-term maintenance and repairs, kitchen renovations and restroom

updates at the original middle/high school building.

In doing so, the district reduced operating costs by operating fewer and more efficient school buildings and reducing bus transportation time and logistics, providing efficiencies to faculty and staff that divided their time between the buildings.

■ Weighing two options

After partner selection, the design-build team got to work with the district. Because the design-build process is focused on design-to-budget and team collaboration, the school and community were invited to provide feedback on two potential solutions.

The first option included renovating all the schools, updating the entrances, kitchens and restrooms, and upgrading the HVAC, mechanical, electrical, plumbing, roofing and building controls. The second option was to create one unified campus by adding an elementary

school to the existing middle and high schools.

The district and community determined that the best option was a one-campus solution. The final design included a new 80,000-square-foot building addition, new pre-K through fifth-grade classrooms, a gymnasium, a cafeteria, a media center, student collaboration spaces and administrative offices.

It also featured playgrounds for elementary students and a new car drop-off loop to ease traffic congestion around the single campus. Lastly, the district wanted to ensure the middle/high school didn't fall behind the new elementary addition. So, the middle and high school buildings would also receive critical infrastructure, restroom and kitchen renovations to ensure the district provided an optimal learning environment for all students throughout the district.

In fall 2022, the Wisconsin Heights one-campus vision came to fruition with the addition of an elementary wing to the middle/high school, enabling all students and staff to be at one location.

Referendum campaign

A referendum campaign followed. With a proposed solution, the district was ready to begin its communication efforts to garner support for the referendum campaign about a year before the vote. The design-build team provided comprehensive communication services to help inform the public of the district's challenges and opportunities. Key tactics included design charrette sessions, critical messaging development, active engagement at community meetings, architectural renderings, communication materials design, community conversations and video story production.

This inclusive and thorough approach helped build awareness, inform the community and spread the word about the positive benefits the construction project could provide to the community. However,

while various tactics were used throughout the 12-month campaign, it is essential to note that each was successful because they shared a consistent message. The district was facing critical needs and growth capacity concerns. Becoming a one-campus district solved these issues and provides the district with cost savings and operational efficiencies. The referendum team ensured that key messaging was simple and unvarying, regardless of the communication channel. This helped avoid confusion and create trust with the district's proposed solution.

Wisconsin Heights voters approved the \$27 million facilities referendum on Nov. 3, 2020, with 52.8% of the vote. Construction began the following year. In collaboration with the design-build team, the district hosted a groundbreaking community event to celebrate the start of an exciting project.

Overcoming challenges

Despite several challenges, the first of which was due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the project's construction phase was completed on time. Due to ever-changing restrictions, associated cost escalations and related supply chain delays, Performance Services and the district collaborated to ensure the materials did not exceed the project costs. The design-build team communicated with the district through every challenge to provide the best possible outcome. The project was delivered with no change orders based on the agreed scope of work, final bids and pricing.

Another major success was the ability to complete the construction during the school year. Despite having an occupied middle/high school, the building was completed with no impact on students and faculty. Working with district staff, the project

A ONE-CAMPUS SOLUTION

"A one-campus decision was great for us. It supports the culture of the community. Elementary kids can walk down the hall to join high school students for an activity such as reading or tech ed. From a parent standpoint, I would have had kids in all three buildings, but this year it's on one campus. It's also very convenient for parents for teacher conferences. It makes the most of our teacher and facility resources and is great for our students and parents."

— Jordan Sinz, former district administrator, Wisconsin Heights School District



ONE CONTRACT

“The most significant consideration in our selection decision was a single point of contact with one contract. The board and I did not want any buck-passing or finger-pointing. The buck started and ended with the design-builder. For our situation, time was critical, so this delivery method with sole accountability for both design and construction was right for this project.”

