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How artificial intelligence tools can help districts improve learning and teaching
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NEARLY 40% OF WISCONSIN TEACHERS LEAVE WITHIN 6 YEARS

The biggest challenge facing Wisconsin is retaining teachers, according to the DPI’s Educator Preparation Program and Workforce Analysis Report. “The state is more successful than our surrounding states in attracting people into the profession as demonstrated by the number of students enrolled in preparation programs,” reads the report, which was released in April. “The state is also preparing and licensing more teachers than are retiring. While the educator workforce would appear stable from these numbers, it is not.” The report attributes the gap to students not pursuing their license, and teachers leaving their schools early in their careers. In 2021-22, 4,002 of the 5,061 Wisconsin students that completed an educator preparation program became licensed. Furthermore, 60.6% of first-year teachers are still employed in Wisconsin after six years. □

WIAA Votes Down NIL for High School Athletes

High school athletes in Wisconsin remain prohibited from benefiting from their name, image and likeness. Wisconsin Interscholastic Athletic Association member schools rejected the NIL proposal by a 219-170 vote, according to the WIAA’s press release following the association’s annual meeting on April 24 in Stevens Point.

The release said the proposed NIL language “would have allowed student-athletes to engage in promotion and revenue opportunities and activities not associated or identified with their school team, school, conference or the WIAA, which included a number of prohibited NIL activities.”

The Milwaukee Journal Sentinel reported that the proposal’s NIL restrictions would have banned students from promoting activities and products associated with gambling/gaming; alcoholic beverages, tobacco, cannabis or related products; banned or illegal substances; adult entertainment products or services; and weapons.

While the members rejected the proposal, WIAA Executive Director Stephanie Hauser said “We will continue this conversation with our membership in response to the trend across the nation with other high school associations allowing some opportunities for name, image, likeness.”

According to the Business of College Sports, high school athletes can monetize their name, image and likeness in 31 states. □

Evers, WEDC Award 18 Districts Fab Lab Grants

Gov. Tony Evers and the Wisconsin Economic Development Corporation announced in late April that 18 school districts will receive fabrication laboratory grants — totaling $493,000.

“We’re working to create spaces with new learning opportunities,” Gov. Evers said in the release. “These grants will go a long way toward helping build the 21st-century workforce we need.”


Student Stops Bus Amid Driver’s Medical Emergency

When his school bus driver lost consciousness, Acie Holland III grabbed the steering wheel and hit the brakes, according to WISN and a letter from the Glendale-River Hills School District.

The Glen Hills Middle School eighth grader was reportedly riding the bus after school when he noticed the driver having a medical emergency. The bus, which was carrying 20 kids, began veering into an oncoming lane.

“I looked up at the bus driver and she was dazed,” Holland reportedly said. “I grabbed the steering wheel, got us to the curb and hit the brakes. When we hit the curb, I turned the wheel all the way because I didn’t know where the parking brake was.”

According to the district, Holland called 911 before the driver regained consciousness and called Riteway dispatch, which sent a safety team and driver to complete the route.

“I hope people take away the fact that everyday people can do extraordinary things,” Glen Hills Middle School Principal Anna Young said. “Our students can surprise themselves.” □
Stay Connected This Summer

Each April, the WASB hosts gatherings of newly elected school board members around the state. I helped facilitate two of those meetings and came away impressed by how eager attendees were to learn about their new role as board members.

We begin each meeting by asking those in attendance: Why did you become a board member? Most often, the answer is some variation of “To give back to our community” or “To help our community’s kids reach their potential.”

It’s heartening that while newly elected board members may be passionate about specific issues, they also want children to succeed in school and in life.

Research tells us that school boards that prioritize student learning can help boost student achievement levels. That’s a big reason it’s so important to continue to develop and improve as a school leader.

The WASB is here to help you. We’re committed to ensuring that new board members (and more seasoned members, too) are equipped to be the best they can be. The WASB’s cadre of experienced school attorneys and consultants can provide a wide spectrum of board governance training. Our wealth of online resources is also available to you.

On June 11, we’re launching a biweekly “New School Board Member Webinar” series based on the New School Board Member Handbook. Each of the five webinars, which will run through August 6, will cover at least one chapter of the handbook, with WASB attorneys and consultants detailing the most important takeaways and answering attendee questions.

These webinars will introduce you to many WASB staff members who will provide support throughout the year. For more, turn the page to find our Report to the Membership and learn what we’ve been up to over the past year.

Please join us for more learning and networking at our Summer Learning Symposium on July 12-13 in Green Bay.

You’ll learn about the latest technological best practices, cautions and challenges for our schools. Sessions include topics focused on artificial intelligence, cybersecurity, student progress monitoring, using podcasts to inform and engage, and more.

On Friday evening former Green Bay Packers great LeRoy Butler, inventor of the Lambeau Leap and a Pro Football Hall of Famer, will be our featured dinner speaker. This optional dinner is separately ticketed. Reserve your seat soon, as they’re likely to go quickly.

Several articles in this issue preview the symposium, which will focus heavily on technology. Read how the Oregon School District uses an internal podcast to showcase its students and keep the community informed about school happenings.

Finally, technology can help districts learn how their students are feeling. Turn to Page 20 to see why it’s essential to go directly to the source and ask students how they’re doing.

While cyberattacks can disrupt districts, turn to Page 18 to explore the connective possibilities of technology. Read how the Oregon School District uses an internal podcast to showcase its students and keep the community informed about school happenings.

Our world is ever-changing, and so are the possibilities for our children. The WASB is excited to serve so many school board members who are eager to learn and grow, so our children can learn and grow as well.

I look forward to seeing you in Green Bay. Have a great summer!

The WASB is excited to serve so many school board members who are eager to learn and grow, so our children can learn and grow as well.
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. Highlights of the WASB’s work for you from May 2023 through April 2024.

LEGAL AND POLICY SERVICES

RESPONDED TO 3,897 law-related inquiries from members in 349 districts and provided direct legal services to 85 districts.


PROVIDED TIMELY LEGAL UPDATES through regular webinars, the monthly Legal and Legislative Video Update and the electronic Legal and Policy Newsletter.

MEMBER SERVICES

Received and responded to 190 MEMBER SERVICE INQUIRIES.

CUSTOMIZED LEADERSHIP SERVICES

Directly served 52 SCHOOL DISTRICTS with customized consultations (e.g., leadership roles and responsibilities, governance, leadership coaching, strategic planning and superintendent evaluation) and assisted many other districts with informal consultations.

Continued to provide districts with access to the updated 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 Regional Meetings, January Convention, Spring Workshops and the SUMMER LEARNING SYMPOSIUM.

STATE EDUCATION CONVENTION

Welcomed 3,286 ATTENDEES, including 1,695 paid registrants, to three general sessions, 84 breakout sessions and 244 EXHIBITORS.

SOCIAL MEDIA/MEMBER OUTREACH

Received 308,583 PAGE VIEWS on the WASB website from May 2023 through April 2024.

Followed by more than 3,600 X (formerly Twitter) Users and more than 1,600 FACEBOOK USERS.

Released monthly episodes of the WASB CONNECTION PODCAST through February.

Recognized 140 BUSINESSES throughout Wisconsin on the WASB Business Honor Roll.
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 or contact the association toll-free at 877-705-4422. The WASB is here to serve you.

