

WISCONSIN SchoolNews

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

January/February 2026 | wasb.org

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TEACHERS OF THE Year

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Milwaukee Students Perform for Hugh Jackman

Hugh Jackman visited Milwaukee School of the Arts last month. The spotlight, however, was on the students, who performed “From Now On” from “The Greatest Showman,” the film in which Jackman played P.T. Barnum.

According to a Milwaukee Public Schools news release, Jackman was in town to promote “Song Sung Blue,” his recent movie about a Neil Diamond cover band from Milwaukee. Seeking to spend time with local arts students, he visited Milwaukee School of the Arts’ Concert Chorale on Dec. 2.

“Having *the* Hugh Jackman walk into your choir room is so insane. It was so cool,” said MHSA senior M Dias, who was one of three “From Now On” soloists, according to MPS’ release. “Singing is my favorite thing to do. It makes me emotional. Singing is one of the most beautiful things in the world to me.”

The Milwaukee Journal Sentinel reported that Jackman donated \$15,000 to the school — \$10,000 for instruments and \$5,000 for upgrades to the auditorium.

“You guys inspire me so much,” Jackman said after choral director Raymond Roberts helped him surprise the students. “I was a kid like you. When I was your age, all I did, my whole time, was doing arts. I just love that you guys are here following your dreams, following your passions.” □

STAT OF THE MONTH

97,414

The number of 4-year-old kindergarten through third-grade students who scored below the 25th percentile on the Act 20-required early literacy screener during the 2024-25 school year.

Source: Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction

DPI Releases Data on First Year of Literacy Screeners

On Nov. 30, the Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction submitted a report on early literacy assessment data to the Wisconsin State Legislature, as required under Wisconsin Act 20.

The report shows that 36.8% of Wisconsin students in 4-year-old kindergarten through third grade scored below the 25th percentile on the required early literacy screener during the 2024-25 school year. According to Act 20, the 97,414 students who scored below the 25th percentile require additional support, including a personal reading plan.

“This first report provides us with a baseline, showing where students performed in a standardized assessment given at one point in time,” State Superintendent Dr. Jill Underly said in the DPI’s corresponding news bulletin. “These data are critical in helping schools guide instruction and intervention — not to define a student’s potential.”

The report found that all school districts and independent charter schools participated in early literacy screening in 2024-25 — Act 20’s first year of implementation. □

Eight Schools Honored for Excellence and Achievement

The Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction recognized eight schools on Nov. 19 for exceptional academic performance and success in closing achievement gaps.

According to the DPI’s press release, the recognition came after the U.S. Department of Education ended the National Blue Ribbon Schools Program earlier in 2025. The eight honored schools had already been nominated prior to the program’s termination.

“We’re proud to continue celebrating the hard work of Wisconsin’s students and educators,” State Superintendent Dr. Jill Underly said in the release. “These schools have shown remarkable results and a strong commitment to helping every child succeed.”

National Blue Ribbon Schools are honored in two categories: Exemplary High Performing Schools and Exemplary Gap Closing Schools. T.J. Walker Middle School (Sturgeon Bay Schools) was recognized for High Performing and Gap Closing, while Edgewood Elementary School (Greenfield), Karcher Middle School (Burlington), Forest Lane Community School (Montello), Shiocton Elementary School (Shiocton) and Crivitz High School (Crivitz) were honored for Gap Closing, and Prairie Lane Elementary School (Kenosha) and St. Croix Falls Elementary School (St. Croix Falls) were honored for High Performing.

The DPI’s release stated that the department plans to continue a state-level version of this recognition program. □



Have Your Say in the New Year

With the start of the New Year, many of us make resolutions.

I hope that one of your resolutions will be to attend the 2026 State Education Convention and fully participate in all it has to offer. For board members, that includes making sure your board's vote is counted when important decisions about the direction of the WASB are made.

The annual WASB Delegate Assembly, held on the first day of the convention at 1:30 p.m. on Wednesday, Jan. 21 at the Baird Center in Milwaukee, is your opportunity to shape the direction of WASB policy position. It is critical that as many boards and districts as possible participate and vote so the WASB's positions truly represent the viewpoints and priorities of our members.

For the first time in recent memory, a proposed amendment to the WASB Bylaws will come before the Delegate Assembly. This is a substantive amendment that will affect WASB advocacy and how it is supported by member boards. I encourage you to review it carefully.

The Delegate Assembly will also take up policy resolutions on several topics of significant importance to many boards. These include resolutions calling for:

- Revising the criteria that determine state school and school district report card scores and the process used to develop the report cards.
- Maintaining the existing enrollment and income caps that limit participation in the statewide private school voucher program (known officially as the Wisconsin Parental Choice Program).

- Establishing a statewide universal school meal program to cover the cost of all student meals not covered by federal programs.

