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

September 2025 | wasb.org



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Wisconsin School News (USPS 688-560)  
is published 10 issues per year by the  
Wisconsin Association of School Boards, Inc.,  
122 W. Washington Avenue, Madison, WI 53703.

Contents © 2025 Wisconsin Association of School Boards, Inc.  
Subscriptions are available to nonmembers for \$95 per year.  
Periodicals postage is paid at Madison, Wis., and other  
additional entry offices.

The views expressed in Wisconsin School News are  
those of the authors and do not necessarily represent  
WASB policies or positions.

POSTMASTER: Send address changes to  
Wisconsin School News, 122 W. Washington Ave.,  
Madison, WI 53703.



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*The views of the authors and sources don't necessarily reflect the viewpoints of the WASB.*

## WPF REPORT: Wisconsin's Education Spending Falls Further Below National Average

A new study released by the Wisconsin Policy Forum found that Wisconsin has fallen further in the national rankings when it comes to per-pupil education spending. At \$14,882 per pupil on public elementary and secondary education in the 2023 fiscal year, according to the U.S. Census Bureau's most recent data, Wisconsin now ranks 26th in the country for per-pupil spending (25th in 2020). It has also dropped to second-to-last among neighboring states, above only Iowa.

This continues a long-running decline in Wisconsin's rank for per-pupil education spending. It was the 11th-ranked state in the country in 2002, including first in the Midwest.

The Wisconsin Policy Forum points to several familiar reasons for

this decline, including that general state aid increases in recent years have failed to meet the rate of inflation. They further point to shifting priorities in the legislature, such as prioritizing reducing taxes.

The report comes shortly after the state passed its 2025-27 state budget, which did see some increases in education spending. While sizable investments were made to special education aids, no additional general aid was provided. Furthermore, broader economic realities persist — including higher-than-normal inflation, reduced federal education spending, staffing shortages and declining populations — all of which will likely blunt many of the positive impacts of this budget.

While there are encouraging

developments in this budget, national trends and shifting priorities reveal a more complicated picture. The rest of the country is simply outpacing Wisconsin's modest gains in education spending, resulting in the state slipping further and further behind. □

For more analysis and talking points from the WASB Government Relations team, visit [wasb.org/legislative-update](https://wasb.org/legislative-update) and subscribe to the Legislative Update Blog.

### STAT OF THE MONTH

**\$14,882**

**The amount of money** Wisconsin spent per pupil on public elementary and secondary education in the 2023 fiscal year — 9.9% less than the national average of \$16,526.

Source: U.S. Census Bureau

## Legislative Fiscal Bureau Publishes New Budget Summary

The Legislative Fiscal Bureau released a host of new budget summary papers in late July. The papers were designed to help legislators better understand the effect the new budget has on tax collections and K-12 aids.

Most important among these for WASB members is a memo that outlines an estimation of how each individual school district's aids will change in the coming two school years. The memo's conclusions assume that districts will levy all of the \$325/pupil granted to them via Governor Tony Evers' partial veto of the 2023-25 budget. However, not all boards may choose to do this.

The bureau also published a summary of the estimated impact on property taxes and its comparison with prior law (this memo does not account for the increases of \$325 per pupil in revenue authority). View these materials on the WASB's state budget webpage: [wasb.org/advocacy-government-relations/state-budget](https://wasb.org/advocacy-government-relations/state-budget). □

## Direct Admit Wisconsin Expands

Direct Admit Wisconsin, a University of Wisconsin System program that automatically admits Wisconsin high school students to select state colleges without an application process, has expanded, according to the Milwaukee Journal Sentinel.

The program, which launched in the fall of 2024, automatically admits high school students into Wisconsin universities at the end of their junior year based on their grades. More students will likely receive automatic admission this fall, as 155 additional schools signed up to participate in year two of the program—bringing the total number of participating Wisconsin schools to 467.

The 10 public universities that participate in the program — and therefore accept students based on their grades — are: UW-Green Bay, UW-Milwaukee, UW-Oshkosh, UW-Parkside, UW-Platteville, UW-River Falls, UW-Stevens Point, UW-Stout, UW-Superior and UW-Whitewater. □



## September: A Season of Possibility and Purpose

For me, September has always carried a sense of fresh beginnings and optimism. There's something truly heartwarming about seeing children step into their schools to begin the school year with wide eyes and eager smiles — ready to learn, reconnect with friends and meet their new teachers. It's a season that reminds us of the incredible potential within every student.

As we embrace this energy, we also renew our commitment to ensuring that all students learn at high levels. Whether that goal is realized depends on many factors — one of the most important being the leadership of school boards.

Years ago, the Iowa Association of School Boards conducted the groundbreaking Iowa Lighthouse Study to explore how school boards influence student achievement. The findings were clear: boards that believe in the potential of every student — and see their role as unlocking that potential — tend to foster higher achievement. Boards that are focused on improvement — not just management — make a measurable difference.

While school boards do not directly teach students, board members' beliefs, decisions and actions shape district culture, which in turn affects classroom instruction and student engagement. The old saying, "Your altitude is determined by your attitude," holds true.

These powerful insights will inform my remarks at the upcoming WASB Fall Regional Meetings,

which kick off later this month.

These meetings are more than just a dinner event — they're opportunities to connect, share ideas, network and grow together as leaders. They also celebrate board members who've shown exceptional dedication by earning new levels of recognition through participation in WASB events and training.

Importantly, the Fall Regional Meetings are where we conduct vital association business, including electing members to the WASB Board of Directors in Regions 2, 5, 7, 9, 11, 14 and 15. Each member board in these regions will cast one vote — in person — to choose their representative. These directors play a key role in guiding the association's work, managing its resources and setting its legislative agenda.

Before each regional meeting, WASB attorneys and consultants will host a 90-minute workshop focused on addressing chronic absenteeism and truancy — an issue that affects student success across Wisconsin. I strongly encourage you to attend both the workshop and the meeting. If you can't make it in person, online versions will be available in early November.

We're also helping school leaders train their staff to navigate changes in federal Title IX law. In partnership with Boardman & Clark, the WASB has released new training videos aligned with the 2020 regulations. The first six modules — for Title IX coordinators, investigators, decision-makers, administrators, all

employees and informal resolution — are now available. Stay tuned for updated training on athletics and retaliation.

Also deserving attention is the WASB Business Honor Roll, which celebrates local businesses that go above and beyond in supporting public schools. Thank you to the 50-plus boards that submitted 180 nominations this year! You can find the full list of honorees at [WASB.org](http://WASB.org), and we'll spotlight some of these amazing partners in the December issue of Wisconsin School News.

Looking ahead, planning is in full swing for the Wisconsin State Education Convention in Milwaukee this January. We've begun announcing keynote speakers and reviewing breakout session proposals. We're also preparing for the 2025 Fall Legislative Conference, which will take place on Saturday, Nov. 8, in Stevens Point.

Finally, I'll be joining the WASB Executive Committee and Government Relations team in Washington, D.C., this month to meet with our U.S. Senators and Representatives. While federal policy continues to evolve, one thing remains constant: the federal government is a key partner in supporting public education.

Let's make this September a time of inspiration and renewed purpose. I look forward to seeing many of you at the Fall Regional Meetings and to continuing our shared journey of leadership and learning. ■

Boards that believe in the potential of every student — and see their role as unlocking that potential — tend to foster higher achievement.



# Leading With Trust

## Can I be trusted? Can my board be trusted? Can my district be trusted?

By Brock Fritz

**P**hil Gore, chief learning officer at the Idaho School Boards Association, wanted attendees of his WASB Summer Learning Symposium keynote to leave Stevens Point considering those three questions. And not just considering them, but taking the steps to ensure the answer to each is a resounding “yes.”

“When boards misbehave, people lose trust,” Gore said July 11, noting that school board members are entrusted with their communities’ two most precious resources: their children and their tax dollars. “When people lose trust in the board, they lose trust in the school district. If people don’t trust their local public schools, they don’t send their kids there. All our work is about relationships.”

Forming and sustaining relationships requires building trust among board members, as well as between the board and the superintendent, staff and community. When trust is present, both sides of a relationship tell the other what they’re going to do, follow through on what they said, and keep each other informed along the way.

Gore, who has lived a life of public service, has built countless relationships since he began serving as a precinct committeeman at age 19. Since then, much of his service has been within school boards, serving as a Seattle-area board member and spending 17 years as a director of board and leadership development in Washington, Texas, Vermont and Idaho.

“The system isn’t designed for us to be educational experts; it’s designed for us to be expert citizens,” Gore says of school boards. “It doesn’t matter the background. We come to the table to contribute our citizen expertise, to demonstrate and participate in how democracy works. We’re part of a team.”

School board teams must figure out how to work together because, as Gore says, “public education hinges on the public being involved in education.” He adds that when boards involve the community, they are more likely to be governing a system that’s improving student achievement overall and closing gaps.

“There’s the cost of public education, and then there’s the cost of not educating people to a reasonably

high level. What will they do to provide for themselves?” Gore says. “School boards make a difference, but we don’t make such a difference when we’re scattered. We make a difference when we focus on what’s best for kids.”

### ■ Building trust

Relationships with trust are developed between people that are self-aware, respectful, appreciative, open and accountable.

However, developing those qualities can take time. Gore has seen effective conversations and school boards, and he’s seen boards with relationship-building to do. He’s found that boards without a sense of team struggle to move forward and impact student achievement, as productive conversations require trust.

“When we respect people, we’re willing, sometimes eager, to join in conversation with them,” Gore says, noting that drama is the enemy of student success. “If we don’t trust people, we don’t talk to them. If we don’t trust people, we don’t involve or include them — and they don’t include us. We can do so much more together.”