— Jordan Sinz, former district administrator, Wisconsin Heights School District

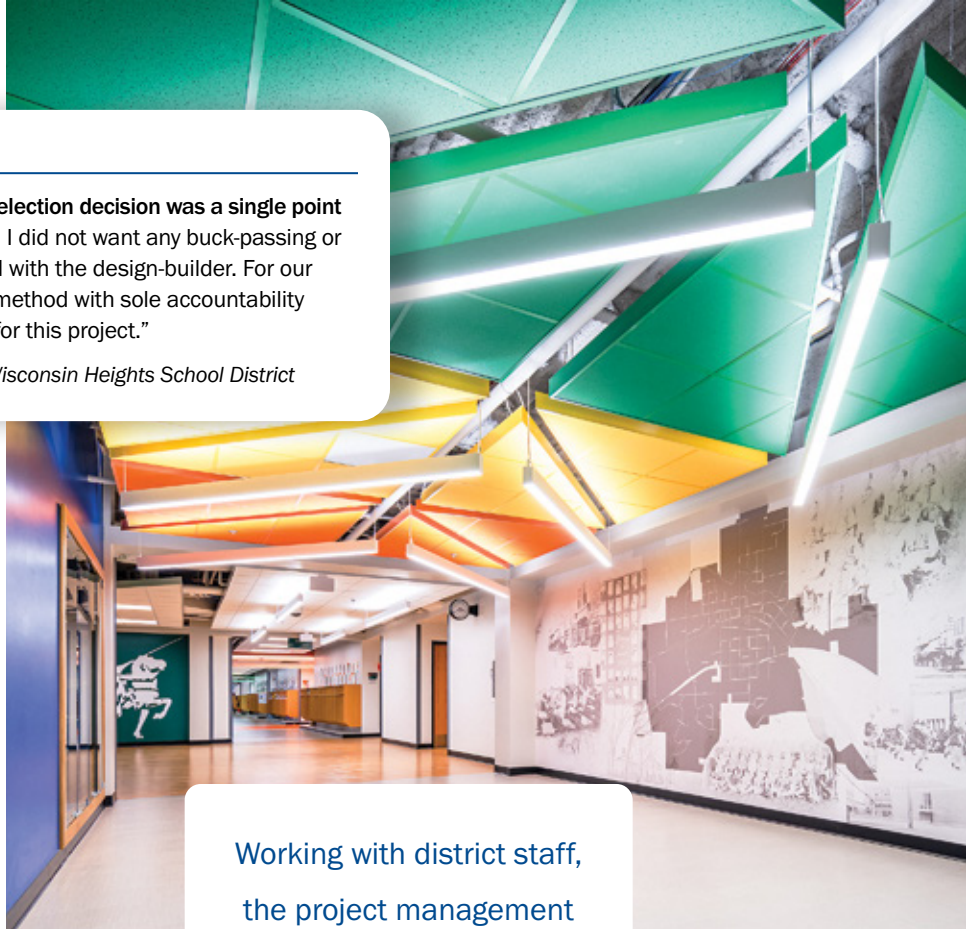
management team understood education schedules and extracurricular events to ensure construction did not disrupt the school calendar. That meant working after hours, during the weekend and through the summer break holiday to ensure construction activities were safe and as unobtrusive as possible.

Construction took a year and a half to complete, finishing in September 2022, just in time for the start of the school year. The district hosted an open house and ribbon-cutting event to thank the community for their support. The community was invited to tour the newly constructed addition and celebrate the new single campus with a tailgate ahead of the district’s homecoming football game.

Benefits of design-build

Wisconsin Heights had previously used the traditional design-bid-build model for completing construction and renovation projects. They experienced the tension of managing separate contracts with separate entities, including unpleasant and surprising change orders. On complex projects such as this one, the district recognized the issues and disputes that could arise between the architects, general contractors and low-bid subcontractors. Instead of being stuck in the middle and risking higher costs, the district was convinced design-build was the way to go for this project. ■

Performance Services provides complete pre-referendum services, facility master planning, architectural design, engineering, construction and project management. They aim to deliver high-performing construction projects with controlled cost, increased project speed and high-quality outcomes.



Working with district staff, the project management team understood education schedules and extracurricular events to ensure construction did not disrupt the school calendar.



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SESSION PROPOSALS DUE JUNE 21, 2024



DRIVEN to Lead

Students leading students in school and community improvement

by Matt Nie

If you've ever heard the words muttered, "Kids these days..." it is normally followed by a lament of how our society's youngest generation falls short. There is a stereotype that today's generation misses the mark in a variety of ways. They are lazy, selfish, disconnected, and apathetic. Some believe today's youth have no sense of shared sacrifice and show little involvement in their communities.

To challenge that stereotype, let's complete this phrase based on fact: "Kids these days, Generation Z in particular, are more likely to volunteer than any generation before them. Kids these days exhibit the greatest tolerance for diversity. Kids these days are more likely to

leverage technology for positive social change. Kids these days have the capacity to be the leaders of tomorrow."

That's where Burlington High School's DRIVEN Leadership Program, a student leadership group dedicated to improving the school and community through service, comes in. There are many service groups out there, but the DRIVEN program in particular leverages generational strengths and puts students in charge of leading other students in service.

Burlington's student-led initiative is dedicated to improving the school and community through service. This program started in 2006 and has grown to become the largest

student organization in the Burlington Area School District. The 150-student organization is supported by dedicated staff advisors Allison Hammerstad, Ben Hendricks and Matt Nie.

DRIVEN focuses on developing character and leadership skills — not only among its members, but across the entire student body. All students at Burlington High School earn a half credit for a character portfolio as part of their graduation requirement, and DRIVEN members take the lead in teaching character lessons to underclassmen. They do so by sharing activities, case studies and personal stories that connect to character.

In addition to their work within the school, DRIVEN is committed to



DRIVEN's success is a testament to the dedication and passion of its student leaders and advisors. The program has gained widespread support from the community, with businesses providing scholarships and donations for service projects

positively impacting the community. They participate in two major community service projects each year. During the holiday season, they partner with the Salvation Army and LOVE Inc., a local food pantry, to assist those in need. Through Salvation Army bell ringing alone, they raise on average of \$2,000 annually for this cause. They also organize the annual DRIVEN Easter Egg Hunt, which has become the largest free egg hunt in southeastern Wisconsin, attended by more than 1,000 community members.

DRIVEN's impact extends beyond their own school and community. They host the annual DRIVEN Conference at the University of Wisconsin-Whitewater, where area high schools learn about DRIVEN's concepts — desire, responsibility, inspiration, vision, empowerment and new birth — and create action plans to improve their own schools.

Student-led service projects are a hallmark of DRIVEN's success. Each year, every upperclassman in the program is required to organize and lead a service project. These projects have raised more than \$25,000 funds for various causes. Students have hit their volunteer hours by organizing Special Olympics basketball tournaments, raising funds for soldiers with PTSD, promoting suicide prevention awareness, supporting local animal shelters and more.