In addition, delegates will be asked to weigh in on a pair of competing resolutions on the topic of "decoupling" voucher payments. Currently, payments to private schools participating in the statewide and Racine voucher programs and the special education voucher program are paid for by reducing the state aid of a participating pupil's resident school district (DPI makes these reductions before aid is sent). The resident school district is then allowed to replace the lost aid by charging property taxpayers.

One resolution calls for ending (or "decoupling") the link between a district's state aid and voucher funding; the other supports maintaining the current system.

To my knowledge, having competing resolutions that are directly opposed to one another is an unprecedented situation.

Let me clear up a point that confuses many board members and administrators: The WASB does not "support" any of the proposed resolutions unless and until they are approved at the Delegate Assembly in January.

The proposed resolutions to be debated were vetted by the WASB Policy & Resolutions Committee, comprised of WASB members from all WASB regions, based on three criteria:

1. Is the proposed resolution timely?
2. Is the proposed resolution worthy of debate?

- 3. Does the proposed resolution need consideration by the full WASB membership?

The Policy & Resolutions Committee advances resolutions it believes meet these criteria and turns down those it believes do not. The committee does not consider the merits of the resolutions in this vetting, nor does it recommend that delegates approve the resolutions. It simply recommends that the resolutions be debated by WASB members. It is the WASB membership, present and voting, that decides whether to adopt them or not.

Beyond the convention, I'm looking forward to a great 2026.

We'll kick off a new year's schedule of conferences and events that includes the WASB/WSAA School Law Conference at the Osthoff in Elkhart Lake on Thurs., Feb 19; WASB New Board Member Gatherings in each WASB region during the third week of April; the WASB Summer Learning Symposium in Stevens Point in July; and WASB Fall Regional Meetings across the state from mid-September through October.

Now, let's turn to the pages ahead. This issue of the School News focuses on Teachers of the Year award winners. Read their stories, what motivates them, and why they're passionate about teaching.

Other articles include tips on effectively communicating with your community, tools for tracking legislative issues, and a behind-the-scenes look at Crandon students' lobbying trip to Washington, D.C., to advocate for the continuation of Secure Rural Schools funding.

I hope your Holidays were merry and bright, and I look forward to seeing you in Milwaukee. ■



2026 WISCONSIN TEACHERS OF THE YEAR

We asked the teachers to write about what led them to teach, and what keeps them committed amid high turnover rates.

► MEGAN DIXON *Second-Grade Teacher*

GLENWOOD ELEMENTARY, SCHOOL DISTRICT OF GREENFIELD

For 26 years, I've served in public education — as a kindergarten teacher, middle school reading specialist, literacy coordinator, second-grade teacher and now as an instructional coach. Each chapter shaped me, but the throughline has always been the same: I am here because of the people who taught me to lead with purpose, act with integrity and believe deeply in what teachers and students can become.

I carry my students and their families. I carry my colleagues. I carry

my own children. And I carry the educators who model that leadership isn't about stepping into the spotlight — it's about stepping forward with intention, rooted in classrooms and grounded in community. Leadership is not about title or position; it's about presence, purpose and people.

We are living in an unprecedented moment. Nearly 300,000 teachers and school staff left the profession between 2020 and 2022. Enrollment in teacher preparation programs has dropped by one-third. More than

half of educators are considering leaving earlier than planned.

These realities shape daily life in our schools: increased student needs, reduced staffing, shifting expectations and policies often created without the insight of practicing educators.

For the past two years, I have served on Wisconsin's Early Literacy Curriculum Council. On a council of nine, I have been the only current classroom teacher. That experience changed me. It revealed how often decisions about curriculum,

assessment and instruction are often made without the voices of those who know students best.

If teachers are not present in decision-making spaces, policies will be built without classroom expertise — and students will feel the impact. Teacher leadership is not optional; it is essential for student success, school improvement and the future of our profession.

This year, I transitioned from teaching second grade to serving as an instructional coach. My goal is simple: help teachers feel seen, supported and skilled. I work alongside colleagues to implement our new literacy curriculum, co-plan lessons, analyze student data and reflect on instruction. This work is collaborative, not evaluative. When teachers plan, teach and problem-solve together, instruction becomes more intentional and responsive — and student outcomes grow.

Collaboration also makes teaching more sustainable. When teachers feel supported rather than scrutinized, they are more confident and more likely to remain in the profession. Shared expertise reduces burnout and strengthens instructional quality. Schools thrive when educators feel they don't have to do the work alone.

Whenever I am asked why I stay in this work, I think of Paris.

Paris entered my second-grade classroom new to our school and significantly behind academically. She had every reason to feel discouraged, yet she showed up every day with determination. Her growth was possible because her family partnered with us, because her teachers were skilled, and because we had a multi-level system of support that allowed us to



I am here because of the people who taught me to lead with purpose, act with integrity and believe deeply in what teachers and students can become.

respond to her needs with intention.