“If people don’t trust their local public schools, **they don’t send their kids there.**”

— Phil Gore, Chief Learning Officer at the Idaho School Boards Association

So, if a school board has a trust issue, what can they do?

Gore believes that repairing trust when it is lacking requires people to:

- Own mistakes
- Find common ground
- Restart
- Lean back in

#### ■ Learn. Grow. Lead.

When trust is built, the work can start. “The path forward isn’t imagining some magic rainbow,” Gore says of how boards can govern through challenging times. “It won’t help you to sit around the board table and complain. It’s being realistic about where we are and what we can do now. When boards focus on a vision for a student success, they’re likely to

lead the board toward that vision.”

Therefore, Gore says that board members’ roles are to:

- Listen and learn
- Understand needs, concerns and opportunities
- Be a member of the team
- Be a steward of public trust
- Exhibit community leadership

In order to successfully fulfill those roles, Gore says board members must:

- Listen
- Practice non-judgment
- Show understanding
- Put themselves in others’ shoes
- Be completely present
- Respond with understanding
- Let go of results
- Don’t harm

When board members demonstrate those qualities while fostering a sense of team within the board, district staff and the community, they help develop a shared vision that shapes district policy, elevates student achievement and strengthens the community.

“Everyone wins when trust is high,” Gore says. “Take responsibility, first for yourself. Then build relationships with your board, superintendent and throughout your district. What you do — and how you do it — matters to the people in your community, Wisconsin and beyond.” ■

*Brock Fritz is the WASB director of communications and editor of the Wisconsin School News. He can be reached at [bfritz@wasb.org](mailto:bfritz@wasb.org).*



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# NIL in Wisconsin High Schools:

## An Era of Opportunity and Responsibility

By RJ Larson

In the last four years, name, image and likeness — or NIL — has become a household name in college sports. The NCAA adopted an official policy in 2021 that allowed student-athletes to profit from their own NIL as long as they complied with the laws of the state in which their school was located. Since then, NIL has begun to make its way to high school athletics too.

As of July 2025, 42 states, plus the District of Columbia, allow high school athletes to engage in NIL deals, according to Business of College Sports. In April 2024, the Wisconsin Interscholastic Athletic Association proposed a bylaw amendment to allow Wisconsin high

school athletes to engage in NIL deals, but membership voted 170-219 to reject the proposal. However, membership opinion changed drastically in the past year, with members approving the proposed language by a 293-108 vote on April 25, 2025.

“The membership became more engaged in the process, understanding what the language was and how it would impact the eligibility of their student-athletes,” WIAA Associate Director Mel Dow says. “Athletic directors, principals and superintendents took time to inform themselves of what the language meant and how it applies to student-athletes, their overall eligibility and day-to-day livelihood.”

While WIAA members approved the bylaw amendment allowing Wisconsin high school students to profit from their name, image and likeness, skepticism remains. Dow believes that people’s perceptions of NIL are often shaped by what they see in the media, which is almost entirely focused on college athletics. NIL at the NCAA level has received backlash due to a number of concerns, including players transferring for new deals, universities not following through on contracts, a large portion of the money going to high-revenue sports like football and basketball, and the perceived widening competitive gap between the Power Four conferences — the ACC, Big Ten, Big 12 and ACC — and the rest of the country.



**"[We] feel that this was an appropriate step to give those kids the same opportunities that their fellow classmates have already experienced."**

— Mel Dow, WIAA Associate Director

Some people believe that NIL is doing more harm than good, and that Wisconsin should've never allowed student-athletes to engage in these activities. However, high school NIL operates differently than the college system — and Dow believes it has the potential to promote equality for athletes throughout the entire student body.

"If you have a student who's in the school band, they can monetize based upon who they are," says Dow, who has served as the WIAA's associate director since August 2021. "There is no restriction that they can't be in the school band because they did a social media post promoting the guitar string that they use. So why should one segment of a student body be treated differently based upon what activities they're involved in? The key thing to understand within these rules is that the amateur status rules are still in play. Kids cannot be paid for their performance in athletics. It's only based upon how they represent themselves — advertisements, endorsements and so forth. No different than any other students that they go to school with. For that reason, we support the membership decision and feel that this was an appropriate step to give those kids the same opportunities that their fellow classmates have already experienced."

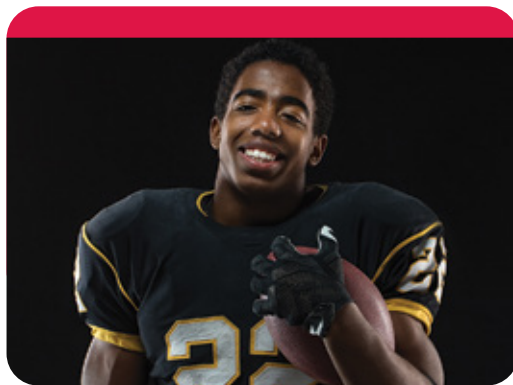
### ■ Collegiate vs. high school NIL

According to Dow, Wisconsin's NIL language was carefully crafted to ensure the state doesn't run into the hardships currently facing the collegiate level.

A key difference at the collegiate level is that athletes are permitted to engage in NIL activities involving their institution's branding. Wisconsin's NIL policy states that "student-athletes are not permitted to represent their school, conference or the WIAA

in any NIL agreements or activities (branded uniform or apparel, messaging, endorsement or promotion). Schools, their employees, or persons associated with schools cannot facilitate deals for student-athletes."

"If I'm from Johnsonville High School, I can't wear a Johnsonville High School uniform, mention that I play for Johnsonville High School,



say I was last year's conference champion or that I was a two-time state runner-up. I can't mention any of those things in any of my name, image and likeness opportunities," says Dow. "I can only talk about what I do, separate from the school system. People who are affiliated with the school program that a student-athlete is attending, or may potentially attend, cannot have any NIL deals with the student-athletes, and they have to be independent of the school."

Another difference between the two concerns transferring between schools. With college athletics utilizing the transfer portal, athletes have begun transferring to certain universities based on NIL opportunities. The WIAA, meanwhile, has a completely different set of rules regarding transferring, including "a student who simply transfers from any school into a member school is eligible for practice and participation

at the non-varsity level for one calendar year, unless the transfer is made necessary by a total change in residence by parent(s)."

Dow explains that the WIAA has "specific rules put into place regarding transferring and school involvement in NIL deals so that there is no undue influence enticing student-athletes to go from one school to another. People continue to see what's taking place in the NCAA and causing uncertainty at the college level. We feel confident that the membership's new language is completely different from that."

Other differences between NIL at the NCAA and WIAA level include:

1. Wisconsin student-athletes cannot promote the following items: gambling, alcohol, tobacco, cannabis or related products, banned or illegal substances, adult entertainment products or weapons of any kind.
2. NIL activities must not interfere with a student-athlete's academic obligations.
3. NIL activities must not interfere with a student-athlete's team obligations, such as practices and games.
4. A student-athlete cannot utilize representation or contract with an agent.

### ■ Who is enforcing NIL rules?

Since schools have no involvement in students making NIL deals, high school athletes aren't required to disclose their deals to the school. This is another difference from the NCAA, which Dow says "requires athletes to inform the schools about NIL deals so they can monitor and make sure that they're not in violation of the rules."

Although school districts aren't



involved in the deals themselves, Dow says athletic directors are responsible for ensuring students remain eligible when engaging in NIL. He explained that athletic directors aren't enforcers, but rather educators — ensuring athletes aren't only informed about the policy, but also about its application.

"You're going to follow the same process that you do every time you start a school year or a sports season," Dow says. "Just as you've explained what your rules and expectations are for being part of a sports program, you're going to do that same thing with name, image and likeness. You're going to talk to them about the academic, attendance and legal substance requirements. Additionally, you're going to inform them that there are name, image and likeness opportunities, and these are the things that are prohibited if you do engage in that. We want administrators to continue that upfront education and then make themselves available to answer questions as needed."

A helpful way for schools to look at NIL rules is to treat them the same as any other rule in their code of conduct. Sit down with student-athletes, inform them of the rules and expect them to follow them. If a violation does occur, athletes must then go through a restitution process to regain eligibility.

"The WIAA requires schools to have a code of conduct, but the bulk of their code of conduct is at the local level and applied by the athletic director," Dow says. "If an athlete violates a code of conduct, they don't report that to the WIAA. They're responsible for the eligibility status of their student-athletes."

### ■ How was Wisconsin's NIL language created?

Similarly to the language of its other rules, the WIAA initially drafted Wisconsin's NIL language based much upon how other states wrote theirs. The WIAA engaged with other states to understand the successes and challenges of their NIL rules. From there, the WIAA worked closely with its members to gather feedback on the current language before it was passed in April.

"All of our membership rules come from the schools themselves," says Dow. "That's the great part about our membership process and the WIAA's rule-writing process."

### ■ Benefits beyond money

The most obvious benefit of NIL is the opportunities athletes have to make money from their name, image and likeness. Students can begin saving for their post-secondary education or have money available

when they graduate and join the workforce. However, additional NIL benefits are often overlooked, according to Dow.

"The first big benefit is that it puts them on that same playing field as their fellow classmates. However, it also allows them to be more professional and involve themselves educationally," he says. "It provides them with a job to represent themselves and it's a little higher level of thinking. Many of these kids dedicate an immense amount of time into their skills and finding other ways to generate revenue."

A November 2024 article by Sports Illustrated reporter Dylan Sanders states that big-name football recruits are receiving massive deals before beginning their collegiate careers. Sanders' article reports that Bryce Underwood, the consensus No. 1 overall ranked high school football player in the nation in the 2025 college football recruiting class, had an estimated \$1.9 million valuation before graduating high school.