**HIGHLIGHTS OF 2023-24 SERVICES**

**ADVOCACY & GOVERNMENT RELATIONS**

- **TRACKED 331 BILLS** through the legislative process, including 94 the WASB supported, 59 the WASB opposed and **28 THAT WERE ULTIMATELY SIGNED INTO LAW.**

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

- Provided weekly budget-focused **CAPITOL CHAT WEBINARS** on Fridays from the introduction of the state budget bill until the bill’s passage.

- Held a November 2023 **LEGISLATIVE EVENT** at Green Lake for 134 people.

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

**MEETINGS & EVENTS**

- Received **13,953 TOTAL VIDEO VIEWS** from May 2023 through April 2024, including **2,434 views on the 61 videos, webinars and workshops uploaded in that timeframe.**

- Added to the **ONLINE LEARNING PLATFORM** with introductory and advanced modules that provide a comprehensive source of online governance and legal trainings.

- Hosted **MORE THAN 30 WEBINARS,** including 20-plus complimentary webinars.

- Held a **SUMMER LEADERSHIP INSTITUTE,** Policy & Resolutions Meetings, a Legislative Conference and a School Law Conference.

- Put on 15 in-person **FALL REGIONAL MEETINGS,** and one virtual, in September and October.

- Held in-person and virtual **NEW BOARD MEMBER GATHERINGS** and Spring Workshops.

**SEARCH SERVICES**

- **COMPLETED 16 SUCCESSFUL PERMANENT SUPERINTENDENT SEARCHES** and one interim superintendent search.

- **AIDED NUMEROUS OTHER DISTRICTS** through presentations and advice.

**WASB INSURANCE PLAN**

- Provided timely, insurance-related updates through webinars and electronic alerts.

- Added to **ARCHIVAL LIBRARY** of insurance-related resources.
Tutor in your Pocket

How artificial intelligence tools can help districts improve learning and teaching

By Brock Fritz


“For years, we’ve had this challenge that there’s not enough teachers for students. Well, artificial intelligence tools give every kid a customized, personalized coach and tutor to accompany them in the classroom,” says Halverson, whose research examines how technology shapes learning in and out of schools. “And they have infinite patience and resourcefulness. The AI tutors are not as smart as the best teachers, but they’re a whole lot better than nothing. AI has the potential to be the most influential technology for learning that we’ve ever seen.”

Halverson, a former high school teacher and administrator, will share why he believes AI can have a dynamic impact on education during his July 12 keynote at the WASB Summer Learning Symposium in Green Bay.

“AI tools are really teaching and
learning tools — you ask them questions and they provide answers,” Halverson says. “This is a revolution in education, and it’s a very accessible revolution. It’s the easiest technology there’s been. You just use ordinary human language — no special buttons, no coding. It’s just any device and ordinary language.”

While always passionate about technology’s role in education, including using video game design as a model for learning, Halverson is particularly interested in the future of AI. It’s a world he jumped into in December 2022.

“When ChatGPT came out, it was like a thunderclap,” says Halverson, co-author of “Rethinking Education in the Age of Technology: The Digital Revolution and Schooling in America.” “The internet has been a really good learning tool, but AI is framing sentences around the specific things that you care about, and using the whole internet as a resource. It’s just a completely different level of access.”

While easy to access, not everyone can inherently get the most out of their AI tools. Because AI is a computer, its output depends entirely on the input. Therefore, getting the best responses requires curiosity, good communication skills and the ability to ask the right questions.

Schools can help students improve their results by teaching prompt engineering: the process of writing questions that get the best answers from generative AI tools.

“If you ask something in a sophisticated and interesting way, it’ll give you a better answer,” Halverson says. “It’s really a form of creative writing that I think will be an emerging form of writing. Good language and communication skills are going to be in high priority as these systems become more interactive.”

It’s not just students that can benefit from AI, according to Halverson. As experts at the head of a classroom, teachers are expected to have a wide breadth of knowledge as they answer student questions. A simple AI prompt of “Tell me three key insights in this research area” can go a long way in helping teachers pull their knowledge to the
The biggest problem people have is when they start thinking of using AI ‘instead of me’ — that’s where cheating happens for students and negligent practice happens for teachers. It’s got to be with you, rather than instead of you.” — UW-Madison Professor Rich Halverson

forefront and prepare to engage in conversation. From there, a teacher can get a jump start on lesson planning by adding, “OK, now make a 10-minute lesson on this research, and create two worksheets so I can check for understanding.”

“Just the way that students have a personalized coach, teachers have a personalized teaching assistant,” Halverson says, noting that AI could have significantly improved his grading efficiency when he was an English teacher. “Going over 35 1,000-word essays with a red pen takes a weekend. But you could have an AI system do a cursory overview: ‘Highlight in this text problematic transitions and then give me a sense of some suggestions I should make for each one.’ You could have the AI system do a pre-read of everything and then switch over to your attention.”

Halverson believes the key to not taking AI too far is keeping the human element at the forefront.

“The biggest problem people have is when they start thinking of using AI ‘instead of me’ — that’s where cheating happens for students and negligent practice happens for teachers,” Halverson says. “It’s got to be with you, rather than instead of you.”

With that in mind, he suggests teachers, students and anyone else using AI to treat its answers as rough drafts that can be developed and edited. By doing some of the leg work ahead of time, AI tools free up the user to focus on their message. Human replacement isn’t the only concern school districts have about allowing AI tools in the classroom. Halverson has long seen many school districts approach new technology with resistance. AI was no exception, with many district leaders immediately worrying that the technology would help students cheat. When speaking at a conference in March 2023, Halverson found that about two-thirds of the schools in attendance were considering policies that would ban AI.

“Cheating on homework is of course something we want to avoid, but there’s so much potential for learning,” Halverson says, adding that the biggest challenge he sees with AI and education is equity. “If there’s a whole group of kids learning with personalized coaches and tutors at their side — with their own devices, internet and parents paying for accounts — and then another group of kids who don’t have those tools, the achievement gaps are going to get out of hand. It’s already out of hand with how much some families pay for the education of their kids. This is just going to make it so much worse.”

That’s why he believes districts must step in and provide access to AI tools to ensure that these equity gaps aren’t present throughout the day.

He suggests districts interested in embracing AI tools start by asking the teachers, recalling a friend in a Wisconsin school district who started the AI discussion by asking teachers what the biggest obstacle was. Their response? Cheating. Leadership went on to ask what would address those cheating concerns, and the teachers decided that the best method was to develop a citation process — just as they would with any other source. They developed a policy together, immediately increasing teacher buy-in.

“They started treating the use of AI as a familiar problem,” Halverson says. “I thought that was a genius way to get the ball rolling, asking teachers, ‘What are your main concerns?’ Address those first and then move on from there.”

Brock Fritz is the WASB director of communications and editor of the Wisconsin School News.
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- A comprehensive Online Learning Platform with introductory and advanced modules to provide on-demand governance and legal trainings for members, including a module specifically for board officers
- Two online training series for school district staff — one focusing on Title IX training and the other on understanding the civil rights of students and employees
- Informative monthly Legal and Legislative Video Updates
- A detailed Superintendent Evaluation Framework to foster productive board/superintendent relationships
- A weekly eConnection newsletter on the latest education news

We look forward to working with you in 2024-25. We are here to serve you!

Contact the WASB today.

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Prioritizing Cybersecurity
Recently, we helped a large school district in the southeastern portion of the U.S. improve its cybersecurity infrastructure to better protect and serve its students. Like many districts, this district expressed general concerns about cybersecurity. They weren’t sure about the best place to start but recognized the need to reduce risk.