While DRIVEN has achieved remarkable success, it's the personal moments that have the most lasting impact. One such moment was the creation of a Night to Remember, a prom-like dance for students with special needs. After dancing with one such student, one of the DRIVEN organizers remarked that they were having more fun than they did at their actual prom. This experience taught them a valuable lesson

that will stay with them for life.

DRIVEN's success is a testament to the dedication and passion of its student leaders and advisors. The program has gained widespread support from the community, with businesses providing scholarships and donations for service projects.

There are no disengaged, apathetic individuals in Burlington High School's DRIVEN Leadership Program. Through their commitment to service, character development and leadership, DRIVEN members are proving that "kids these days" have the potential to be the leaders of tomorrow. DRIVEN's legacy is one of student empowerment, compassion and positive social change. ■

Matt Nie is a DRIVEN staff advisor. He co-presented the "DRIVEN to Lead: Students Leading Students in School and Community Improvement" session at the 2024 State Education Convention.



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We look forward to working with you in 2024. We are here to serve you!

Contact the WASB today.



FOSTERING Belonging

The journey of inclusion advocates in Platteville School District

by Kim Walters

In the heart of the Platteville School District, a transformative initiative has taken root, going beyond traditional educational approaches to embrace the essence of inclusion. Amidst the challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic and a renewed focus on social justice, the district embarked on a journey of diversity, equity, inclusion and belonging, fostering a commitment to nurture a sense of belonging for every student, staff member and family within their community. Central to these changes is the creation and implementation of the role of the K-12 inclusion advocate.

The journey began in 2020, amid the complexities of the pandemic, remote learning and a nationwide call for racial justice. Facing the need for adaptation and reflection, Platteville School District leadership introduced “equity and diversity coaches,” later evolving into the K-12 inclusion advocates role.

Superintendent Jim Boebel emphasized the district’s recognition that perfection isn’t always attainable in education, stating they had to “build this plane while flying it.” Boebel knew this was the right decision, and the team responded with agility and flexibility. This approach

reflects the essence of the district’s commitment to transformative change and their mission statement of “Every Student, Every Day.”

The creation of the inclusion advocate was part of a broader initiative to assess strengths and areas of need related to unity efforts within the district. It stemmed from a collective understanding that belonging is not just a desire but an essential human need. Startling statistics from the 2021 Wisconsin Youth Risk Behavior Survey revealed that almost 40% of students in grades 6-12 didn’t feel a sense of belonging in their school environ-

The principles behind “Every Student, Every Day” guide the district’s commitment to change and inclusion:

YOU BELONG *P*



We will ensure all spaces are welcoming, safe, and accessible.

We will create inclusive environments which represent & celebrate the diversity of our community.



We will be a district in which everyone feels physically and psychologically supported and safe.

We will provide intentional social emotional learning & support for all students and staff.



We will provide and utilize materials and resources that authentically represent diverse perspectives & backgrounds.

We will provide equitable access to technology, resources, and supplies that support learning.



We will support all students and staff to approach learning with a growth mindset.

We will collaborate and use strategies that promote engagement, voice & choice, equitable access, and meaningful feedback for students and staff.



We will engage students and families in partnerships built on trust.

We will create and nurture supportive and respectful relationships placing students at the forefront.



So that the Platteville School District can Ensure High Levels of Learning for ALL in a Safe, Inclusive Learning Community;
EVERY STUDENT, EVERY DAY.

ment, laying the groundwork for change in Platteville. To address this need, the district partnered with the CESA 6 Center 4All, which offered a strategic approach that led to impactful, lasting change. Weekly professional development sessions, book study discussions, belonging and engagement walks, listening sessions and the Intercultural Development Inventory became pillars of growth, fostering a deeper understanding of cultural self-awareness and dismantling unconscious biases.

Within Platteville School District hallways and classrooms, the belief of “You Belong” echoes with purpose. This commitment aims to create an environment where every individual feels seen, heard and valued. Inclusivity is not mandated from the top down; it’s a collaborative process permeating through every layer. Crafted through a bottom-up approach, the district’s 10 “You Belong” statements became

the voice of the community, students and staff, fostering ownership and a shared vision. Tangible impacts of these statements included presentations on language and unconscious biases, as well as the formation of kindness clubs and Diverse Student Alliance groups. High school students became advocates, integrating “You Belong” statements into learning objectives and establishing a peer mentorship program. The journey wasn’t solely about shifts in curriculum and teaching pedagogy, but also about creating support systems for every individual. Data served as a measure of progress, prompting peer learning walks and conversations that occurred organically throughout the school day, reflecting significant strides towards a more inclusive environment.

As the journey continues, it’s about not just maintaining progress but evolving. Current students stand as a testament to the impact of DEIB

initiatives on their lives.

Jacob Crase, Platteville High School principal, expressed pride in the student leaders involved in the Diverse Student Alliance, stating, “The student leaders involved in DSA at Platteville High School are truly inspiring. I am so proud of the work that they have done across our district and in our community.” Their stories reflect not only academic success but a profound sense of belonging beyond traditional metrics. Their story resonates beyond district boundaries, encouraging others to embark on transformative journeys towards fostering belonging in educational systems.