While there are outliers, only a small percentage of high school athletes in the country are participating in NIL deals. An August 2024 article by Elizabeth Heubeck, a writer for EducationWeek, states that "the vast majority of high school athletes who enter NIL deals will not get rich from them. The percentage of high school

**A helpful way for schools to look at NIL rules is to treat them the same as any other rule in their code of conduct. Sit down with student-athletes, inform them of the rules and expect them to follow them.**

athletes signing lucrative NIL deals are less than 1% of the nearly 8 million high school student-athletes in the nation.”

Heubeck’s article references Tod Morgan, a North Carolina athletic director who chaired the North Carolina High School Athletic Association NIL Committee. He estimates that the average worth of an NIL deal for high school athletes runs between \$60 to \$120.

If so few student-athletes receive deals for such a small amount of money, why go through all the trouble of creating an NIL policy? From Dow’s perspective, the hours spent making NIL a reality in Wisconsin were worth it because it’s the students’ right to be able to engage in it.

“They own their own name, image and likeness. As long as they’re not using it to represent anything within their school programming, that’s their personal prerogative,” says Dow. “We are a strong proponent of anything that the membership wants. Understanding that there’s going to be some nuances and learning curves, but we feel that it is an appropriate step in today’s age.”

**■ Want to know more?**

One way that athletic directors, administrators and students can become educated on Wisconsin’s NIL policy and opportunities is by working with Influential Athlete, which had a year-long partnership with the WIAA in September 2024. The Milwaukee-based company focuses on educating high school athletes on how to best use their name, image and likeness in high school and beyond.

“Our partnership with Influential Athlete was mainly for helping

educate our athletic directors and school administrators about the specific details, so they knew what it was that they were voting on,” Dow says. “They also provide an opportunity for students and others to learn a little bit more about the impact of NIL.”

Influential Athlete’s website states it offers live workshops, ready-to-use NIL resources for schools and a scalable licensing option for students to access the Influential Athlete Academy, a self-paced online program teaching athletes how to build a profitable personal brand, attract sponsorships and monetize their NIL effectively.

The WIAA is also a valuable resource for school leaders, student-athletes and the general public. Scroll down on the [WIAAWI.org](http://WIAAWI.org) homepage, click on “eligibility rules and forms” and access an abundance of resources, such as a NIL AD checklist, videos for understanding NIL in Wisconsin, an NIL FAQ

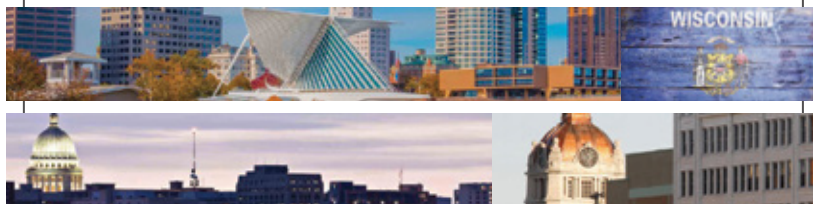
form, a document showing the differences between high school and collegiate NIL rules, a compliance yes-and-no chart and more. “Our office is always here to help our school administrators navigate some of those more difficult questions — help them have a better understanding of what the interpretation of the rule is and the practical application of it,” says Dow. “It’s that ongoing educational process to make sure that everybody is on a fair and equal playing field. The more that people can invest in learning about what is available and how it navigates through the rules, that’s only a benefit for themselves and their well-being.”

For more about NIL in Wisconsin, contact WIAA Associate Director Mel Dow at [mdow@wiaawi.org](mailto:mdow@wiaawi.org) or (715) 344-8580. ■

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# Understanding Public Sentiment

What the data tells us about shifting views on schools

By Brock Fritz

People have more platforms than ever to express their opinions, but the number of options can make it difficult to gauge overall public sentiment. The Marquette University Law School Poll can give a glimpse at statewide public perception surrounding schools. The latest poll, conducted with 873 registered voters from June 13-19, found that more people are satisfied than dissatisfied with the job public schools are doing in the community.

However, the long-term trend has seen rising dissatisfaction since the late-2010s.

“More people are satisfied than dissatisfied — and that’s good,” says Charles Franklin, scholar, pollster and director of the Marquette Law School Poll. “But the cautionary note is satisfaction was over 70% (in the mid-2010s). There’s been a downturn after 2018. Since that time, satisfaction has primarily been in the low-to-mid 60s. The bottom line is that schools are in pretty good shape, but not as good of shape as they were with public satisfaction.”

The June 2025 poll found that 63% of respondents were “very satisfied” or “satisfied” with the job public schools in their community. That’s up from 58% in



Charles Franklin



## "Schools are in pretty good shape, but not as good of shape as they were."

— Charles Franklin, scholar, pollster and director of the Marquette Law School Poll

February 2025 and 46% in June 2024, but well below the more than 70% of respondents that were “very satisfied” or “satisfied” from mid-2012 through 2017. That number dropped to 64% in 2018 and 59% in a 2020 poll that was released just prior to the COVID-19 pandemic.

“There’s an easy belief out there that big percentages of the population turned against schools because of how we dealt with the pandemic,” Franklin says. “But to take away that the public turned drastically against schools because of the shutdown, I don’t think it’s supported by the data. The little dip you saw was in January 2020, before the shut-down, then it rebounded during the core of the shutdown, then it’s come down a bit since then.”

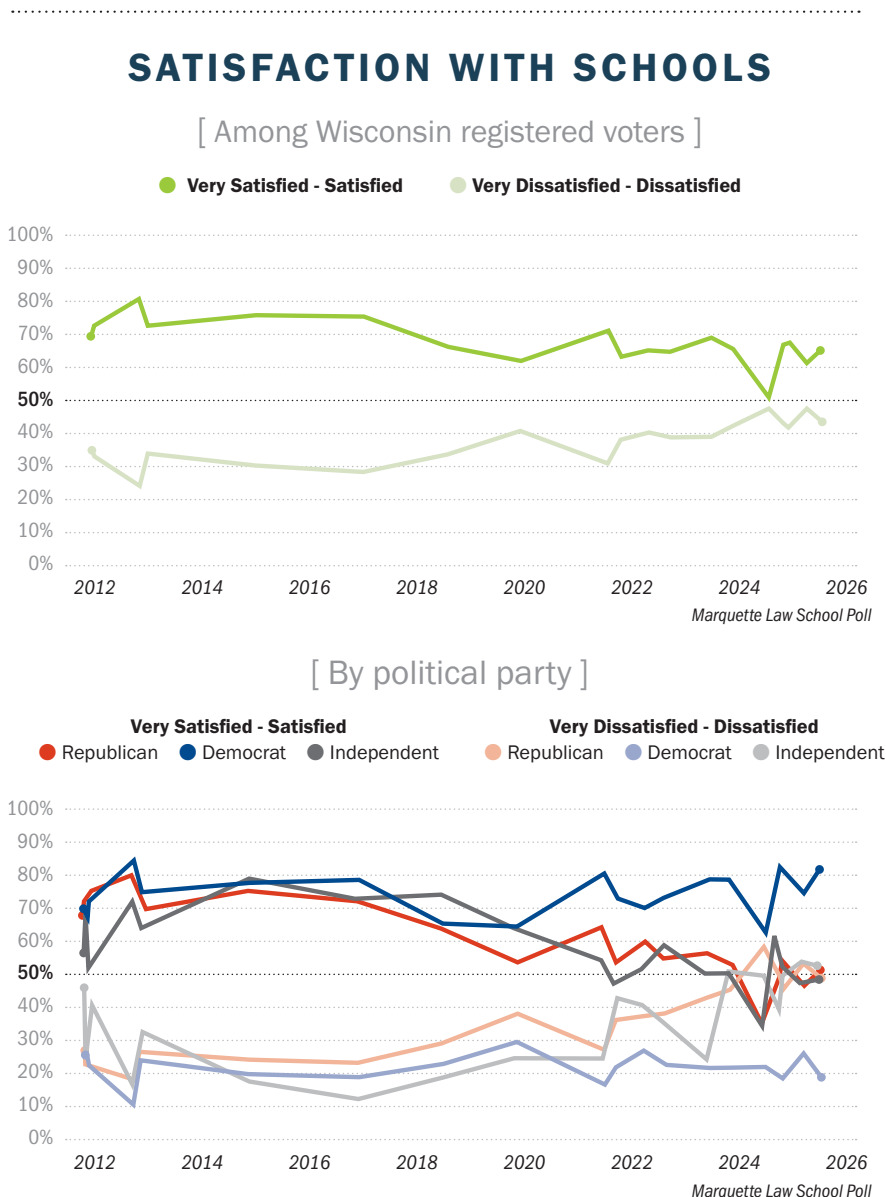
While 63% is a fairly strong majority, looking deeper at the numbers tells more of a story.

The mid-2010s Marquette Law School Polls found that about 70% of Republicans were “very satisfied” or “satisfied” with their schools. That number has been about 50% in recent polls, and dropped all the way to 34% in one 2024 poll that Franklin says lines up with Milwaukee Public Schools’ financial difficulties.

“They’re quite evenly divided, and way below where they were at the beginning of our polling,” Franklin says, noting that independents have also fallen significantly and been split fairly evenly over the past few polls.

Democrats have hovered between 84% and 61% satisfaction since 2012. Since that 61% polling in 2024, the numbers have increased to 83% in the latest poll.

“That’s a solid foundation for support for public schools,” Franklin says. “On the other hand, it illustrates the partisan polarization on this. We don’t want to place too



much confidence in that overall positive evaluation when the greater part of that is coming from one political party. In all of these charts remember that a sizeable minority is still a minority within that party and still has a voice in that party.”