Before the district could move forward, the staff first needed to understand the most critical vulnerabilities and what actions they already had taken.

System access is one of the first places school districts need to look when assessing their risks and needs. The district we worked with had multifactor authentication available through its software solution and simply needed to implement this function. MFA ensured that nobody with access to the systems was sharing passwords and prevented the leaking of passwords. This is the base-level support any school district should have and where this large district laid the foundation for a solid overall security strategy.

Many school districts make the mistake of limiting important security features such as MFA to only certain staff, such as IT or chief-level officers. The truth is that anyone in a district with access to applications and systems — educators, staff, directors and others — should be required to use MFA and other security features. This is especially true for payroll and purchasing staff, who have access to significant data and administrative controls and can be primary targets for potential attacks.

From there, the district moved to role-specific authorization, which allowed it to set specific permissions to users to better protect certain data. Finally, the district established a directory access protocol to make access more convenient and secure for all users.

Initial steps
For most districts, three vital features can improve security:

- **Multifactor authentication:** The foundation for a solid cybersecurity strategy, MFA enhances cybersecurity by authenticating users via an authenticator app or email.
- **Role-specific authorization:** Configurable user profiles within a software system can confine sensitive data access only to those who need it.
- **Lightweight directory access protocol:** LDAP enables organizations to securely store and manage information and authenticate users against a centralized directory for access to third-party software solutions.

Schools and districts face historically high numbers of cyberattacks, ranging from malware attacks to data breaches and ransomware. Taking these first steps now is critical to ensuring operational stability and privacy for students, staff and families.

Districtwide threats
Researchers estimate that ransomware attacks cost education institutions more than $53 billion in downtime and compromised more than 6.7 million personal records between 2018 and 2023, according to Comparitech, a cybersecurity product review website. U.S. schools alone lost an estimated $35.1 billion. Cybersecurity firm Sophos reported a 56% year-over-year increase in K-12 ransomware attacks in 2023.

School systems hold valuable troves of data within their systems, and hackers target them because they’re traditionally less defended than data systems in finance, healthcare and other industries. K-12 districts generally are late adopters of technology, and some districts still have not moved to storing infor-
While it can be challenging and time-consuming for IT teams in public schools, **resources must be spent on ongoing cybersecurity training and check-ins** with students, families and staff.

sourcing cybersecurity protocols such as training, monitoring and testing for phishing attack recognition can be helpful. This builds greater awareness among all those IT staff serve so that districts can be better protected.

| Advancing cybersecurity |

Regardless of size, school districts can enhance their cybersecurity strategy using four strategies.

1. **Strong IT leadership and personnel.** An experienced technology leader can weigh in on best practices, considerations for new technology procurement or usage and pressing needs within the context of changing threats.

   Of course, a strong IT leader needs a team. An agile IT team, provided with up-to-date professional learning opportunities, can actively ensure protocol adherence, provide critical training and support, and identify and isolate threats when they arise. A single person can’t do it all. Consider an IT leader’s requests for additional staff seriously in any K-12 budget discussions.


   CISA recommendations include implementing MFA; prioritizing patch management; performing and testing backups; and creating a training and awareness campaign.

   Training and awareness can make or break any cybersecurity initiative. While it can be challenging and time-consuming for IT teams in public schools, resources must be spent on ongoing cybersecurity training and check-ins with students, families and staff. This is especially true as threats continuously evolve.

3. **Secure, integrated technology.** People make up the heart and soul of any cybersecurity initiative, but technology is the backbone — the frame on which everyone’s best efforts stand against threats or fall. Hackers know how to exploit weaknesses, so reputable technology providers must constantly update their software with security features like MFA and website encryption. Additionally, cloud-based systems can offer reliable system maintenance and redundancy without taxing district staff.

   Integrated software systems also help reduce risk. When data move within a single system, the data are not exposed via third-party app connections or emailed spreadsheets. Simplifying tech stacks can exponentially improve a district’s cybersecurity.

   Avoid sending and storing sensitive information via email.
Use a web-based email encryption solution, which enables secure sending and receiving of sensitive data and information. The recipient receives a link to view the message and attachments. They follow this link, log in and then safely view the details without a hacker’s prying eyes catching a glimpse.

**4: Careful response planning.** Planning for an attack or incident is a realistic part of any cybersecurity initiative. Even with the best defenses in place, a careless link click can spell disaster. The first step in such an event is not to panic.

Districts should have a business continuity plan ready to put in place. The Southeast district developed a plan that will maintain smooth operations, minimize impact on student learning and ease families’ expectations should an attack occur on their district. The continuity protocol included a timetable for an incident investigation, how long the plan should be used in various scenarios and clear communication measures throughout the process. The district implemented a strong cybersecurity program that resulted in greater awareness of security protocols and has so far reduced risk for the large district.

**An ongoing partnership**

Together, software providers and K-12 professionals can solidify a cybersecurity strategy that’s up to date, resilient and practical to implement and maintain. The Southeast district that implemented multifactor authentication is on track to exponentially improve its overall cybersecurity strategy.

No school or district needs to go it alone. Partnering with software vendors and security experts can help mitigate the risk and instill confidence going forward.

Tim Chadwick is chief information security officer at LINQ in Wilmington, N.C.

Morrad Battah is a solutions consultant at LINQ.

A few hours before the school day began on the morning of Jan. 10, 2022, most Neenah Joint School District staff members and families were preparing themselves and their children for the start of a new week — and a typical below-zero Wisconsin day.

Soon, a few district staff members reported they weren't able to access their Google accounts. It was inconvenient, but it seemed harmless enough for a Monday morning. But when the phones stopped working and the entire district server shut down, it quickly became apparent this was not a typical school day.

District technology staff immediately realized that Neenah had become a victim of a cybersecurity attack. Fortunately, Neenah had prepared for such an incident, previously developing a cyberattack crisis plan. The district had also purchased cyber insurance, which proved to be invaluable throughout the ordeal.

After learning of the incident, district leaders immediately notified law enforcement and engaged cybersecurity experts to begin restoring systems and conducting a thorough digital forensic investigation. The Wisconsin National Guard’s Cyber Protection team was called in, quickly arriving on scene thanks to Director of Cybersecurity Operations Lt. Co. Sarah Frater happening to be a Neenah resident and parent. Frater and her team arrived at the Neenah Joint School District Administration Building within the hour.

School proceeded that Monday, but it wasn't a typical school day. With little technology available, teachers were forced to pivot fast, and learning looked much like it did decades ago. The district intended to continue working through the outage, but it became clear that the challenges were too much for staff and students, forcing the district to cancel school for January 11.

Meanwhile, the district’s technology staff was working around the clock to get the systems back up and running. Many of the details associated with the attack must remain confidential, but the technology staff and National Guard quickly made significant progress in restoring the systems. A highly secure software system was deployed immediately to prevent additional data from being accessed, but the district remained closed on January 12.

“The decision to cancel is based on three factors that we believe need to be in place in order to safely and appropriately resume school: A working phone system, a working wireless system and staff access to their digital files,” the district announced on Facebook at the time. “The restoration of our services is a deliberate process, and we will not sacrifice our safety...
and security for speed.”

The district also wanted to ensure it was in control of all school door fobs and HVAC units. All of those factors were restored in time for school to resume on Thursday, January 13. Although technology was still limited, Friday was a scheduled half day and the district was closed the following Monday for Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. Day, giving the technology experts even more time to restore the systems for the long term.