Ultimately, it’s not just about reaching a destination; it’s about transforming lives along the way. ■

Kim Walters is the director of the Center 4All at CESA 6. She co-presented the “Inclusion Advocacy: Gotta Start Somewhere” session at the 2024 State Education Convention.



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CONTAINING Cellphone Harm

Schools begin to address students' preoccupation with devices, contributing to an improved classroom climate

by Delaney Ruston

My daughter Tessa begged me for a smartphone when she was 12. I had several concerns, including my fear that Tessa would always want to be on it. We waited another year, and Tessa became a smartphone owner at 13. Not long after that, I spoke with one of Tessa's teachers, who mentioned that Tessa was sitting in the back of the classroom and spending a lot of time on her phone during class. I was upset but knew I needed to stay

calm when asking Tessa about this that night.

I said, "Tessa, I was speaking with one of your teachers today, and they said you seem to be on your phone a lot."

She replied, "Mom, science, aargh, the class is so boring. I just can't stand it." She went on and on until finally, I needed to interrupt her.

"Tessa," I said slowly for impact. "It was not your science teacher. It was your math teacher."

■ An irresistible urge

Cellphones constantly distract kids at school. And their ability to resist the urge to be on their phone day in and day out, hour by hour, depends on many intrinsic and extrinsic factors.

At that time, Tessa's school did not have a clear phone policy. Individual teachers were working hard to create and enforce their own rules, made difficult by the lack of backup they received from the



... 55% of middle schools allowed kids to carry their cellphones all day despite the fact that more than 80% of parents did not want their kids using their cellphones at school.

school or district administration.

This incident happened shortly after the release in 2016 of “Screenagers: Growing Up in the Digital Age,” a documentary film in which I share the journeys of families (including my own) and schools with personal technology. After the movie’s release, I met many teachers and parents from around the U.S. who also were struggling with the impact of cellphones in classrooms. Just like me, they wanted answers.

Based on my experience with my kids and talking with parents and teachers via school screenings of “Screenagers,” it was apparent that parents and teachers wanted phones curtailed, and school administrators were struggling to respond. But when I searched for what most schools were doing regarding their phone policies, I found that, shockingly, there were no data on this.

As a result, my Screenagers team and I conducted a national survey that captured responses from 1,200 middle school parents. According to these parents, 55% of middle schools allowed kids to carry their cellphones all day despite the fact that more than 80% of parents did not want their kids using their cellphones at school.

Since our study in 2017, we found just one other study about school phone policies. Conducted in 2020, research appearing in the Journal of the American Medical Association’s Pediatrics newsletter found that 97% of U.S. middle schools and 91% of high schools had some sort of cellphone policy. However, 72% of schools did not restrict phone use during transition periods between classes, and only 78% of middle and high schools restricted phones during actual class time. So while schools

seem to be growing more comfortable with implementing phone restrictions, few have adopted a policy that fully removes phones during the school day.

■ Constructive limits

Why have limits on cellphone use? Through the research I’ve done for the Screenagers films and my conversations with educators and families across the nation, I believe that data-driven Away for the Day policies are a highly effective way to support learning.

A few things I’ve concluded, in succinct form:

- **Studies confirm that cellphones overpower self-control.**

A study titled “Brain Drain: The Mere Presence of One’s Smartphone Reduces Available Cognitive Capacity” examined behavior by participants who turned off their phones. While they performed memory tasks, some could keep their phone with them and some had to put it in another room. Those who had the phone with them did significantly worse on the tasks. The attention and energy it takes to not check a phone seems to cause “brain drain.” The study’s findings appeared in the April 2017 issue of the Journal of the Association for Consumer Research.

One realm where technology measurably impacts performance is academics. A report on cellphone use abroad found that after schools in England banned mobile phones, the test scores of 16-year-old students increased by 6.4%, according to a March 2021 report in The Conversation. Inter-

estingly, the impact was twice as large among low-achieving students, indicating that phones further the already significant achievement gap between students who excel in school and students who do not.

- **Cellphones impact mental wellness.**

Rates of depression in adolescents have been increasing. From 2005 to 2017, major depressive episodes reported by adolescents within the previous year increased by 52%, according to the National Survey on Drug Use and Health, a nationally representative survey of more than 600,000 U.S. adolescents and adults. A Journal of Adolescence survey of 15- and 16-year-olds across 37 countries in 2018 determined that, in comparison to 2012, twice as many tweens and teens reported feeling lonely, with girls reporting higher levels of loneliness than boys.

Youth who spend more time on social media have a greater likelihood of reporting depressive symptoms, and for middle schoolers on social media, the likelihood of reporting these symptoms is even higher. A 2022 Monitoring the Future study found in-person time with friends strongly correlates to fewer depressive symptoms. If we can create a school environment that gives kids no choice but to communicate and socialize face-to-face with their friends, teachers, counselors, coaches, principals, etc., we are taking a step in the right direction when it comes to adolescent mental health.



▪ **Cellphone use can lead to stories of pain.**

As the Screenagers team travels across the country, we meet people who are eager to share their personal struggles with technology.

Cyberbullying is raised frequently as a significant issue among school-aged children, but even more youth experience micro-emotional hits, such as being left out of group chats, seeing photos and videos of only some members of a friend group together and comparing themselves to the images their peers post on social media.