Breaking it down further, the percentage of satisfied voters with kids under 18 years old has fallen from about 85% in 2013 to the

mid-50s in 2025.

“That should be a real warning sign that the folks with the most at stake in their local schools have shown a greater decline in satisfaction than those on the left,” Franklin says. “It hasn’t reached the point of more dissatisfaction than satisfaction, but you don’t want to see this trend continue for many years. If it keeps going the way it is, those lines are

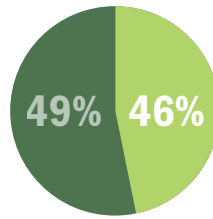
## Which is more important?

Property tax or school funding trend

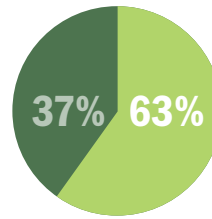
[ Among Wisconsin registered voters ]

- Reducing Property Tax
- Increasing Spending on Public Schools

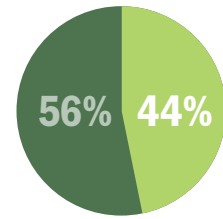
Marquette Law School Poll



2013



2018



2025

going to cross and that will raise real questions about supporting public schools in your communities.”

Similarly, rural areas and small towns have shown more of a rise in dissatisfaction.

“School and community are such a central part of small-town life that it’s worrisome to see this downtrend,” says Franklin, who grew up in an Alabama town of 2,600 people that was centered around the local schools.

The Marquette Law School Poll also asked several questions that could provide insight as to why satisfaction has decreased. From 2015 through 2022, voters said that increasing spending on public

schools was more important to them than reducing property taxes. That trend reversed in 2023, with the last six surveys finding that a majority of respondents prioritize reducing property taxes. The two most recent polls have showed support in the upper 50th percentile.

“That trend doesn’t show much sign of abating,” Franklin says. “This is a real reversal. You’ve had a really good run here where the public was absolutely behind funding schools and didn’t see that as competing with property taxes or other things they’re concerned about. Those days were gone in 2023 and have been that way ever since.”

Franklin recognizes that the cost of housing plays a role in these findings, but he also believes that these polls give a good look at the issues facing the public education system.

“There are a surprising number of issues in which there’s broad bipartisan support,” he says. “We often focus on the most divisive issues, but maybe don’t pay enough attention to the areas where there can be broad agreement. That doesn’t mean the divisive issues should be dismissed, they’re very important, but we need to think about both the people that agree and disagree with us on the topic of schools.” ■



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# Arts Instruction for Everyone

By Anne Davis

A well-rounded education for Wisconsin public school students includes not only core subjects like English and math, but also instruction in art and music. Arts instruction fosters creativity, problem-solving and other essential skills that prepare students for life in an ever-changing world.

“The arts are absolutely vital to our futures,” DPI Art and Creativity Education Consultant Christopher Gleason says. “It’s not a luxury. We have to get away from the idea that arts are something to add.”

Wisconsin state statutes require districts to provide K-8 students with regular instruction in art, music, reading, language arts, social studies, mathematics, science, health and physical education. At the high school level, districts are required to offer students access to instruction in

art and music.

Moreover, there’s a demand for arts instruction. As schools returned to in-person instruction after the COVID-19 pandemic, the number of students enrolled in arts programming (music, arts, theater and dance) began to increase, according to Gleason. By the 2023-24 school year, 49% of all Wisconsin high school students and 89% of all middle school students were enrolled in some type of arts programming.

“There is a demand,” Gleason says. “Students want to take these courses.”

But the demand comes as arts instruction faces challenges. A primary concern — as for all instruction — is adequate funding. Declining enrollments and revenues mean that many districts, especially smaller rural districts, are facing

budget shortfalls resulting in tough decisions about staffing and programming in all areas.

Gleason is also concerned that an emphasis on accountability and raising test scores may take time away from arts instruction.

Although there have been isolated incidents, Wisconsin School Music Association Executive Director Laurie Fellenz hasn’t seen a trend toward cutbacks in music programming. She attributes that to the fact that arts instruction is mandatory under state law.

According to a 2025 report from the Arts Education Partnership, Wisconsin is among 41 states that require arts instruction at the elementary level, 40 states at the middle school level and 39 states at the high school level.

“We are just not seeing the

**By the 2023-24 school year, 49% of all Wisconsin high school students and 89% of all middle school students were enrolled in some type of arts programming.**

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impact of any major changes,” Fellenz says.

At the national level, there’s the potential of cutbacks in several grant programs that districts can use to fund a variety of student supports. In May, President Trump proposed combining the programs into a single stream and cutting the overall amount from \$6.5 million to \$2 million in his 2026-27 budget. At the time of writing, Congress had not acted on that proposal.

Amanda Karhuse, assistant executive director of advocacy and public policy for the National Association for Music Education, says her members are particularly worried about Title IV-A, which districts can use to support arts programming (for more on title funds, turn to page 28).

“That’s a huge cut,” Karhuse says. “There’s not going to be enough funding.”

However, starting the week of July 28, the U.S. Department of Education began releasing billions of K-12 education dollars that had been frozen since July 1. Based on last year’s data, Wisconsin is expected to receive roughly \$72 million of these funds.

Another financial concern for school arts programs is the potential impact of tariffs, which could correspond with increased costs in band and orchestra instruments, printed and digital sheet music, and classroom technology such as MIDI controllers and software platforms.

In a letter to Wisconsin school district administrators and music educators, Fellenz alerted them to the potential impact of tariffs and advised making purchases for the 2025-26 school year as soon as possible. She suggested a 10-15% contingency buffer in budgets and recommended school leaders collaborate with nearby districts or

regional cooperatives to consolidate orders or share specialty resources.

Another challenge for school arts programming is the shortage of licensed teachers. Wisconsin is one of 21 states facing a shortage of arts teachers, according to Gleason, who notes that the turnover among teachers with six years of experience or less is especially high.

“We need more arts educators,” he says, acknowledging the difficulty of the profession and noting that the DPI is developing mentor programs to support young teachers. “There’s a lot of need and a lot of interest. The key now is to create the right conditions.”

On the national level, Karhuse says the teacher shortage has become particularly acute since the pandemic, with older music educators retiring and others burning out. Recruiting more music educators is a top priority for the National Association for Music Education.

One of the association’s strategies is members talking broadly about

the life skills students receive from arts coursework, such as resilience, team-building, problem-solving and creativity.

They also provide an incentive for some students, with Karhuse saying “These are the courses that engage them and make them want to come to school.”

In addition, arts educators who work with students as they progress through school — such as middle and high school band teachers — can build strong relationships with students.

“These teachers really get to know them in a way that other teachers don’t,” says Karhuse, who has a word of advice for local school board members. In addition to attending a band concert, she encourages them to go into a classroom and watch music education in action. “They will see so much more goes into it than a single performance.” ■

*Anne Davis is a freelance writer who has been covering public education in Wisconsin for more than 30 years.*



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# THE POWER OF Community Advocacy

*Mauston superintendent: Referendum would have failed  
if it wasn't for advocacy group*

By Brock Fritz

In danger of dissolution, the School District of Mauston went to referendum three times in less than a year:

- In April 2024, the referendum failed after a campaign that Superintendent Joel Heesch calls a bit of a “solo effort.”
- In November 2024, the referendum failed despite an expanded campaign that reached a larger audience.
- In February 2025, the

referendum — which asked voters to exceed the state-imposed revenue limit by \$1.75 million annually for the next four years — passed by more than 1,000 votes, with Heesch saying, “I had nothing to do with the referendum passing.”

So, what happened to bring Heesch from a “solo effort” to having “nothing to do” with a successful referendum that passed by about 66% of the vote? Community advocacy. “The community advocacy group

was the entire difference in us passing the referendum,” Heesch, who presented a breakout session on July 11 at the Summer Learning Symposium in Stevens Point, says of the “YES for Mauston Kids” group that formed between the November and February elections.

Early in the referendum process, the district was having a tough time relaying its message to the community.

“We kept hearing, ‘Wait a second, you’re asking for more



Superintendent Joel Heesch, School District of Mauston

money? We just gave you money,” says Heesch, referencing a \$54.8 million referendum that passed in 2020 to build a new elementary school building, renovate other district buildings and invest in infrastructure and maintenance. “We had to try to inform and educate people about the differences between a capital referendum and an operational referendum — and how those pots of money don’t cross.”

That’s the message Heesch attempted to get across prior to the April 2024 election, when the district asked to exceed its state-imposed revenue limit by \$2.25 million per year over the next four years. His effort included four large group presentations, three live radio broadcasts, two mass mailings, Facebook posts and one article in the local newspaper.

While Heesch felt good at the time about the outreach, just 38.3% of voters were in favor of the referendum and he was surprised when he heard community members say things like “I didn’t even know you were going for a referendum.”



“It was like, ‘Oh, I thought I was out there.’” Heesch says, noting that the district went back to the drawing board to think about what they could do differently. “There are only so many avenues in a rural community.”

They found several new avenues to get their message out there. And in November, the district reduced their request to exceed the revenue limit to \$1.75 million per year over the next four years. Their outreach also included:

- Six large group presentations
- Three live radio broadcasts
- Two mass mailings
- Facebook posts
- Emails to families
- One article in the local newspaper
- Presentations at each municipality
- Presentations at service organizations

Once again, the referendum failed, this time receiving 49.4% approval. Heesch went back to the school board with the message of “I can get us through four years of \$1.75 million, but I can’t get us there with zero. We will close.”

The board adopted a resolution for consideration of dissolution, which Heesch says was “nothing more than being transparent that we know that if we don’t pass a referendum, we’re going to run out of money.”

That was despite the district already cutting \$1.5 million and 29 positions.