Students like Paris don't need goodwill alone — they need teachers who know how to diagnose learning needs, plan instruction and adjust based on data. They need educators who understand early literacy development and believe deeply in what students can achieve. Through targeted instruction, consistent feedback and collaboration with her family, Paris made remarkable gains.

Her story underscores a truth we cannot ignore: love is essential, but not enough. Students deserve teachers equipped with strong pedagogical knowledge, supported by collaborative teams, and guided by systems that ensure no child slips through the cracks.

Teacher leadership also means investing in the next generation. Through our partnership with Alverno College, preservice teachers learn in real classrooms — by teaching, reflecting and receiving meaningful feedback. These experiences help future educators

understand what it truly means to reach every learner, not just the ones who arrive confident, prepared or easy to teach.

As an instructional coach, I am committed to strengthening foundational literacy practices. Reading development is complex, and educators deserve ongoing, research-based professional learning. When we invest in teacher knowledge, we transform student outcomes. Therefore, mentoring is woven into everything we do. Co-teaching, modeling lessons, analyzing data and supporting new teachers create a culture where growth is collective.

Teaching has never been easy, and today it is more complex than ever. But I remain because I believe in what we can accomplish when teachers lead. When educators are empowered, schools become more responsive, inclusive and effective. Students thrive. Communities grow stronger.

When we invest in teachers, we invest in students. And when we center educators, we center children.

The future of our schools depends on the choices we make now — and the questions we ask with courage:

- How can we require — not just invite — teacher voice in decisions?
- How can we build leadership pathways that keep teachers connected to classrooms?
- How can we make space to listen to the expertise already in our schools?

These questions are anchors for action. If we approach them with commitment, collaboration and belief in what is possible, we will build the kind of schools every child deserves. □

Celebrate the 2026 Wisconsin Teachers of the Year at the State Education Convention!

Join us at the Baird Center in Milwaukee on Wednesday, Jan. 21, as we recognize and honor these exceptional teachers during the opening general session of the annual convention.

► JOEL COYNE *Business Education Teacher*

SUN PRAIRIE EAST HIGH SCHOOL, SUN PRAIRIE AREA SCHOOL DISTRICT

I want to make the world a better place. A cliché? Maybe. True? Absolutely. Teaching is the one place where I feel I have the greatest opportunity and ability to affect change. Change that, in both small and large ways, can improve someone's life. And in doing so, I can help make the world a better place.

To this day, I still remember my sixth-grade teacher, Mr. Conner, and the impact he had on my life. I say this without reservation; it was a turning point. I was an average student who often tried to fall to the background. Rather than putting myself out there, I was very comfortable with letting others take the spotlight.

One day I was tasked with reading a passage aloud to the school and families in attendance. I was a slower reader and, like many, got nervous speaking in front of large crowds. Scared of failure and with little confidence in my abilities, I tried to get out of it. To his credit, Mr. Conner wouldn't let me back out. Instead, he worked with me and built up my skills and confidence.

I can't remember the exact words he used, but it wasn't what he said, it was how he made me feel. His message has resonated with me for years. He saw something in me, challenged me and told me I was chosen to read the passage because he believed I could do it and would hold me to high expectations. Though my voice probably cracked and my hands trembled, that feeling — that someone believed in me — was empowering. It was especially transformational because he saw something in me that I didn't see myself.

That small moment may not register as a memory for Mr. Conner, but the impact it had on me was profound. I felt seen, not just for



Rather than accepting the world as it is, I aim to help create the world as it could be — one where students see themselves as capable of more.

who I was, but who I could be. Looking back, it was a turning point in my life.

Over the course of Mr. Conner's teaching career, he had countless interactions that would nudge students in the right direction. He believed in students and in doing so made them believe in themselves. The individual lessons and units have long since been forgotten, but the shift in identity remains. Like a snowball rolling downhill, one small act of belief can build on itself so that what was a small nudge at the start can leave a tremendous impact.

That's the power of teachers who connect with and believe in their students. Research has shown that students with a strong student-teacher relationship have increased motivation, which leads to better academic outcomes.

Teachers have a wealth of skills that would make them highly successful in any number of fields. Ability to multitask, without a

doubt. Ability to think creatively and problem-solve, 100%. Ability to be held accountable to a number of different stakeholders, you bet. And, most importantly, ability to lead — absolutely. Teaching is gathering a group of students to learn together but, more importantly, to believe in themselves. That they are capable of more than when they first entered our classrooms. But teaching offers a unique opportunity that is not afforded by many professions.

Every day educators have the opportunity to be the nudge, the inspiration, the belief, the turning point for someone. It is why I am a teacher today and why we need to continue to strengthen our profession.