During the process of determining what data was taken, it was apparent that no student data was breached and only a small amount of personal data from staff members was impacted. The district held an all-staff Zoom meeting, with staff gathering in groups at each school and accessing the meeting through personal hotspots. Communication was challenging, but the district’s mass messaging software could still be accessed, allowing continued updates to be shared with emails to families and texts to staff.

The insurance company put the district in touch with experts who regularly deal with ransomware negotiations. The negotiators determined the attack likely originated from overseas. The perpetrators of the attack are part of a vast web of cybercriminals that orchestrate these events. The group is protected overseas and has not been apprehended.

The negotiators worked alongside the technology experts to determine what information had been accessed. Because the district took significant steps to protect any impacted data, there was a high degree of confidence that there was extremely low risk associated with the stolen data. Furthermore, through the district’s insurance provider, every employee was provided one year of personal identity protection.

Although the district’s technology staff had the primary pieces in place within days, allowing school to return to session, it took months before the technology systems were fully operational.

While the district was prepared for an attack, it has since taken additional steps to prevent such an incident from happening again. Many of those preventative steps are confidential, but district employees have gotten used to new protocols such as two-factor authentications and stronger password practices.

Neenah was not the first Wisconsin district to experience such an attack, nor will it be the last. Districts can only secure their systems as best they can. Therefore, it’s crucial to develop a cyberattack crisis plan, purchase cybersecurity insurance and stay as prepared as possible.

Jim Strick is the communications director at Neenah Joint School District.
Cybersecurity is everyone’s lift. It’s also a difficult topic that can be easy to avoid and hard to understand.

It’s easy to dismiss the cyber events we read about in the paper, often thinking, “This will always happen to someone else, right?”

As a member of the Milton Board of Education, the chief information officer to the Educational Communications Board, and a volunteer on the Wisconsin Cyber Response Team, I sincerely wish I could tell you that it will never happen to your district. But I unfortunately cannot. What I can do is arm you with information that will help reduce the likelihood of an event in your district and increase your response time. I have had the honor of working with several districts that have experienced cyber events. These experiences have given me a unique perspective on what is important for a school board member to know about cybersecurity.

To help you prepare for a day I hope never comes, here are my top seven things all board members should know or do to be prepared for a cybersecurity incident.

1. It’s not if, it’s when. It sounds a little dramatic, but unfortunately there is truth in this statement. K-12 school districts are an extremely popular cyber target. With a quick Google search, you can find that K-12
schools are often listed at, or near, the top of entities hit by cyberattacks. The Wisconsin Cyber Response Team responded to more than 40 K-12 incidents in the past three years, which means roughly one-tenth of Wisconsin public schools have faced an attack. This does not include the unknown number of school districts who didn’t report their incident to the Wisconsin CRT. Rather than thinking “It can’t happen here,” take the time to plan and prepare.

2. Why K-12’s are a target. The bad guys like easy targets. School districts sometimes fall in that category, as they are commonly at a financial disadvantage — both in physical and human resources — when it comes to funding the protection needed to properly protect against professional thieves. Simply put, it’s common for a district to not have adequate funding or staffing to stand up to sophisticated attacks. School districts, rich in sellable data, also hold value. Student demographic data is often bought on the dark web, held and then utilized when a student turns 18 to open credit cards or commit identity theft. If you were a thief, the front door was open and you could see piles of money inside, you would definitely try that house.

3. Understand cyber insurance. A good cyber insurance policy is extremely important. Just like anything, there are good and bad policies. Cyber insurance is just as much about what is not in the policy as what is. Have a healthy conversation with your district leadership about ensuring your district has quality cyber insurance. Additionally, understand that a good cyber insurance policy is not cybersecurity. While necessary and important, it is only part of a good cyber posture, and should be reviewed annually.

4. Understand the impact. Cyberattacks are becoming increasingly common. They can significantly disrupt a district in multiple ways, including lost educational time, lost community trust and unexpected financial burden. In the event of a significant incident, your district may be closed for several days, and a mountain of communication will need to occur. Furthermore, if an event includes data loss, the district might need to pay for credit checks for a large number of people. Not only is the threat real, so are the consequences.

5. Prepare for a cyber event. Treat cybersecurity like any other catastrophe that might impact a district. Districts should prepare for and test their response procedure for a cyberattack just like they prepare for a fire or tornado. Make sure your district’s continuity of operations plan is updated with a cyber/data loss response playbook. The proper response can minimize the damage and streamline recovery. As a board, discuss and practice your role in a cyber response. As a district, if the bad day ever comes, you will want to be able to tell the community you were prepared and did everything you could to prevent it.

6. Have conversations. Don’t let the first time you discuss a cyberattack be when you’re in the middle of one. As a board, work with district leadership, and discuss your district’s cyber posture and how to fortify it. Take time as a board to discuss difficult topics, such as whether to pay a cyber ransom. Write your decisions into policy if applicable. This might not only benefit you, but also future boards.

7. Help is out there. Feeling a bit overwhelmed? There are many free resources available to K-12 school districts, as well as a host of experienced districts and people willing to assist. For districts unsure where to start on their cyber journey, I recommend talking to the Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction and reviewing the resources shared on the DPI cybersecurity website, at dpi.wi.gov/cyber-security/cyber-security-resources. CESAs and other school districts are also a fantastic resource of people with varying levels of cybersecurity experience.

Unfortunately, the threat of a cyberattack is real and should be taken seriously. For the foreseeable future, districts must stay prepared and fortify their networks to ensure they can provide a quality continuity of operations. I encourage all Wisconsin board members to educate themselves on this topic, with the understanding that it’s better to be prepared for a bad day that never comes than to not be prepared on that bad day.

Cybersecurity is “everyone’s lift.” As one of the guardians of your district, take time to ensure your district is fortified, educated and prepared to respond.

Edward Snow is a School District of Milton board member and a member of the Wisconsin Cyber Response Team.
It’s all about the kids.” Not just a tagline, the student-centered focus is apparent upon pulling up the Oregon School District’s podcast feed.

Student names litter the page, with recent episodes of “Inside the OSD with [Superintendent] Dr. Leslie Bergstrom” featuring titles such as “Amazing Student Interviews,” “Keeping Our Kids Safe,” “Alumni Tell All,” “German Exchange Students” and “Homecoming Festivities.”

“When the students are on and find out everybody can get the podcast through Spotify, they get excited,” Bergstrom says. “Last year we went out to the Dane County Fair and met with FFA students who were showing animals. We did interviews with a lot of the kids, sitting at a picnic table and talking about their experience. It was an absolute delight, because the students are so enthused about what they’re doing. And so knowledgeable … when you listen to them, it’s impressive.”

That’s what the podcast is intended to do: Showcase students while keeping the community informed about district happenings.

As the podcast’s webpage, found on OregonSD.org/podcast, says: “There is nothing more important than our kids. We hope to give you an inside look at what life is like in our schools, and that is going to be fun because it’s all about our kids! Our purpose is to educate and inform listeners about what’s going on in our schools and have fun doing it!”

Inside the OSD started as an idea. As Oregon Director of Communications Erika Mundinger watched how communication and the desire for information changed throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, she also saw the power of podcasting.

“It’s just a worldwide trend,” Mundinger says of the rise of podcasts, citing a 2024 Edison Research report that found that 47% of Americans age 12 and older listened to podcasts in the past month. “The number of people listening to podcasts versus sitting down and reading has skyrocketed.”