“The cuts were significant,” Heesch says, noting that an independent auditor told district leaders that they were going to run out of money during the 2026-27 school year. “The pain was real and our class sizes were showing that, but having the auditor say that when they gave their report at one of our board meetings, that was tough.”

That transparency led to the creation of YES for Mauston Kids. So, in February, the district produced the same number of



presentations, radio broadcasts, mailings, social media posts, emails and articles. The lone difference from November was the existence of the advocacy group, which Heesch says relied on “the impact of those people who are incredibly well respected in their own segments.”

The advocacy group was born from a Facebook post. Brandon Luehrman, a former Mauston teacher and current Re/Max Realty employee, posted on Nov. 6, 2024: “Mauston School District Voters: The next question becomes, ‘What does the district need to do/change for your vote to become a ‘Yes’ in April’s referendum?’ Everyone please be civil.”

That led to 153 comments, and the community movement was underway.

“We had to get things together quickly,” says Luehrman, who met with Heesch during the week of Nov. 11 to discuss forming a community advocacy group. He contacted potential members from a variety of stakeholder groups, such as parents, local business owners, community members and educators.

The following week, Luehrman connected with the Wisconsin Public Education Network, which provided guidance throughout the process. The initial group meeting was held the week of Dec. 2 to gauge member interest and begin laying out a plan.

The first meeting of the eight-person core group was held the week of Dec. 9 to establish an overarching

goal, discuss leadership roles and create communication methods. The following week, the group split into two main categories, with four people leading finances and marketing, and four others handling social media.

From there, weekly meetings were held until Feb. 8, and the group was out in the community spreading information.

“Our community wasn’t as informed as we needed to be,” Luehrman says, noting that while there was a core group of “no” voters in the community, they knew there were undecided individuals who could make an impact at the polls. “We needed to make sure we were reaching those people.”

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**“Our community wasn’t as informed as we needed to be.  
We needed to make sure we were reaching those people.”**

— Brandon Luehman, former Mauston teacher and advocacy group organizer

They set out to market to those people with a variety of methods, including:

- Creating 4x8 banners — Believing they are more visible and reliable than yard signs (note that all signs and banners must include the phrase “Paid for by [GROUP NAME].”
- Partnering with local business — Asking businesses with reader board signs to display a digital banner in a low-cost, high-visibility strategy that reinforced community support.
- Leveraging existing billboard contracts — Worked with businesses already renting billboards to secure three large billboards at no cost.
- Responding to community interest — Connecting with community members who reached out about their interest in engaging in advocacy.
- Working with the local radio station — A local station provided free airtime, which was billed by local business owner, community members, graduates, parents, students and politicians.
- Creating customized buttons, stickers and clothing — To promote voting.
- Building a social media and messaging strategy — The YES

for Mauston Kids Facebook page focused on the impact on students while targeting voters who were on the fence. While they let the district handle financial questions, the advocacy group was diligent about responding to misinformation factually rather than passionately.

The combined effort showed at the ballots, while also building a tight-knit group of informed district advocates who are more in tune with what’s happening in their local schools.

“We would have failed again if it wouldn’t have been for this group,” Heesch says. “I know that for a fact.” ■



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*By Hannah Gill*

- **Suno AI** can quickly compose





CESA 10 Ed Tech Coach Hannah Gill teaching Osseo-Fairchild School District fourth graders about artificial intelligence literacy.



A Gilmanton middle school student reading feedback he received from Snorkl.

catchy songs that can summarize lessons, introduce a new topic or teach about a classroom routine/expectation, making it a fantastic choice for younger students who learn through listening. Students in the Bruce School District and Flambeau School District were introduced to Suno during Teacher Appreciation Week, when elementary students surprised their teachers with personalized songs that expressed their appreciation for their dedicated teachers.

- **Snorkl** is an AI-powered platform offering instant feedback on student thinking via verbal and visual explanations on a virtual whiteboard. After an initial demonstration, a math educator in the Gilmantown School District began using Snorkl daily for exit tickets. He found that the immediate, personalized AI feedback significantly deepened student engagement and understanding, particularly as students articulated their mathematical reasoning.

- **Virtual reality goggles** — CESA 10 recently acquired 20 Meta Quest VR goggles, paired with an educational management software program called Engage IO. Member districts can borrow these goggles for in-class virtual field trips, allowing students to hold artifacts, converse with historical bots and create virtual

environments based on their prompts. This setup enhances learning experiences without incurring additional field trip costs.

These are just a few of the tools available to integrate AI into schools. CESA 10 has also utilized SchoolAI,

## Of the 15 fastest-growing professional skills in the U.S., AI LITERACY IS NUMBER ONE.

Gemini, Notebook LM and Otter.ai, among others. Finding that ongoing support and collaboration make a considerable difference with AI integration, the team uses Slack, a messaging platform with separate channels for educators to ask questions, offer personal anecdotes, share resources and collaborate with educators across districts.

Additionally, they conduct regional meetings and workshops, which allows teachers to learn from one another and develop a strong foundation for sustained AI use.

If your district is interested in investing in AI but is unsure where to start, consider these first steps:

- 1. Identify champions.** For successful implementation, it's crucial to gain staff buy-in. Is there administrative support for introducing AI solutions? Is this initiative incorporated into your district's strategic plan? Assemble a core team of individuals willing to lead this effort and schedule regular check-ins to monitor progress and address challenges. When inviting members to this team, make sure to include educator representation from all grade bands and specialties.

- 2. Define objectives.** Are you aiming to increase teacher efficiency? If so, have educators pilot a tool and track their time (including preparation, teaching and personalized student interactions) before starting this initiative to establish baseline data. Other objectives might include enhancing student engagement and test scores, increasing AI literacy among staff and students, and expanding the curriculum.

- 3. Evaluate technology.** Before you implement AI in your school network, ensure that the infrastructure is robust. Do all schools and classrooms have reliable internet access? Can your devices effectively utilize AI tools? Does the tool integrate with your district's LMS? Most importantly, are there systems available to guarantee data security and privacy?



## AI's growing presence in education will profoundly influence how learners research, write and collaborate in the future.

**4. Schedule ongoing professional development.** The integration of AI in your school should be an ongoing effort rather than a one-time initiative. Make plans to regularly check in with staff to discuss challenges, share resources and assess progress. Encourage early adopters to share their success stories with those who may be struggling. Additionally, create an internal resource library where staff can access best practices and guidance.

**5. Embrace ethics.** The use of AI in education brings significant ethical considerations. Ensure you have policies and guidelines regarding

data privacy, security and the responsible use of technology. Display age-appropriate posters throughout the school to remind students that it's never acceptable to share personal information or claim AI-generated content as their own.

A crucial element of CESA 10's approach is fostering a collaborative environment where educators from different districts can learn from one another's experiences with AI. Beyond the initial training and tool introduction, it's essential to actively cultivate communities of practice. This involves facilitating regular virtual meetings and forums where teachers can share successes, troubleshoot

challenges and brainstorm innovative AI applications. By connecting staff across district lines, educators are empowered to tap into a wider pool of knowledge and expertise, accelerating the collective learning curve and ensuring that best practices in AI integration are disseminated efficiently throughout the region.

As AI continues to reshape the educational landscape, the question is no longer if we should integrate it — but how. ■

*Hannah Gill is the instructional technology coach at CESA 10. Hannah and the rest of CESA 10's Educational Technology Department can be reached at 715-723-0341 or [info@cesa10.k12.wi.us](mailto:info@cesa10.k12.wi.us).*

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# BACK TO SCHOOL

**Welcome back!** Classrooms throughout Wisconsin are full again. The new school year buzz is in the air, and we are off and running on the 2025-26 school year.

Now's the time to look ahead at all the remarkable things that will happen this year.

But it also gives us an opportunity to look back on our own school days.

Below, find a selection of throwback school photos of WASB staff and board members.

A sweet and studious crew, for sure.

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WASB Region 5 Director, Wausau School District Board Member



**BOB GREEN**

WASB Region 12 Director, Middleton-Cross Plains Area School District Board Member



**LINDA FLOTTUM**

WASB Region 1 Director, Turtle Lake School District Board Member



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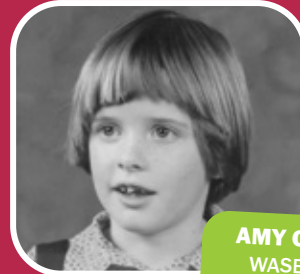
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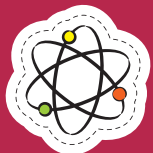
**DELTA SMITH**

WASB Technology Services Specialist



**BARBARA HERZOG**

WASB Region 10 Director, Oshkosh School District Board Member



*Have a fantastic 2025-26!*

## CONNIE KINCAIDE

### CEDARBURG SCHOOL BOARD MEMBER

Connie Kincaide was elected to the Cedarburg School Board in April 2023 and brings a deep commitment to her community. A wife, mother and active public servant, Kincaide also serves as an Ozaukee County Board Supervisor, an officer on the City of Cedarburg Diversity Committee and a voting member of the Washington Ozaukee Joint Board of Health. Her advocacy extends across numerous organizations focused on increasing special education funding, protecting disability rights and supporting minority communities.

**Kincaide recently spoke with the WASB about what drives her passion for public service, the exciting initiatives underway in her district, advice for fellow school board members and key takeaways from the 2025 WASB Summer Learning Symposium she plans to implement in Cedarburg.**

*Please note her responses to these questions are her opinions and don't reflect the opinions of her entire board.*

#### WSN: Tell me about yourself.

**Connie Kincaide:** I am a wife, mom and elected representative for residents who live in Ozaukee County and Washington County. When I am not prepping for committee meetings, board meetings or attending events, you can find me at home in Cedarburg, spending time with my husband Ryan, my son James and doting on our cat Lyla. If you catch me in my free time, I'm likely harmonizing to a popular song that I can't quite hit the notes to in the melody, scrutinizing a film adaptation of a beloved (by me) novel, watching "The Office" on repeat and doing my best to (kind of) figure out how to connect with people on social media platforms.