These hits consume kids throughout the school day when they have access to their phones. These seemingly small moments make it nearly impossible to focus on learning. In our film “Screenagers Next Chapter,” James Gross, director of the Stanford Psychophysiology Lab, explains what he and fellow researchers discovered in laboratory studies and in the field.

“When people try to use suppression, they can look cool, but they don’t feel cool,” says Gross, a psy-



chologist who studies emotion and emotion regulation. “Furthermore, their thinking process is slowed down, so if you give people information while they’re suppressing, they don’t remember it as well.”

“If I’m a teenager and I’m really upset about something that a friend of mine said or something had happened at home, trying to suppress that emotion may make me so busy



cognitively that I can’t really pay attention to what the teacher is saying or what the homework is all about,” Gross says. “And if you add that up day after day, it can mean very, very different trajectories academically.”

William Dorritie, superintendent of a rural 340-student school district in the upstate New York community of Laurens, told us: “I can say without a doubt that the vast majority of student conflicts we deal with on a day-to-day basis originate from social media. Students are constantly trying to check their phones for the latest social media posts, any of which cause stress and anxiety during the school day.”

■ **Impactful policy**

What our organization calls Away for the Day policies that are being adopted by a growing number of schools are showing some reported improvements in students’ emotional well-being and academic performance. Matthew Burnham, a middle school principal in El Cerrito, Calif., which introduced this practice in 2016, says, “When we took the phones away, we had very little pushback from the kids, and all of those distractions and problems went away.”

Ryan Wilson, now a high school principal in Southlake, Texas, was interviewed for an upcoming Screenagers blog about starting an Away for the Day policy during his tenure as principal of Dawson Middle School, also in Southlake.

“Since [implementing the policy], we’ve continued to have our share of cellphone drama,” he says. “But it is very much reduced and often not during the confines of the school day. Social media use still causes conflicts in school,” Wilson explains, “but school personnel are more able to process the situations calmly.”

■ **Enforcement worries**

So why do middle schools allow students to have phones with them all day? In many cases, school adminis-

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trators tell us they want to make a change but do not have the bandwidth to create a more effective schoolwide plan restricting phone use.

Other administrative leaders say they are concerned about trying to enforce such limitations. Dorritie, who spent 14 years as a principal in Laurens before becoming superintendent in 2020, says, “To be honest, for several years I had been advocating against an Away for the Day policy, feeling that phones were so much a part of our daily lives that we would be best served by educating students on appropriate cell-phone usage.”

Ultimately, Dorritie did put in place an Away for the Day policy in his district this fall when he realized how access to personal digital devices was complicating life at school for educators and students alike. “My views have certainly changed on this

topic,” he says. “While I still believe in the proper use of technology to advance teaching and learning, I think that instituting a 1:1 device program where the district has control over the network is a far more effective tool than allowing students to use their cellphones during the school day.”

Dorritie expects the number of bullying reports and school counselor visits related to social media conflict will decline this school year. However, he admits he is concerned about enforcement of the new policy, while noting the school board and most parents he’s heard from have been supportive. “I would much rather enforce the new policy than have students experiencing significant emotional distress and cyberbullying through social media during school hours,” he says.

Emerging benefits

Seeing how phones impact our students’ learning and mental health makes it clear that something needs to change. Away for the Day initiatives have greatly improved school culture in the schools that have implemented them by enabling students to connect face to face and learn with less distraction.

When parents and educators step up to support practices to keep children off of their cellphones during the school day, these initiatives can go even further. ■

Delaney Ruston is a physician in Seattle, Wash., and director/producer of “Screenagers” documentaries. Contact her at delaney@screenagersmovie.com.

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If you have a newly elected or appointed school board member, encourage them to attend a WASB New School Board Member Gathering, which will provide an informal orientation to:

- Discuss essential information for their first board meeting.
- Meet their WASB regional director.
- Network with new and experienced school board members in their WASB region.
- Learn about WASB services that can help them in their new role.

Experienced board members and district administrators are encouraged to attend and offer input and guidance.

All gatherings are scheduled for 7-9 p.m. There is no cost or need to register. Visit WASB.org for more information.

There will be a statewide online meeting for new school board members on Thursday, April 25. This meeting will be recorded and available for viewing at any time afterward.

New School Board Member Gatherings

APRIL 16-18 | 15 LOCATIONS

All gatherings are complimentary

APRIL 25:

Online Statewide Meeting

■ Tuesday, APRIL 16

- Region 3: CESA 7, Green Bay
- Region 4: CESA 7, Menomonie Middle School
- Region 7: CESA 6, Oshkosh
- Region 12: Verona Area High School
- Region 15: Pewaukee High School

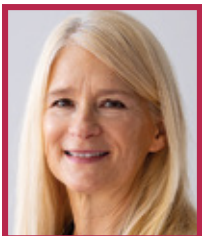
■ Wednesday, APRIL 17

- Region 1: CESA 11, Turtle Lake*
- Region 5: Marathon High School Library
- Region 6: CESA 4, West Salem
- Region 11: Muskego-Norway District Office
- Region 13: Elkhorn School District Administrative Building

■ Thursday, APRIL 18

- Region 1: Best Western The Hotel Chequamegon, Ashland*
- Region 2: Lakeland Union High School, Minocqua
- Region 8: Reedsville High School Library
- Region 9: CESA 3, Fennimore
- Region 10: Gerstenkorn Administration Building, Portage

* *There will be two gatherings for Region 1. The content covered will be the same each evening, so please choose the meeting most convenient for you.*



Kelly Thompson Joins WASB

Former Muskego-Norway Supt. Kelly Thompson, Ph.D., has joined the WASB as a search and governance consultant.