So, she approached Bergstrom about starting a district-wide podcast with authentic, timely, engaging episodes that community members could listen to while commuting, walking the dog or doing chores. It was an easy sell, and the first episode launched on Dec. 16, 2022, with the Oregon School District School Nutrition Director joining to discuss the district’s lunch operations.
That nine-minute conversation sparked a two-season — the 2022-23 and 2023-24 school years — series featuring 15- to 25-minute episodes releasing every one or two weeks on Thursday afternoons. With 40-plus episodes under their belt, Oregon leadership will present their findings during a “The Power of Podcasts to Inform and Engage” session on July 12 at the WASB Summer Learning Symposium in Green Bay.

“We have our website, social media and emails, and we work with local news media, but this is another way to make info accessible and explain things that can be too difficult for an email,” Mundinger says of the communication gaps the podcast has helped fill. “We can cover more ground in discussion than in writing sometimes.”

Where do episode topics come from?

Whether from students, teachers, parents, community leaders or an online submission, Mundinger says the idea is “to be timely and relevant with the information we’re sending out, so it depends on what’s going on in the district.”

Therefore, to shed light on the snow day decision-making process, WMTV 15 Meteorologist Brian Doogs hopped on an episode to discuss winter weather and the considerations school districts take into account. Similarly, an Oregon police officer joined an episode to examine school safety.

With the focus on providing information and sharing students’ stories, the district keeps it simple. Oregon’s podcast process consists of finding a story, scheduling interviews, writing questions and recording the conversation with a free app on Bergstrom’s phone.

“I don’t consider myself to be a podcast, technology or audio expert, but we can do this. If you have a phone, you can make a podcast,” Bergstrom says. “When we share it with other districts as something they could do, I like to tell them, ‘It’s as simple as…’ It opens a door and reduces the barriers. Because it’s not just our district that needs to communicate in an authentic, timely way. All districts do. So, I love it when we can say, ‘We did it, and it wasn’t as hard as you probably think it is.’”

“It’s a tradeoff,” Mundinger adds. “We haven’t invested in expensive equipment, so it’s not going to be top-of-the-line sound studio quality, but it is accessible and authentic. We’re not looking to spend a ton of money to do this. We’re just trying to get good, authentic information out to people.”

Once recorded, the files are sent to Oregon Multimedia Production and Technology Specialist Eric Rodgers, who edits the episode, makes the intro and outro, and prepares everything for production. The episodes are posted on Spotify, Apple Podcasts, Amazon Podcasts and more, while also promoted on the district’s website, social media platforms, newsletters and emails.

“It’s kind of grassroots,” Mundinger says, noting that the podcast is mentioned at every school board meeting, and little cards throughout district buildings feature a QR code that takes people directly to the podcast. “We try to have different audiences represented on the podcast, and when students are a part of it, their families want to hear it. So, I email whoever is on the podcast. When we did a ‘What Did You Learn in Kindergarten?’ episode last year, we let the teacher know it was up and running, send it to the families so they can listen and subscribe. I think the best way to gain an audience is for people take an active interest in a particular topic, and then episodes start coming directly to their feed.”

The district also seeks to make the podcast accessible to everyone in the community, posting written transcripts — in English and Spanish — on the podcast’s website.

“We try to make everything we do accessible for whoever is in our school district,” Mundinger says. “We have plenty of people who require Spanish translation. I’m continually looking for ways to make that faster and easier.”

“It’s not the perfect solution, but we know we can never do something that’s only accessible to a certain segment of our students and families,” Bergstrom adds. “So even if it’s not perfect, it has to be accessible to everybody.”

That goes for podcast and every other communication Oregon sends out to its families and community members. While Bergstrom says surveys show that parents feel positively about the communication they receive, the district wants “to improve our ability to communicate how they can help their children with academics or social-emotional growth. Parents are eager for more support in those areas.”

And Oregon is working on providing those new avenues of communication, with Mundinger noting school communications have evolved dramatically since she became Oregon’s first director of communications six years ago.

“We live in a society where people just want to know things,” Mundinger adds. “We’re used to having more communication. So, we’re trying to be timely and relevant with all the information we’re putting out.”

Brock Fritz is the WASB director of communications and editor of the Wisconsin School News.
Schools exist to serve students. How are they accomplishing that goal? How can districts know how their students are feeling? And how can districts improve their students’ experiences?

Go straight to the source, suggests School Perceptions Project Manager Daren Sievers. “The best way to know how students are doing is by asking them,” says Sievers, who will co-present with Tomahawk School District’s Wendell Quesinberry and Sparta Area School District’s Sam Russ during the WASB Summer Learning Symposium in Green Bay on July 12-13. “It’s critical to check in with them about how they’re doing, what barriers there are to their learning, and what barriers there are to them feeling safe and happy at school. Our Student Perception Survey tool asks all the critical questions school leaders need to know in order to serve their students better.”

Believing that “the students are the experts” and “every kid deserves to tell you how they’re feeling,” School Perceptions creates surveys intended to give district leadership an idea of how their students are doing.

Sievers suggests asking students if they:

▪ Feel safe at school.
▪ Have barriers that make learning difficult.
▪ Are worried about their transition to middle or high school.
• Are connected to other kids.
• Feel they have an adult they can talk to when they need help.

Districts must seek this information, because many students aren’t feeling their best. The Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction’s 2021 Youth Risk Behavior Survey found that 52.2% of students self-reported “significant problems with anxiety,” 33.7% reported feeling sad or hopeless almost every day for more than two weeks in a row, and 18.1% reported seriously considering attempting suicide in the past 12 months, the highest rate since 2003.

To determine whether students feel a sense of connectivity, the Student Perception Survey asks questions like, “Do you have a friend to sit with at lunch?” or “Do you have a staff member to go to if you have a problem or question?”

Sievers, who worked at the Slinger School District for 27 years, including spending the last nine as superintendent, says there were two times in his career where he noticed a significant change in student behavior and mental health:

• The onset of smartphones, social media, screen time and isolation. “Everyone looks like their life is perfect and they’re having a blast because of how they portray their life on social media,” Sievers says.

Therefore, Sievers believes it’s crucial for districts to check in with students. And not just check in, but do something with the findings. Districts that distribute student surveys can use the results to identify practices and policies that better support students and increase engagement.

“No student learns their best unless they feel cared for and connected to their school and feel like they can be themselves and look forward to going to school every day,” Sievers says, noting that Sparta Area School District is using the surveys to examine the activities kids want offered at their schools.

After all, not every kid goes to school solely to learn. Some are driven by extracurriculars. Stating that 70-80% of adolescents participate in at least one extracurricular activity, the presenters believe the benefits of participation break down to:

• Academic benefits — Including higher GPAs and test scores; better math and English grades; improved academic motivation
and educational aspirations; Increased desire to attend college; superior attendance rates; reduced likelihood of dropping out; and more.

- **Social benefits** — Including a chance to explore, identify and express an identity; discover preferences; evaluate values and norms; meet a diverse group of peers; and improve self-confidence by affirming strengths, capabilities and interests.

- **Non-cognitive benefits** — Including improved task persistence; acceptance of constrictive criticism; leadership efficacy; independence; time management; teamwork; work-life balance; and more.

“Participation, particularly in earlier years of school, is crucial to establish, on the grounds that the most direct avenue to student
achievement is via the levels of participation,” Sievers says. “Students who do not have strong peer relationships often do not understand that other students are also feeling the same way. For example, a student who cannot find someone to play with at recess, partner with during an activity, or sit with at a lunch table may feel they possess ‘permanent inadequacies’ with regard to school belonging and ability to make new friends. A strong foundation helps provide emotional support, instrumental aid, a greater sense of school belonging, and resilience for developmental challenges.”