#### How long have you lived in Cedarburg and what do you enjoy about it?

**CK:** I've called Cedarburg home since 2011 and absolutely love being able to walk to many of our schools, the library, restaurants and shops. In the past decade, I have seen parks built with a focus on accessibility, festivals and events grow in popularity, and a



growing awareness and appreciation for the diversity of backgrounds, beliefs, abilities and experiences of all residents. This is something that I am profoundly grateful for.

#### What made you interested in running for the school board?

**CK:** As a very active parent in the district, I spent years going to board meetings and had been a point person for questions that families and residents had about a past

referendum and special education services. Seats were opening and I thought maybe, just maybe, I could win. I filed paperwork and started fundraising so that I can continue having a seat at the table.

#### Why are you passionate about public education?

**CK:** I benefited from a great public education and had incredible teachers who encouraged me along the way. Although I didn't graduate at the top of my class, or with distinction, I always felt safe in classrooms to learn, try new things and to do my best, even if my best sometimes meant failing.

I also grew up in districts with diverse student bodies and began elementary school right after the Americans with Disabilities Act was signed. Being in classes with peers of all backgrounds and abilities has had a lasting impact on me personally and professionally. While there is no perfect school or school district, I have found that public schools bring people together who may not otherwise meet, are a key to thriving communities and are worth fighting for.



**While there is no perfect school or school district,** I have found that public schools bring people together who may not otherwise meet, are a key to thriving communities and are worth fighting for.

**What's going on in your district right now?**

**CK:** The Cedarburg School District has great things going on throughout the year! Summer Academy is always a hit with students and parents alike. As we get ready for the school year to begin, many families are looking forward to a more accessible park opening up at one of our elementary schools. I'm looking forward to seeing that long-term goal of many parents and community members come to fruition.

**You attended the WASB Summer Learning Symposium in July. What were some of the highlights for you at that event?**

**CK:** I love being able to reconnect with, as well as meet, board members from around the state. Finding a balance between informational sessions, inspirational messages, and enough time for discussions and networking is no small task. I appreciate the effort WASB takes to bring in speakers with many different backgrounds and perspectives.

**What can new board members get out of attending WASB events?**

**CK:** Serving on a school board is a unique experience. Not everyone will understand the time and energy that goes into decisions you make that impact thousands of people. I have found camaraderie at WASB events and have said yes to each one with the mindset that a stranger is just a friend I haven't yet met. Though we may have different views

on a number of things, the love of learning, heart for public education and advocating for our districts is common ground from which many great conversations have been had.

**What other tips would you give to new members?**

**CK:** Be yourself, be open to learning and growing, and always put students' interests first. There may be times you wish you said more (or less) at a board table, but what's done is done. Do your best to prepare before each meeting and take comfort in knowing that likely all of us have had a vote or discussion time we may have handled differently.

**What other boards/organizations are you involved in?**

**CK:** In addition to serving on the CSD Board of Education, I am an Ozaukee County Board Supervisor. I also serve as an officer on the City of Cedarburg Diversity Committee and am a voting member on the Washington Ozaukee Joint Board of Health. In recent years, I have been a member of the WASB Policy and Resolutions committee. I am a member of advocacy groups and organizations that focus on increased funding for special education, disability rights, awareness of epilepsy and autism support needs, addressing housing inequities, breaking stigmas around mental illness, safeguarding the rights of minority groups and bridging divides in politicized climates. I am grateful for the opportunity to work alongside some of the most intelligent,

compassionate and persistent people in Wisconsin.

**Have you always been involved in public service? Was there something that ignited that passion?**

**CK:** I have benefited from the advocacy efforts of many before me, and want to be remembered as someone who did the best they could with what they had.

As someone who has a seizure disorder and who manages chronic illness, I struggled to find a "traditional" career path. Volunteering for causes that I cared about was always a place I could come back to, knowing that it made a difference. Over the years, this has morphed into a better understanding of my own strengths, and civic service has been a natural progression of wanting to put those strengths to the best use possible.

**What are you most looking forward to during the 2025-2026 school year?**

**CK:** There is never a dull moment in our district. A few activities that are close to my heart include volunteering with the annual Veteran's Day procession that travels to each school, supporting our CHS Robotics team, cheering on the CHS Unified Basketball (UBall) team and helping with initiatives at each of our schools that support work done by food pantries in Ozaukee County. As a board member, I'd like to be relied on as someone who shows up wherever, whenever and however I can for all students and their families. ■

## 2025 Regional Meetings

### Join your peers at the 2025 WASB Fall Regional Meetings!

Meetings will take place in every WASB region across the state and provide an opportunity to network with area board members, celebrate accomplishments and learn what the WASB is doing for you. Regions 2, 5, 7, 9, 11, 14 and 15 will vote on a WASB regional director.

**All meetings will begin at 6 p.m.**, with registration and networking followed by a 6:30 dinner and 7 p.m. programming. Each pre-meeting workshop will begin at 4:30 p.m. The member fee is \$42 for the meeting, which includes dinner, and \$75 for the pre-meeting workshop. Register for both and receive a \$10 discount. Visit [WASB.org](http://WASB.org) for more details and to register.

**REGION 1** | Oct. 14 – Ashland, The Landing at Best Western / Hotel Chequamegon *and*  
Oct. 15 – Rice Lake, Lehman's Supper Club

**REGION 2\*** | Oct. 16 – Minocqua, Norwood Pines Supper Club

**REGION 3** | Oct. 22 – Green Bay, Rock Garden / Comfort Suites

**REGION 4** | Oct. 28 – Eau Claire, The Florian Gardens

**REGION 5\*** | Nov. 4 – Rothschild, Holiday Inn Wausau-Rothschild

**REGION 6** | Oct. 9 – Onalaska, Onalaska Middle School

**REGION 7\*** | Oct. 23 – Neenah, DoubleTree by Hilton Neenah

**REGION 8** | Oct. 21 – Kiel, Millhome Supper Club

**REGION 9\*** | Oct. 8 – Fennimore, Southwest Tech

**REGION 10** | Oct. 7 – Wisconsin Dells, Trappers Turn

**REGIONS 11\* & 15\*** | Oct. 2 – Brookfield, Sheraton Milwaukee Brookfield Hotel

**REGION 12** | Sept. 30 – Sun Prairie, Hilton Sun Prairie

**REGION 13** | Sept. 23 – Burlington, Veterans Terrace

**REGION 14\*** | TBD – Milwaukee, MPS Administration Building

**Online Workshop** | Nov. 4, 12 p.m. – Zoom

**Online Meeting** | Nov. 6, 12 p.m. – Zoom

*\*Denotes regions with elections for WASB Board of Directors*

## Celebrating Student Voices

### Don't miss our powerful Student Voices

**video** – now live on [WASB.org](http://WASB.org) and all WASB social media platforms! Hear from passionate students across Wisconsin as they share why public schools matter and inspire others to stand up and support them. Watch now and share with your community!



Stay in the loop and never miss a moment – follow the Wisconsin Association of School Boards on YouTube @TheWASB. Subscribe and stay up to date on the latest with WASB events, strategic planning and other happenings in Wisconsin public education.

## REGIONAL MEETING WORKSHOP

**Prior to each Fall Regional Meeting**, WASB consultants and staff counsel will host a 4:30 p.m. workshop in the same facility in which the meeting will be held. This year's workshop covers student absenteeism and attendance laws:

### Students Can't Learn If They're Not There

Student success starts with showing up. Yet in the 2023–24 school year, nearly 1 in 5 Wisconsin K–12 students missed more than 10 days of school. That's a challenge we can't afford to ignore – and one we can address.

Join us for a focused 90-minute workshop designed to help school leaders take meaningful action. We'll begin with a clear overview of Wisconsin's compulsory attendance laws, presented by WASB legal counsel, to ensure your district understands its responsibilities and options. Then, WASB consultants will share proven, practical strategies that districts across the state are using to improve attendance and re-engage students.

### You'll leave with:

- A solid understanding of the legal framework around attendance and truancy.
- Tools to communicate effectively with families.
- Policy ideas that support student engagement.
- Real-world examples of what's working in Wisconsin schools.

Whether your district is already tackling chronic absenteeism or just starting the conversation, this session will equip you with the insights and strategies to make a difference.

**REGISTER NOW** and help ensure every student has the opportunity to succeed.

An online workshop for all members will be held at 12 p.m. on Tuesday, Nov. 4, on Zoom.

## NEW RELEASE: Title IX Training

The WASB and Boardman & Clark recorded new Title IX training videos over the summer. The first six modules – for

Title IX coordinators, investigators, decision-makers, administrators, all employees and informal resolution – are now available. Stay tuned for updated training on athletics and retaliation. All new content is available to current subscribers. Visit the WASB Portal to subscribe your district and provide the training required in the 2020 regulations. For more information, visit [WASB.org](http://WASB.org) or contact [info@wasb.org](mailto:info@wasb.org).

## Convention Updates

**Registration opens Nov. 3, 2025** for the 2026 Wisconsin State Education Convention, scheduled for Jan. 21-23 in Milwaukee.

**NEW THIS YEAR:** Hotel room blocks open at 8 a.m. on Monday, Nov. 3, 2025. A link to book hotel rooms will be included in a confirmation email upon convention registration.

**If you submitted a breakout session proposal,** you will receive an email by Sept. 12 notifying you whether it has been accepted. Contact WASB Director of Communications Brock Fritz at [bfritz@wasb.org](mailto:bfritz@wasb.org) for more information.