She specializes in continuous improvement processes, strategic plan development, progress monitoring and

stakeholder and survey feedback. Thompson also has significant experience with referendums, facility master planning, human resources and school board governance.

She retired from Muskego-Norway Schools after serving 30 years in various roles, including superintendent for 11 years, assistant superintendent for human resources, director of curriculum and instruction, associate high school principal and director of pupil services.

Thompson has a doctorate in educational leadership from the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee along with a bachelor's degree in psychology and a master's degree in educational psychology. □

Spring Workshops

Navigating Today's Challenges While Keeping the Focus on Students



- **MAY 7-9 and 14-16** | 5 Locations
*Online Statewide Meeting: **MAY 16***
Networking: 6-6:30 p.m. **Dinner:** 6:30-7 p.m.
Presentation: 7-8:30 p.m. (All in-person locations)

-
- | | |
|---|---|
| ■ Tuesday, MAY 7
CESA 2, Whitewater | ■ Tuesday, MAY 14
CESA 7, Green Bay |
| ■ Wednesday, MAY 8
CESA 11, Turtle Lake | ■ Wednesday, MAY 15
CESA 5, Portage |
| ■ Thursday, MAY 9
CESA 1, Pewaukee | ■ Thursday, MAY 16
Virtual |

Amid today's rapidly evolving educational landscape, it can be challenging to keep the focus where it belongs — on promoting the success of all our students. Does your board's mission and vision align with the goal of high levels of learning for all children? Come together, share insights and collaborate on solutions at our Spring Workshop. This isn't just another passive presentation; attendees will meet and learn from other school board members facing common challenges. Don't miss out on this chance to share a meal with, learn from and inspire each other in an interactive workshop where we'll tackle some of the following questions together:

- How does your board's mission and vision align with a goal of high levels of learning for all children? How are you and your administration working together to achieve high levels of learning for all children?
- What metrics are you using to measure outcomes for all kids? How do you navigate the discussions that are brought forth with a specific focus on "some" kids while reflecting and considering "all" kids?
- What are your schools implementing to keep students coming to school engaged in their learning?

Visit [WASB.org](https://www.wasb.org) for more information and to register. Members are welcome to attend a workshop in any location.

Upcoming Webinars

■ INDIVIDUAL CONTRACTS AND THE NONRENEWAL PROCESS

APRIL 3 | 12-1 p.m.

Presenter: Scott Mikesh, Staff Counsel

This presentation covers all aspects of teacher contracts, including the drafting of contracts, contract terms, application of section 118.22 Wis. Stat. to teacher nonrenewals and more.

Registration is required.

■ SCHOOL BOARD REORGANIZATIONAL MEETING

APRIL 11 | 12-1 p.m.

Presenter: Bob Butler, Associate Executive Director and Staff Counsel

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

This webinar is complimentary, and no registration is required. It will be recorded and placed on the Online Events page on [WASB.org](https://www.wasb.org).

■ ANNUAL AND SPECIAL MEETINGS: NOTICES, PROCEDURES AND POWERS

JUNE 26 | 12-1 p.m.

This presentation will review the notice requirements for annual and special meetings, cover meeting agendas and procedures and discuss the division of powers between the annual meeting and the school board in common school districts.

Registration required.

Please note: *These webinars, and all previous ones, are recorded and available on demand. WASB members can purchase any webinar and watch when their schedule allows. Upcoming live and pre-recorded webinars are listed on the [WASB Webinars page](https://www.wasb.org) at [WASB.org](https://www.wasb.org). In addition, links to past webinars are available in the [Policy Resources Guide](#).*

■ RECURRING WEBINAR: WASB LEGAL AND LEGISLATIVE VIDEO UPDATE

APRIL 10, MAY 15, JUNE 19 | 12 p.m.

Each month, WASB staff counsel and government relations staff address current topics of interest to WASB members. The topics are typically driven by recent developments affecting schools in the state Legislature, Congress, governmental agencies and the courts.

This webinar is complimentary, and no registration is required. Visit [WASB.org](https://www.wasb.org) for the link.

Campaign Season is Advocacy Season for School Leaders

Now is the time to build the foundation for relationships with lawmakers, but redistricting could point you in a new direction



Whether you are a newly elected member of your school board or a grizzled veteran, you've likely seen how your schools are influenced by the decisions made in Madison and Washington, D.C. That influence can be positive and helpful, but it can also be problematic and challenging for your work. For that reason, it is important for school leaders to help state and federal policymakers understand and appreciate the effect of their decisions on students and school districts.

The WASB Government Relations staff provides high-quality, professional representation for Wisconsin school boards at the state Capitol and with state agencies and federal officials. The Government Relations staff works to develop effective relationships with lawmakers on both sides of the aisle and with agency officials to advance the WASB Legislative Agenda and the resolutions adopted at the annual Delegate Assemblies. Our messaging has more impact and effectiveness with lawmakers when we are backed up by your local arguments and examples.