Attendees of the symposium session will get an in-depth look at these benefits. Furthermore, with Sievers explaining how to collect data, Quesinberry sharing how Tomahawk uses the data to address targeted improvement areas, and Russ discussing how Sparta’s findings have helped them enhance their extra-curricular offerings, attendees of the symposium session will learn:

- How to measure how students are feeling about their school experience.
- How to use student perceptions to reduce barriers to learning and better support them socially and emotionally.
- How to disaggregate data to understand if engagement differs among key subgroups.

While student surveys can’t tell district leadership everything about how their schools are operating, they can go a long way toward adding the voice of the people districts are open to serve: students.

“You have assessment data, you have demographic data, but you also need perceptions data,” Sievers says. “The best way to know how your students are doing is by asking them and by gathering student perceptions data. We are proud of the efforts Wisconsin districts are making to check in with their students to better meet their needs.”

Brock Fritz is the WASB director of communications and editor of the Wisconsin School News.
In early September 2017, as Hurricane Irma was forecast by the National Weather Service to strike the metro Atlanta area, school districts across the region made quick plans to move to remote learning. Employees in the Atlanta Public Schools were asked to work from home to stay safe.

It was during that time that we started receiving phishing emails targeting thousands of our employees over several days. These emails took on several varied forms, all intended to lure our employees to “reset” their passwords. At the time, we already had a well-developed process in Atlanta for handling these phishing emails, and we swung into action to contain and address them.

Just as quickly as the emails landed in our inboxes, they suddenly stopped, and we thought we were out of the woods.

### Compromised emails

Sept. 29, 2017, should have been another ordinary day, a “payday” in the Atlanta Public Schools when the district’s 9,500 employees (including substitute teachers and hourly employees) were looking forward to receiving their paychecks for their hard work. Then, our payroll team started getting calls from employees who did not get paychecks. First, it was a handful of employees. When it was all said and done, 34 employees were missing paychecks.

As our technology team investigated, we quickly discovered the extent of the issues and were able to link them back to the phishing attacks. These employees had fallen for the fake password “reset” emails and had unknowingly provided their login credentials during the attack. The bad actors had compromised their emails and direct deposit accounts and had routed the paychecks to ghost debit cards. The money was gone.

We immediately engaged federal and local law enforcement agencies and hired cybersecurity experts to work alongside our team to determine the extent of the compromise. Our main goal was to enhance our protections and ensure the criminals had not compromised other critical systems. We worried that private information relating to employees and students had been exposed.

While this incident was financially motivated, it marked a significant turning point in our cybersecurity program. It helped us instantly get the attention and seriousness every program deserves in a K-12 school district.

### Expensive expertise

Every technology leader fears the day their informational and instructional technology systems will be the target of an outside attack. This fear cuts across all industries, from banking to energy production to health care and education.

In education, district leaders and chief information officers (where they exist) are responsible for implementing the systems, processes, people and technology to prevent these intrusions. When posting jobs to hire cybersecurity engineers, district technology leaders need the resources to compensate knowledgeable and experienced staff. Competition for their skill sets comes from...
the private sector with its greater financial resources, making it harder to attract the best talent. District technology leaders operate at a disadvantage due to limited budgets.

While cybersecurity always had been considered necessary in the Atlanta Public Schools, the program did not receive nearly as much funding as in the year immediately following the attack, which was crucial in helping us invest significantly in our program.

Platform for urgency

Security is not an exact science and often involves building layers around your critical assets and infrastructure to make it difficult for bad actors to attack those assets. Therefore, creating a safe cyber environment for schools involves a combination of technical measures, policies and educational initiatives. These include (1) implementing robust network security; (2) securing personal tech devices of students, teachers and staff; (3) implementing user authentication strategies; (4) providing cybersecurity awareness training for students, teachers and staff; (5) updating software regularly; (6) securing Wi-Fi networks; (7) implementing data backup and recovery strategies; (8) developing incident response plans; (9) implementing internet content filtering; (10) collaborating with law enforcement; (11) performing regular security audits; (12) implementing privacy policies; (13) involving parents and guardians; and (14) collaborating with informational technology professionals.

While it is expensive for schools to be proficient in all of these areas, the district’s tech leadership must work with superintendents to build a comprehensive cybersecurity program and prioritize the areas to be addressed first while working to improve other areas.

In Atlanta, the incident with the employee paychecks gave us a platform to advocate for urgent initiatives to be implemented immediately. Because we had an audience with the superintendent and chief financial officer, we could make the case for several technology tools to scan and filter our email system for phishing attempts.

Collaborative measures

Superintendents and their cabinet members can support their technology leaders in several ways before a cyberattack (preventative) and after an attack (curative).

Our leadership team also consented to periodic “mock phishing” exercises where employees who failed to identify the potential threat would be enrolled in additional training.

Our leadership team also consented to periodic “mock phishing” exercises where employees who failed to identify the potential threat would be enrolled in additional training.

Technology leaders will need their support to rally employees and students very quickly around any cyber initiatives that may be needed to counter or limit the impact of the attacks. District technology staff may be unable to do this themselves in the relatively short period it will be needed.

Collaboration also will be needed to develop short- and long-term budgets to address the immediate resource needs and build a sustainable program for years to come. We also requested additional funds to hire a cybersecurity firm to aid in the investigation immediately. While we ultimately did not use it, we had support from the superintendent and the chief financial officer to offer free credit monitoring should any employee learn his or her personal data was exposed. In the months following the incident, we worked with the budget team to fund other security measures.

While regularly providing status updates to our senior leadership, this experience also allowed us to collaborate with other internal division leaders. We worked with our chief human resources officer to incorporate cybersecurity awareness training into the annual ethics training required for all employees. We worked with the C-suite executives to enforce compliance with the cybersecurity training for all their employees. Our leadership team also consented to periodic “mock phishing” exercises where employees who failed to identify the potential threat would be enrolled in additional training.

Unknown to us then, several other school districts nationwide had experienced the same attacks we experienced in Atlanta. Because most of us don’t share cyberattack information openly, we had no opportunities to learn from other school districts (which might have prevented us from financial losses). As a result, we have made it our mission to share our story. We have since openly shared details of our attack with other school districts, especially our counterparts around Atlanta. The goal is to increase information sharing and learn from some of the best practice initiatives deployed across our state.

We see the Atlanta Public Schools case study as a compelling testament to the importance of a comprehensive and proactive approach to cybersecurity in K-12 education. School districts can bolster their defenses, mitigate risks and create a resilient cyber environment to benefit students, teachers and staff through continuous advocacy, collaboration and information sharing.

Olufemi Aina is the executive director of information technology for the Atlanta Public Schools in Atlanta, Ga.

Join us in beautiful Green Bay for this two-day symposium to learn about the latest technological best practices, cautions and challenges for our schools. Friday’s sessions will include topics focused on artificial intelligence, cybersecurity and school safety, student progress monitoring, and using podcasts to inform and engage. On Saturday, attendees will hear WASB attorneys and governance consultants discuss the topics most relevant to Wisconsin school boards.

FRIDAY, JULY 12

Friday Welcome and Keynote: Rich Halverson, PhD
University of Wisconsin-Madison associate dean for innovation.