**CONVENTION CALL FOR PROPOSALS** Get involved in the 2026 Wisconsin State Education Convention! The convention, scheduled for Jan. 21-23 in Milwaukee, is your opportunity to highlight your innovative programs and talented students. The WASB is now accepting proposals for the School Fair, student art exhibit and the student video team. School Fair proposals are due by Sept. 19, 2025. Student art exhibit and student video team proposals are due by Nov. 15 and Nov. 28, respectively.

**Submit your proposal at [WASB.org/convention](https://wasb.org/convention).**

### UPCOMING WEBINARS

#### ■ WASB LEGAL AND LEGISLATIVE VIDEO UPDATE

**SEP. 17, OCT. 15, NOV. 19** | 12 - 1 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.

*The Zoom link will be emailed to you as the event approaches.*

### Delegate Assembly Resolutions Deadline

**Monday, Sept. 15** is the deadline for school boards to submit resolutions for the WASB Delegate Assembly. To review the resolution process and find the submission form, visit [WASB.org/advocacy-government-relations/delegate-assembly](https://wasb.org/advocacy-government-relations/delegate-assembly).

SAVE THE DATE  
**2025 WASB Fall  
Legislative Conference**  
Nov. 8, 2025 | Stevens Point, WI

## Meet a Convention Keynote Speaker

### Mickey Smith Jr.

**Educator. Encourager.** Those are just two of the words that describe Mickey Smith Jr., who will bring a saxophone on the Wisconsin State Education Convention stage to share his unique combination of message and music.



In the course of his career, the eight-time Teacher of the Year and GRAMMY Music Educator Award Recipient has grown multiple band programs in Louisiana, Texas and Florida by over 500%, encompassing over half of their school populations.

The Southwest Louisiana native believes in promoting education and the educators across the globe who make it possible. He has extensive experience teaching in Title I, urban, suburban, rural, public and private schools. Throughout the years, Mickey's classrooms have been filled with students from a variety of backgrounds. There are some who have experienced trauma and adverse circumstances, but they have all been provided with the opportunity to find greater meaning and purpose through music. Mickey's classroom experience encourages students to do more than make music, but also to "discover their personal sound."

He empowers educators to build genuine relationships with students in order to discover the unique sound of every child in their class. He has experienced firsthand that every child is just one sound away from achieving success. Mickey was that very student that benefited because someone believed in who he could be.

Mickey believes that modern-day teaching is a relationship-based approach, and that more than ever teaching cannot simply be about the subject matter, but also about showing students that they matter. His mission is to engage, educate and empower every learner to excellence through music, so that every child feels loved, valued and wanted.

The teacher, all-state conductor and clinician has taken his systems of joy for teaching to hundreds of educational conferences, school district meetings and leadership development stages across North America sharing his "Keep on Going" approach.

West Palm Beach is now home to Mickey, Eugenia and their two children, William and Mikayla. Learn more about Mickey Smith Jr. by visiting [mickeysmithjr.com](https://mickeysmithjr.com) and watching his convention announcement video on the WASB's YouTube page. □



## WASB Heads to Washington: What Are We Going to Discuss?



The hot, humid and smoky summer has come to an end, and the 2025-2026 school year has officially begun! We hope that everybody enjoyed a restful summer and had a chance to prepare for the excitement of welcoming a new group of students.

If you were avoiding the news, this summer was largely dominated by the state budget process. The legislature and governor worked non-stop through June and early July to hammer out the final details of a bipartisan compromise state budget (If you missed the details, check out our August issue of Capitol Watch or review the Legislative Update Blog). Now that this process is over, it gives us an opportunity to shift focus from K-12 fiscal issues in Wisconsin to those at the federal level.

As part of this effort, the WASB Government Relations Team and Board of Directors Executive Committee will be heading to Washington, D.C., from September 7-9, to participate in the Consortium of State School Board Association's Federal Advocacy Conference. We will have the chance to hear from top federal officials and staff — and, most importantly, meet with our

Congressional delegation. Outlined below are a few major issues we plan to discuss with our representatives in Washington. While not encompassing all federal issues, these will be among the top of our agenda as we communicate with our federal lawmakers.

### ■ Individuals with Disabilities Education Act

IDEA is one of, if not the largest, federal mandates placed upon school districts. The act governs special education services for students across the country by ensuring all students with a disability have access to a free appropriate public education in the least restrictive environment.

The federal government promised to support IDEA at a 40% level. However, the highest the government has ever achieved was 18% in 2005. More recently, the level of support has been a little over 10%. With more than 8 million students with disabilities nationwide, states are struggling to fill in the gaps left by the federal government.

Another important point we will be making is the need to explore ways of reducing burdensome paperwork and procedural hurdles. This

will help build a better, more efficient system that continues to ensure students with disabilities receive a quality education while strengthening relationships between families and districts.

### ■ Title funds

Title I funding is designed to assist school districts in providing support for economically disadvantaged students. As education advocates, we are all too familiar with how a student's home situation can affect academic achievement. Often these individuals need more services and support to learn than their fellow students. Ensuring the federal government continues to provide robust support for these students is critical to creating a level playing field for every student.

Title II-A funding is a dedicated funding source for teacher recruitment and retention. In Wisconsin and across the country, schools are struggling to recruit and retain teachers. Nearly every subject area is experiencing shortages in available labor. The purpose of the Title II program is to improve academic achievement of all students by increasing access to effective educators. Recently, this program has

We will have the chance to hear from top federal officials and staff — and, most importantly, meet with our Congressional delegation.

been targeted for elimination or drastic reduction by both the current administration and Congress. The flexible use of these funds is an important tool for districts, and eliminating the program during this time could have major ramifications nationwide.

### ■ **Medicaid's effect on school budgets**

The fourth-largest source of federal funding for public school districts, Medicaid is not often thought of as a “school program.” That said, public schools receive over \$7.5 billion nationally in Medicaid reimbursement every year. These funds help to provide critical health services to students that are required regardless of whether schools receive Medicaid funding.

While we recognize that this program is largely outside of the education community's purview, reductions in funding will have a dramatic impact on schools. We hope to remind our congressional delegation that this program has a significant impact on public schools and to consider this when making changes to the program in the future.

### ■ **Strengthening Congressional control of federal education funding**

Recently, the U.S. Department of Education temporarily withheld some fiscal year 2025 funds from state agencies. This was despite these funds receiving Congressional approval, and a statutory deadline for release. While the funds have since been released to state agencies, these funds came with new requirements (not approved by Congress). Some states, such as Wisconsin, have yet to direct those funds to school districts while they review the implications of the new requirements. We recognize that the current administration is focused on reducing federal spending; however, stable and predictable funding is essential to school finance.

Even brief interruptions in said funds can cause serious disruption, as districts must make decisions about programming before the school year begins. Even if funds are eventually received, it may come too late to reopen programs. We hope to encourage our delegation to explore ways of strengthening their control

(such as those outlined in the Senate Appropriation Committee's fiscal year 2026 education spending plan) over the appropriations process, and to prevent interruptions such as these moving forward.

### ■ **Rural school supports (Secure Rural Schools/Impact Aid)**

Most of Wisconsin's schools are classified as rural school districts. Many of these districts rely on designated federal programs to supplement their unique budgetary needs. Secure Rural Schools funding is a dedicated funding stream for schools with federal forest acreage in their boundaries. Similarly, Impact Aid is a program that helps school districts that have federally owned land (such as military bases, shipyards, etc.) within their boundaries. The goal of these programs is to offset the loss of local property taxes that result from federally owned land that is not taxed. Unfortunately, SRS was not reauthorized past 2024, and Impact Aid has continually been a low priority in Congress. We hope to renew these programs to provide critical assistance to these unique districts. ■

### **Fall opportunities for updates on K-12 state and federal issues**

- WASB Legislative Conference; Nov. 8, Holiday Inn Convention Center, Stevens Point
- WASB Regional Meetings (Legislative Update included), Locations and dates vary, more updates to follow
- September Legal and Legislative Webinar; Noon on Sept. 17

## **REMINDER: Delegate Assembly Resolutions due to the WASB by Monday, Sept. 15**

**As a WASB member**, you have the opportunity to shape the future of both public education policy and our organization. If there's a change you want to see from the state or federal government — or in WASB's advocacy goals — submit a resolution for the 2026 Delegate Assembly!

This is your opportunity to bring forward ideas, concerns and solutions that matter to your district and help WASB better reflect those we serve.

Learn more and submit a resolution at [WASB.org](https://wasb.org). □



# First Amendment Concerns Regarding Library Materials

In recent years, school board members have frequently faced issues related to the removal of school library materials. One important legal principle that board members need to keep in mind when navigating these issues is the First Amendment to the U.S. Constitution. The First Amendment implications of removing materials from a public school library is an evolving area of the law. The U.S. Supreme Court offered some thoughts on this issue back in 1983 in the *Pico* decision.<sup>1</sup> Recently, courts have struggled to determine the amount of legal weight to give the *Pico* decision. In May 2025, the Fifth Circuit Court of Appeals decided *Little v. Lllano County*<sup>2</sup> and gave very little weight to the *Pico* decision. Fifth Circuit decisions do not bind Wisconsin school districts. However, this decision is an illustration of how courts approach First Amendment issues involved in the removal of materials from school libraries.

This Legal Comment will give an overview of the *Pico* decision. Then, it will summarize the Fifth Circuit's *Little* decision and discuss the First Amendment principles discussed in that decision. Finally, it will provide some takeaways for Wisconsin school

districts in the absence of controlling legal authority on this issue.