As locally elected officials, school board members are uniquely able to have influence. You share constitu-

ents with your elected lawmakers. And, in trying to influence your lawmakers, you are not in this alone. The WASB is here to help you advocate effectively.

■ Redistricting: Making sense of the new legislative district maps signed into law

As has been the case in recent election years, a significant number of state legislators are announcing their intention not to return next session. Some are running for other offices, but many are closing the book on public life, at least for the time being. It is important to keep track of these announcements in case the legislators who represent your school districts (in whole or in part) leave office.

In some cases, you may lose a legislator with whom you have a good working relationship, and you will be looking to duplicate that with a new face. In other cases, if the relationship wasn't the best it could be, you have an opportunity to begin anew.

With legislative district maps changing as well, you could be in a situation where you are getting new legislators even if they are incum-

bents. The WASB is tracking these changes statewide. Through our Legislative Update Blog, we will be updating you on:

- Legislators who have announced they are not returning.
- Legislators who were drawn out of their current districts and have announced their intention to move to run in their old district or intend to run in a new district.
- Legislators who are running for a new office.

It is important to know how the new legislative maps impact your school district.

■ 2023-24 Legislative Session wraps up

As we are writing this column, the state Senate is in session for the last time barring something extraordinary. In next month's column we plan to summarize some of the major K-12 legislation passed this session.

It is time to assess what happened legislatively this session and identify areas of importance that were not addressed and need to be worked on next session.

Our messaging has more impact and effectiveness with lawmakers when we are backed up by your local arguments and examples.

Follow the Legislative Update blog at wasb.org/legislative-update to get information about the latest developments in Madison and Washington, D.C.

This means that by the time you are reading this, lawmakers have been done with legislating for a couple of weeks. They are starting to focus on their reelection if they are running again. That means they are back in their districts and looking to get out in the community.

■ **Advocacy activities that can help you build a relationship:**

- Publicly thank your legislators in person, through your local media or on social media for the positive K-12 initiatives that they supported. Remind them of the ongoing commitment to K-12 that is required for student success, and nudge them on issues that were not addressed.
- Invite them to your schools for a tour and meeting about your school district's successes and challenges.
- Invite them to speak at an end of school or beginning of the school year event. The more time they spend with you and your students, the better they will understand your mission.

- Invite them to a school board meeting to update the board on legislation from the past session.
- Host candidate forums to get to know candidates for your legislative districts. Question them on their knowledge of education issues and positions.
- Alert local media of any visits or events.
- After the election, meet with your legislators or candidates elect. Lay the groundwork for the next legislative session.

■ **WASB resources**

The WASB Government Relations staff offers a variety of resources to assist you in advocating for the needs of your district:

- Follow the Legislative Update blog at wasb.org/legislative-update to get information about the latest developments in Madison and Washington, D.C.
- When something timely and important is happening that requires quick advocacy, we will notify you with a WASB Action Alert email. These emails utilize

an advocacy software system that makes it quick and easy to contact your lawmakers with sample messages that you can customize to highlight the impact on your district.

- If you use social media, follow the WASB Facebook and X accounts.
- Check out the monthly Legal and Legislative Video Updates at noon on the third Wednesday of the month.
- Advocacy information can also be accessed via our weekly e-newsletter, the eConnection.

The April election will bring many new board members to the state. This year's new board members have the opportunity of starting the same year as new legislative districts and potentially new lawmakers. This means you have the chance to start alongside new representatives and build those relationships from the ground floor. With the wind at your back, why not try your new wings at advocacy!

If you don't tell your district's story, who will? ■

You have the chance to start alongside new representatives
and build those relationships from the ground floor.



Notices of Reasonable Assurance and Summer Unemployment Benefits

Unemployment benefits are designed to provide partial wage replacement to employees when they are between jobs or have experienced a significant decrease in work hours and wages for reasons beyond their control. Many school employees are not scheduled to work over the summer months. However, if school districts comply with specific provisions in the unemployment compensation law by issuing notices of reasonable assurance, most school employees who do not work over the summer will not be eligible for unemployment benefits. This is particularly important for school districts because unlike most private employers, school districts cannot purchase unemployment insurance. Instead, school districts must reimburse the state dollar-for-dollar for any unemployment benefits awarded to the school district's employees or former employees. This Legal Comment will discuss what districts should include in notices of reasonable assurance and the process for issuing them.

What is a notice of reasonable assurance?

By law, a school year employee that only works during the academic year and not during the summer is not eligible for unemployment benefits

for the summer if the employee has reasonable assurance that they will perform reasonably similar employment in the subsequent academic year. To be reasonably similar, the employee must earn at least 90% of the amount the employee earned in the preceding academic year, and the employment must involve substantially the same skill level and knowledge as the employment in the preceding academic year.

A notice of reasonable assurance allows a district to document that it gave reasonable assurance of reasonably similar employment to a particular employee for the subsequent academic year. At the same time, the notice informs the employee that because they have reasonable assurance of reasonably similar employment for the next academic year, they are not eligible for unemployment benefits over the summer. This may prevent an employee from inadvertently filing for unemployment benefits over the summer months, and save the district from needing to expend time and effort to respond to such a claim.

Who should receive a notice of reasonable assurance?