A Personalized Coach in Your Pocket: How AI Tools Can Stimulate Learning
Hear how schools can navigate technological concerns and put artificial intelligence tools in the hands of students and teachers to improve efficiency and educational outcomes.

Friday sessions: Focus on artificial intelligence, cybersecurity and student safety.

- Responding to School Threats Originating from Internet Media
- Ransomware Attacks Do Occur: What You Should Do Before, and if, It Happens
- The Power of Podcasting: How the Oregon School District is Using Podcasts to Engage and Inform
- What Can You Learn From Your Students?
- Teaching with AI
- Navigating Cyber Insurance Without Getting Schooled
- Cyber Risk Exercise: Strengthening Your School’s Preparedness
- Beyond the Hype: Practical Impacts of AI on Educational Quality and Access
- AI Workshop: Tools and Resources

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

FRIDAY, JULY 12 | SPECIAL DINNER PRESENTATION

An Evening with Hall of Famer LeRoy Butler
In this optional Friday dinner presentation, former Green Bay Packer LeRoy Butler will share stories of his playing career, and detail the role education played on his path to the Pro Football Hall of Fame. This event requires a separate registration.

SATURDAY, JULY 13

Saturday sessions: Focus on legal and governance, including school attendance and school referendum trends.

- Legal Issues: Social Media and Electronic Communication in Schools
- AI and Policy Implications
- Attendance Matters: Empowering Educational Governance to Ensure Student Success
- Charting Tomorrow: Navigating Strategic Vision and Leadership in Education
- Engage to Empower: Proactive Communication Strategies for Education Stakeholders
- School Finance Demystified: What Every Board Member Needs to Know in the Referendum Era

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

For session descriptions, a complete agenda and registration information, visit WASB.org/meeting-and-events/2024-summer-learning-symposium/.

CALL FOR STATE EDUCATION CONVENTION PROPOSALS

The State Education Convention, to be held in Milwaukee, Jan. 22-24, 2025, is your opportunity to highlight your district’s innovative programs and talented students. If your district has results worth sharing, consider submitting a proposal and participating in the annual convention. We are looking for breakout sessions and School Fair proposals that feature innovative projects and initiatives. Breakout session and School Fair proposals are due June 21 and June 23, respectively. In addition, we are looking for three musical performance groups to show off their skills at the convention. Apply by June 7. Finally, we are seeking proposals for student art and a student video team by Friday, Nov. 15.

Visit WASB.org/convention to learn more and submit a proposal.
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. A total of 140 businesses were recognized in 2023. Visit WASB.org to nominate a business by Friday, Aug. 9, 2024.

**2024 Business Honor Roll**

2024 Business Honor Roll

**WASB Welcomes Director of Communications Brock Fritz**

Brock Fritz was hired April 29 as the WASB director of communications and Wisconsin School News editor. For the past five years, Brock has served the magazine as a part-time editor and proofreader.

He was also an associate editor for America’s Credit Unions, a trade organization formerly known as the Credit Union National Association. A graduate of the University of Wisconsin-Madison with a bachelor’s degree in journalism and economics, Brock lives in Oregon, Wis., with his wife Erin, a first-grade teacher, and their 11-month-old son Connor. They enjoy visiting local parks and trails, making trips up north, following Wisconsin sports and playing any form of game. Brock’s excited to take a larger role in the WASB and tell the amazing stories happening in school districts throughout the state. Please send story ideas his way at bfritz@wasb.org.

**Dan Nerad Memorial Gathering**

A public memorial gathering will celebrate the life of Daniel Nerad from 12-2 p.m. on June 22 at the Olin Park Pavilion in Madison. Born in Kenosha, Nerad was a former superintendent in the Green Bay, Madison and Birmingham, Mich., school districts, as well as a valued consultant for the Wisconsin Association of School Boards since 2018. He passed away at 72 years old on Nov. 28, 2023. His passion for service and contributions to public education are missed.

**Upcoming Webinars**

- **SCHOOL DISTRICT REFERENDA (TWO-PART)**
  - **PART 1:** Community engagement **JUNE 5** | 12-1 p.m.
  - **PART 2:** Legal & policy considerations **JUNE 12** | 12-1 p.m.

  More and more school districts are going to referenda for funding and facilities. In this two-part webinar series, we’ll explore how to engage a community around a referendum project and the legal and policy considerations you should consider. Registration is required. One registration gets you access to both parts.

- **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.

- **NEW SCHOOL BOARD MEMBER WEBINARS**
  - **JUNE 11, JUNE 25, JULY 9, JULY 23, AUGUST 6** | 12 p.m.

  This series will help new school board members acclimate by reintroducing and expounding on the New School Board Member Handbook. These webinars are complimentary. No registration is required.

- **RECURRING WEBINAR:**
  - **WASB LEGAL AND LEGISLATIVE VIDEO UPDATE**
  - **JUNE 19, JULY 17, AUGUST 21** | 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. No registration is required. Visit WASB.org for the link.
Redistricting Provides a Fresh Opportunity for Advocacy

Summer of 2024 has arrived, closing the legislative session and ushering in the much-anticipated campaign and election season. With high-profile Presidential and Senate elections this year, all eyes are sure to be watching Wisconsin. State Senate and Assembly elections are also going to be in the limelight because of a dramatic legislative redistricting that occurred earlier this year. With a shake-up in district boundaries that have been in place for years, there is a growing list of lawmakers who have announced they will not be seeking re-election. Furthermore, many incumbent legislators will be running in brand new districts with a new slate of constituents. (Subscribe to wasb.org/legislative-update/ to stay up to date on these announcements.)

With this degree of turnover and legislative district alteration, school leaders could be seeing new faces representing their school districts in January. Consequently, now is a great time for you to get to know your potential lawmakers better! K-12 education, as always, is sure to feature prominently in many candidates’ platforms, and you have the opportunity to share your expertise and knowledge with new legislators.

Even-numbered state Senate seats and all state Assembly seats are up for reelection this fall. A great way for your school district to play an active role in the election (and provide an important community service!) is to host a candidate forum. A forum is a great way to engage your community around an upcoming election, build support for the issues that matter to your school district, and learn more about the candidates running to represent you. You can even consider partnering with neighboring school districts to maximize attendance and interest in the forum, and increase the likelihood candidates will want to participate.

Guide for successful candidate forums

Plan ahead. Pick a time and date to host your forum. Avoid religious or government holidays, dates when other community functions are scheduled, and business hours. For the site, a school building is ideal, but make sure you have adequate seating.

Invite candidates. Legislative district boundaries typically determine which legislators/candidates to invite and which neighboring school districts to partner with. Send an invitation letter well before the planned event and follow up with a phone call. For candidate forums, candidate contact information is available on the Wisconsin Elections Commission website at elections.wi.gov. Since this would be a campaign-related event, send invites to incumbents’ campaign or home address rather than their Capitol office. The earlier you schedule your candidate forum, the better. Schedules typically get more crowded the closer you get to the date of the primary or general election.

Choose a format. There are numerous ways to structure a candidate forum, including:

- Candidates give prepared remarks, and attendees ask follow-up questions from microphones in the audience.
- Candidates are asked prepared questions on legislation or themes important to public education and your community.
- Candidates are asked questions that the audience submits on index cards. At the end, candidates provide closing statements, with an equal amount of time given to each candidate.

Every format needs a moderator to introduce the candidates, start the dialogue, keep the discussion moving and screen audience questions if that is the method you select. Ask a well-known, nonpartisan member of your community to serve in this role —
school administrators, school board presidents and local media people are common examples.