## ■ The U.S. Supreme Court's *Pico* decision

In *Pico*, the U.S. Supreme Court determined that a school district violated the First Amendment when the board appointed a book review committee to recommend to the board whether 11 books should be retained in the school library or removed. After receiving that report, the board decided to retain only one of the books in the library, with one additional book being available only with parental approval. The other nine books were removed from the district's libraries and from use in the curriculum. One of these books, "Slaughterhouse-Five," remains somewhat controversial today. Students in the district brought a lawsuit against the board for removing the books.

The Court ruled against the board, but the justices authored multiple opinions. No single opinion had support from a majority of the nine justices. However, five justices agreed that the board violated the First Amendment by removing the book, which makes it clear that the board lost the case. The justices

couldn't agree on a legal rationale as to why the district lost. One opinion authored by Justice Brennan was only joined by Justice Stevens, Justice Marshall, and in part by Justice Blackmun. This means that Brennan's opinion is only a plurality opinion, and its reasoning doesn't have the controlling legal weight that an opinion issued by a majority of the justices would have.

The *Pico* plurality opinion has been cited by lower courts, scholars and attorneys as persuasive authority to caution school boards against removing materials from the library. In particular, the plurality opinion stated, "we hold local school boards may not remove books from school library shelves simply because they dislike the ideas contained in those books and seek by their removal to prescribe what shall be orthodox in politics, nationalism, religion, or other matters of opinion."<sup>3</sup>

## ■ The Fifth Circuit Court of Appeals decision in *Little*

All the judges in the Fifth Circuit Court of Appeals, sitting en banc, recently had the opportunity to review the *Pico* decision, ultimately giving it very little weight. In *Little*,

The *Pico* plurality opinion has been cited by lower courts, scholars, and attorneys as persuasive authority to caution school boards against removing materials from the library.



## The state of the law regarding First Amendment library materials challenges will continue evolving as more courts weigh in on the issue.

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the Fifth Circuit decided a lawsuit brought against Llano County for removing 17 books from the municipal public library because of how the books treated racial and sexual themes. The Court of Appeals held that library patrons had no right to receive information under the First Amendment. In its reasoning, the Court of Appeals specifically stated and reiterated that “*Pico* carries no precedential weight.”<sup>4</sup> Interestingly, a plurality of the Fifth Circuit would have gone farther and held that the library’s collection constituted government speech that is not subject to suit under the First Amendment.

Ultimately, the Court of Appeals ruled against the library patrons and dismissed their First Amendment claims. The library patrons framed the County’s decision as censorship and even book-burning. The Court of Appeals dismissed those allegations, saying, “Take a deep breath, everyone. No one is banning (or burning) books. If a disappointed patron can’t find a book in the library, he can order it online, buy it from a bookstore, or borrow it from a friend.”<sup>5</sup> Despite the Court of Appeals’ attempt to downplay these concerns, removing books from a library based on their content remains a deeply contested legal issue, especially in Wisconsin schools where there is no controlling precedent discussing the weight of the *Pico* decision.

### ■ A constitutional right to receive information?

The Fifth Circuit held that there is no right to receive information under the First Amendment. The Court of

Appeals expressly stated that a majority of the Supreme Court Justices in *Pico* never held that such a right exists. The court explained that the First Amendment generally prohibits the government from stopping individuals from receiving a book. However, that right is distinct from any right of individuals to tell the government which books it must keep in the library.

According to the Fifth Circuit, a logical extension of that right would be that individuals could challenge which books libraries must purchase. This could create a potential First Amendment issue whenever the library declines to buy a certain book for any reason. This would create unintended consequences and significantly interfere with routine library practices.

The Fifth Circuit also reasoned that it was essentially impossible to establish a workable legal standard for determining when a library violates the First Amendment by removing a book from its collection. The various proposed potential legal theories would generally require libraries and courts to evaluate the content and viewpoint of the texts. Viewpoint discrimination has been held to violate the First Amendment in a variety of contexts, and the court wanted to avoid potential viewpoint discrimination claims with respect to library materials. Libraries frequently remove items through a process known as “weeding.” Sometimes books are weeded out because they are physically falling apart or no longer being checked out. However, weeding guidance from some librarian organizations also suggest weeding books out that

reflect stereotypes or outdated thinking. The Court of Appeals could not reconcile this type of viewpoint-based weeding with the library’s decision to remove 17 books for their treatment of racial and sexual themes. The court held that both the weeding and the removal were proper.

### ■ Libraries as government speech

Further illustrating the complexity of this First Amendment issue, a plurality of the judges in *Little* went even further and stated that the county’s selection of library books constituted government speech. Essentially, the county engaged in government speech when it selected the contents of the library and that the county was, therefore, free to make viewpoint-based decisions regarding which books to purchase and remove without being subject to First Amendment challenges.

This broader rationale was not adopted by a majority of the judges in the Fifth Circuit. This means that, similar to the *Pico* decision, this part of the decision is not binding precedent even within the Fifth Circuit. Additionally, in 2024, the Eighth Circuit Court of Appeals explicitly held that selecting and removing library materials did not constitute government speech.<sup>6</sup> The two courts disagreed about whether the library engages in expressive activity through its selection and removal of library materials. Among other factors, the Eighth Circuit Court of Appeals doubted that the public would view the placement and removal of books as the government speaking on its own whereas the Fifth Circuit Court of Appeals thought that

the public would view the situation as the government speaking on its own. Ultimately, this disagreement regarding government speech might be resolved by the U.S. Supreme Court sometime in the future, or the Seventh Circuit Court of Appeals, which has jurisdiction over Wisconsin schools, might decide the issue.

### ■ Conclusion

The state of the law regarding First Amendment library materials challenges will continue evolving as more courts weigh in on the issue. In particular, the law remains unclear for Wisconsin school districts. Therefore,

Wisconsin school districts should take a cautious approach when considering the removal of library materials. School boards should be thoughtful in their deliberative process regarding the removal of library materials and comply with all applicable policies and procedures established by board policy, including the process for modifying those policies and procedures. School districts should also work closely with legal counsel in these situations because the removal of library materials raises legal issues in addition to the First Amendment issues discussed in this Legal Comment.

*This Legal Comment was written by Brian P. Goodman of Boardman & Clark LLP, WASB Legal Counsel. For related articles, see Wisconsin School News: "Legal Issues Involved in Reviewing School Library Materials" (Sept. 2023).*

1. *Bd. of Educ., Island Trees Union Free Sch. Dist. No. 26 v. Pico*, 457 U.S. 853 (1982) (plurality).
2. *Little v. Llano Cnty.*, 138 F.4th 834 (5th Cir. 2025).
3. *Pico*, 457 U.S. at 872.
4. *Little*, 138 F.4th at 843-844.
5. *Id.* at 838.
6. *GLBT Youth in Iowa Sch. Task Force v. Reynolds*, 114 F.4th 660 (8th Cir. 2024).

*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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jessica\_a\_daun@uhc.com  
uhc.com

UnitedHealthcare is dedicated to helping people live healthier lives and making the health system work better for everyone. We are committed to improving the healthcare experience of K-12 teachers, staff, retirees and their families in the state of Wisconsin.

#### ► USI Insurance Services

262-302-2343  
raeanne.beaudry@usi.com, usi.com

Our focus is financial security options that protect and assist growth. We go beyond simply protecting against the loss of assets and property.

#### ► WEA Member Benefits

800-279-4030  
aerato@weabenefits.com,  
weabenefits.com

We have provided retirement savings and investment programs, financial planning services and insurance to school employees and their families for nearly 50 years. We also provide financial education and employee benefit solutions to help districts recruit and retain staff.

### Leadership Consulting

#### ► Excel Leadership, LLC

262-420-0799  
brian@excelleader.org  
excelleader.org

We facilitates development of strategic plans for school districts, workshops to improve board and administration relationships, tools and processes for more effective board governance, and mentoring of district leadership.

### Legal Services

#### ► Buelow Vetter Buikema Olson & Vliet LLC

262-364-0300  
jaziere@buelowvetter.com  
buelowvetter.com

We have decades of experience in representing school boards across Wisconsin. We advise school boards and administrators on a variety of issues from labor and employment to student discipline and expulsion.

#### ► Renning, Lewis & Lacy, s.c.

844-626-0901  
info@law-rl.com  
law-rl.com

Renning, Lewis & Lacy, S.C. provides legal counsel on a full range of issues that school and higher education institution clients confront on a regular basis.

#### ► von Briesen & Roper, s.c.

414-276-1122  
james.macy@vonbriesen.com  
vonbriesen.com

For more than fifty years, von Briesen has delivered client-driven results to school districts throughout Wisconsin. Our team's depth and breadth of experience allows us to understand the unique challenges facing school districts today and help our clients become true leaders and innovators.

#### ► Weld Riley, s.c.

715-839-7786, weldriley.com  
sweld@weldriley.com

We provide a wide variety of legal advice and counseling to help Wisconsin school districts, colleges and CESAs address corporate-related, body politic and unique legal issues.

### School/Community Research

#### ► School Perceptions, LLC

262-299-0329  
info@schoolperceptions.com  
schoolperceptions.com

An independent research firm specializing in conducting surveys for public and private schools, educational service agencies, communities and other state-level organizations.





**SUPPORTING, PROMOTING AND ADVANCING PUBLIC EDUCATION**



# **UPCOMING MEETINGS & WORKSHOPS**



## **2025 FALL REGIONAL MEETINGS & WORKSHOPS**

**September - November**

Dates and locations vary by region



## **FALL LEGISLATIVE CONFERENCE**

**November 8, 2025**

Holiday Inn Convention Center - Stevens Point

Visit [WASB.org](https://www.wasb.org) for complete information and to register. | 608-257-2622 | [info@wasb.org](mailto:info@wasb.org)