Any employee that only works during the academic year and is not under contract for the following

school year should receive a notice of reasonable assurance. Many support staff positions fit into this category, but not all of them. For example, some administrative assistants and custodians might work 12 months a year, which means they do not need to receive a notice. They will not be eligible for unemployment over the summer because they work over the summer.

Teachers and administrators who received a contract for next year or received notice of renewal of their contract for next year also do not need to receive a notice of reasonable assurance. The contract generally constitutes reasonable assurance of reasonably similar employment for the next school year.

Substitute teachers and substitute support staff should receive notices of reasonable assurance if the district reasonably anticipates employing them in a similar manner next year. However, some substitute teachers may qualify for unemployment benefits even if they receive notice of reasonable assurance because of the uncertain work schedules of substitute employees. For example, a long-term sub that worked nearly an entire quarter through the end of the academic year, likely doesn't have reasonable assurance of reasonably similar employment if the district just plans to place the employee on

Any employee that only works during the academic year and is not under contract for the following school year should receive a notice of reasonable assurance.

Districts need to issue notices of reasonable assurance no later than the employee's last day of work for the current school year.

the daily substitute list next school year. By contrast, if a district offered the employee a long-term sub position for the first quarter of the next school year, the employee likely has reasonable assurance of reasonably similar employment and would not be eligible for unemployment benefits over the summer. These cases are very fact dependent.

■ What should a notice of reasonable assurance contain?

A notice of reasonable assurance should be in the form of a letter to the employee. It should notify the employee that they have reasonable assurance of continued employment with the district for the following year in accordance with Wis. Stat. § 108.04(17). It should specify that this employment will be reasonably similar to their current position with respect to their compensation and will also involve work that is substantially the same skill level and knowledge as their most recent employment.

During the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, the Wisconsin Department of Workforce Development concluded that a notice of reasonable assurance was insufficient if it did not give the employee a reasonably specific start date for the next school year. While those circumstances were unique, districts should specify in the notice the last day of an employee's employment for the current year and the first day of their anticipated employment for the subsequent school year.

A notice of reasonable assurance should also include a disclaimer that it is not an employment contract and that it does not alter an employee's

at-will status. Additionally, districts should specify in the notice that the district retains the ability to reassign employees consistent with applicable policies, and that the district is not guaranteeing an employee a specific position for next year. However, a district needs to be careful when reassigning an employee for a subsequent school year because if the new assignment is not reasonably similar to the employee's previous employment, the employee could be eligible for unemployment benefits from the summer months. For example, a district likely could not offer a special education paraprofessional employment as a custodian for the following year without the employee being eligible for unemployment benefits over the summer months, even if the positions paid the same, because the work does not use substantially the same skill level and knowledge as their most recent employment.

■ When and how do school districts distribute notices of reasonable assurance?

Districts need to issue notices of reasonable assurance no later than the employee's last day of work for the current school year. Many districts issue these notices in early to mid-May to avoid the rush that often accompanies the end of the school year. A district could issue notices even earlier if it wants to so long as the district is reasonably certain that the employee will be employed next academic year in reasonably similar employment.

Districts should hand deliver or mail a copy of the notice to the employee and keep a copy for its

records with a notation regarding how and when the notice was given to the employee. Some districts ask employees to acknowledge receipt of the notice by signing and returning a confirmation of receipt and understanding of the notice. This can be an effective practice, but it comes with the added administrative step of ensuring that every employee signs and returns these notices. An employee that fails to return the confirmation slip might try to argue that they never received the notice and is entitled to unemployment benefits over the summer.

■ What can school districts do if they don't issue a timely notice of reasonable assurance?

If a district forgets to provide notice of reasonable assurance to one or more employees, the district can limit the impact by promptly providing those employees with notice. Once the employee receives the notice, they will be ineligible for benefits from that point forward. Theoretically, a district could receive notice that an employee has applied for benefits, realize they do not have a record of issuing a notice of reasonable assurance, and issue the notice to the employee that same day. The employee would then only get benefits for those weeks preceding the receipt of the notice.

Sometimes a district is not certain about their staffing needs for next year and decides not to issue a letter of reasonable assurance to certain employees who might not be brought back next school year. Such a district should issue notices of reasonable assurance to employees as soon as it is reasonably certain

School districts should be aware of how to properly draft and use notices of reasonable assurance to minimize their potential unemployment benefit liability over the summer months.

they will have reasonably similar employment for next year. These employees would then only get benefits for those weeks preceding the receipt of that notice.

Conclusion

In a time of continuing budgetary uncertainty, school districts should be aware of how to properly draft and use notices of reasonable assurance to minimize their potential

unemployment benefit liability over the summer months. School districts may wish to work with legal counsel to draft these notices to increase the likelihood that the Department of Workforce Development will deny unemployment benefits over the summer to any academic-year-only employee who received the notice but still applied for unemployment benefits. Districts should also review their procedures to ensure that all

the proper employees receive the notice in a timely manner. ■

Endnotes

This Legal Comment was written by Brian P. Goodman and Douglas E. Witte of Boardman & Clark LLP, WASB Legal Counsel. For related articles, see Wisconsin School News: "Unemployment Benefits Under the New 'Misconduct' and 'Substantial Fault' Standards" (Nov. 2015), and "Let Me Assure You...When Substitute Teachers Are Entitled to Unemployment Compensation During the Summer Months" (Apr. 1995).

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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