**Generate interest.** As mentioned previously, consider partnering with neighboring school districts or local municipal officials. Working with other districts allows you to reach more people and gain more exposure. Working with local municipal governments broadens the content areas that will be discussed, brings in additional interest and allows you to reach more people. Inform the local media about the forum as well as any parent, teacher and civic group that may be interested in attending.

Spread the word utilizing newsletters, social media, local newspapers and/or local television or radio outlets. WASB can also help promote your event.

Send a media advisory notifying the news media about your event three to five days in advance. Consider allocating central, unobstructed space close to electrical outlets for TV camera crews and TV and radio reporters to cover your event.

**Keep it fair and nonpartisan.** As a trusted, nonpartisan voice in the community, your school board and school district are uniquely suited to host a candidate forum. Working in your selected format and with your moderator, try to ensure each candidate has equal time/opportunity to react to each issue or question.

Make sure ALL major-party candidates in that election are invited. Make a thorough and good faith effort to ensure the participation of at least two candidates for a specific office, but you may proceed with a forum if only one candidate accepts. Provide the questions in advance to give candidates a chance to educate themselves and prepare a substantive response.

Again, if only one candidate attends, make it clear to attendees and in your advertising that other candidates were invited to participate — name names, quote invitees and give reasons for nonparticipation. If no reason is given for nonparticipation, then state that. This avoids the impression that you are taking a partisan stance by omission.

**Take notes.** During the forum, make note of the candidates’ positions and any commitments they provide. This will be useful in future communications and allow you to better hold them accountable for their votes.

**Follow up.** Send thank you letters to the participating candidates, school district staff who assisted in making the arrangements, the moderator, timer and any other volunteers.

**Remember:** Candidates can become the lawmakers you will need to have a relationship with after the election. If there is no incumbent or if a challenger wins, your forum will have provided you a great opportunity to begin developing a relationship of trust before the winner is elected.

If you have questions about the effects of redistricting on your district, or need help planning your own candidate forum, the WASB Government Relations Team would be happy to help. Feel free to reach out!
First Amendment Cautions When Board Members Use Social Media

School board members must be aware of the potential legal implications of using social media pursuant to their official duties. Board members increasingly use social media to communicate with parents, students and the public regarding school-related matters, sometimes using the same social media accounts that they use for their own personal, non-school-related content. However, a recent U.S. Supreme Court case, Lindke v. Freed, established a critical distinction between social media use that constitutes official government business and private, non-government-related use. This case significantly affects how school board members should approach the use of social media. This Legal Comment will summarize the Lindke case, analyze how school board members’ social media use may implicate the First Amendment, and provide some tips for avoiding legal pitfalls.

Understanding Lindke v. Freed

The key legal question in Lindke is: When does the First Amendment apply to public officials’ social media use? After all, school board members are also private citizens who do not surrender their constitutional rights when they take a seat on the school board. Instead, they retain their First Amendment rights as private citizens despite being public officials, which includes maintaining an active presence on social media. The legal question in Lindke is premised on the application of the First Amendment, in that only government action triggers First Amendment protections, not private action by a private citizen. Therefore, the U.S. Supreme Court in Lindke established a test to determine whether public officials, such as board members, are acting in their official capacities or as private citizens when they use social media.

James Freed, the city manager in Port Huron, Mich., maintained a public Facebook page where he identified himself as a “public figure” and shared information related to his position as city manager. Freed also continued to post personal content and photos of his family life on the same Facebook page, creating a “mixed use” social media page. Freed was sued for violating the First Amendment when he deleted an individual’s comments and blocked that individual’s access to Freed’s social media page.

Similarly, Michelle O’Connor-Ratcliff and T.J. Zane were board trustees for the Poway Unified School District in California. Both maintained public Facebook pages where they described themselves as “government officials” and shared information related to their official work as board trustees, including posting school district achievements, information about their school visits, soliciting community feedback and occasionally responding to school-related questions and comments. After O’Connor-Ratcliff and Zane deleted individuals’ comments and later blocked certain individuals from accessing their public social media pages, the blocked individuals sued, arguing that both public officials violated the First Amendment.

These cases were consolidated by the U.S. Supreme Court and decided in Lindke. The resulting legal test provides helpful guidance to all public officials who use social media related to their official duties. The Court held that a public official’s use of social media only constitutes “state action” covered by the First Amendment if the public official both (1) possessed actual authority to speak on the government’s behalf on a particular matter and (2) purported to exercise that authority when speaking in the relevant social media posts.

Board members do not have to avoid using social media

School board members are certainly able to choose not to have an active social media presence. While this choice might solve this particular legal issue, it also denies school board members the potential benefits that an active social media presence can provide. Even in light of this case, school board members do not need to refrain from using and maintaining social media accounts. A public official does not act under the color of state law when they use social media.
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solely in their private capacity. The law does not consider every Facebook comment or post by a public official to be state action, because such an approach would infringe upon the First Amendment rights of public officials to speak as private citizens.

Instead, school board members should be aware of the legal implications of posting information pursuant to their official duties and then deleting certain comments and/or blocking certain individuals from accessing the social media page. When school board members post school-related content on social media, the courts may determine that the board members are acting as private citizens for First Amendment purposes. In such a situation, courts will take a closer look at the content posted on the public officials’ social media account to determine whether the board members were acting in their official capacity and exercising the authority to speak on the school district’s behalf. If board members use and maintain a public social media presence to share information related to their role as board members and delete certain comments and block certain individuals from commenting on these social media pages, board members might face liability for violating the First Amendment.

**Tips for using social media appropriately**

When using and maintaining social media accounts, here are some considerations for board members:

1. Consider creating and maintaining separate social media accounts, one for school-related content and another for personal content. However, the label of the account alone is not sufficient to avoid liability. Courts will still examine how board members use the social media accounts to determine the applicability of the First Amendment. Board members choosing this option must strictly adhere to the separation between their public and private accounts.

2. Consider the content on their personal social media accounts. Board members should not make comments on their personal social media pages that are within their official capacity as board members or on behalf of the school district. Remember, even if board members post comments on their personal social media pages, the courts could still find that the board members’ comments constitute state action subject to the First Amendment.

3. Consider including disclaimers on personal social media accounts such as, “all comments, posts and statements are made in my capacity as a private citizen and not on behalf of the school district.” This is not dispositive, but it may help communicate that the account is not intended to be an official account.

4. Consider revising board policies to address which board members, if any, are authorized to speak on behalf of the board, on social media or in any other manner. This will help board members understand when they are speaking on behalf of the board or school district.

5. Consider the potential legal implications of blocking certain social media users and comments and not others. Treating users and comments differently because they are negative, repetitive or unpopular may constitute a First Amendment violation. Board members may want to consider turning the commenting function off entirely to avoid the legal issues that arise from permitting some comments but not others based on viewpoint.

**Conclusion**

School board members may continue to have an active social media presence. Again, not every social media post constitutes state action that triggers the application of the First Amendment. Board members are likely free to post about the success of family and close friends at school or in school-related activities. However, even these posts about personal matters shouldn’t include content that might be interpreted as being within the scope of their official board member duties. Board members might want to add a label or disclaimer to their personal social media accounts stating that the social media account is made solely in their private capacity as a citizen and not on behalf of the school district. Even then, board members need to run their social media accounts in a manner that is consistent with a personal account rather than an account related to their official board member duties.

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