I became a teacher because I want to pay it forward. Like the mantra when camping, "Leave it better than you found it." I have greatly benefited from many great coaches and educators who helped guide me along the way. I believe that we need to continue to invest our time and resources in our nation's most valuable assets, the youth. One day, they will be our leaders, and it is imperative to give them the chance to spread their wings. To have opportunities, take risks and discover their own potential.

The impact of teaching is often invisible in the moment, but even small nudges can set a whole new direction. Rather than accepting the world as it is, I aim to help create the world as it could be — one where students see themselves as capable of more.

That's why I choose to teach. To shine a light, to lift others up and to believe in the students. It's my way of making the world a better place. □

► MARK ACHERMAN Science Teacher

DARLINGTON ELEMENTARY-MIDDLE SCHOOL, DARLINGTON COMMUNITY SCHOOL DISTRICT

When I first began college at the University of Wisconsin-Platteville, I did not declare a major. Like many young people just out of high school, I didn't really know which path I wanted to take. Around that time, I began coaching junior high basketball. As a coach, I discovered that I enjoyed helping people learn and had a natural knack for working with kids. It was during this experience that I decided to pursue a degree in teaching.

Little did I know then that I would meet my wife, who is also a teacher, through the profession. Together, we raised three wonderful children, two of whom have since followed in our footsteps, majoring in education at UW-Platteville. Additionally, my sister, a cousin, a niece and a nephew are also Wisconsin teachers. So, you could say that the commitment to education is very much a family tradition.

I'm fortunate to continue my teaching career at Darlington Elementary-Middle School, where I work with top-notch teachers and administrators who consistently put students' needs first.

Over the past three decades, education has changed dramatically. But as much as things have changed, the fundamentals have stayed the same. Students still need teachers to build connections with them and to be challenged and motivated when it comes to learning. Making those connections and challenging my students in their learning is what motivates me the most to continue teaching. I strongly believe that it is not what we teach, but how we teach that matters most. Students might not remember certain science concepts after they leave my classroom, but they will always remember how I taught and how I treated them.

As a teacher, I strive to put the



Over the years, I have learned that the true impact of education lies not in what we teach, but in how we teach and the connections that we make.

following principles, which I refer to as TEACH, into my lessons: Technology, Engagement, Authenticity, Collaboration and Hands-On Learning. Technology is one of the most powerful motivators available in education, so I try to include technology tools daily in order to engage students. I am motivated and love the challenge of creating real-life, authentic lessons that challenge my students and make learning meaningful. If students can relate to lessons and know why they are learning the materials, they are much more motivated learners. Working in groups and collaborating with others gives my students the confidence to speak in class and let their voices be heard. While combining collaboration and using hands-on learning, passive learners become active learners. Collaboration is also essential when it comes to reaching English Language Learners, who make up about one-third of the learners in our school. With the help of technology, the support of ELL

teachers, and peer teaching through group work and collaboration, we can close the achievement gap for these students.

I'm fortunate to work at a school where the administration and other educators share my passion for sustainability. I've been involved in several long-standing, hands-on projects at Darlington Community School District. The most notable is our school's nature trail, which I continue to develop, featuring 35 trees and a tradition of planting a new tree to honor retiring employees. From solar panels on our school to participating in the KidWind program, our students can see that sustainability is a way of life, not just a concept. Recent initiatives funded by grants from the Kohl's Fellowship Award and local businesses include launching a school composter for cafeteria waste and hosting community astronomy nights with new telescopes. These initiatives continually expand opportunities for students to understand and appreciate the world around them.

When asked what keeps me in the teaching profession, ultimately, it is my passion for creating meaningful learning experiences for my students. I am driven by the challenge of embracing new technologies and meeting the different needs of all my learners. As a science teacher, I continue to be motivated by my passion for creating innovative sustainability projects. Over the years, I have learned that the true impact of education lies not in what we teach, but in how we teach and the connections that we make. What began as an uncertain career path has become a rewarding profession that isn't always easy, but is always worth it. □

TONI FINK

Second-Grade Teacher

MILWAUKEE SPANISH IMMERSION SCHOOL, MILWAUKEE PUBLIC SCHOOLS

always dreamed of being a teacher. I loved school, and I was endlessly fascinated by the idea that learning could uncover the hidden knowledge behind the mysteries of the world. I was so amazed by what I learned that I told everyone I knew. I wanted them to feel that same sense of wonder — that spark that happens when something finally makes sense.

At the same time, my own education had gaps that shaped me just as strongly as the parts I loved. I changed elementary schools several times. I do not remember one teacher who made a genuine effort to make me feel welcome or to get to know me as a new student. My strengths went unnoticed, and unnoticed strengths turned into doubts. There always seemed to be favorites, and I was never among them. That feeling of sitting in a classroom yet being on the “losing team” could be incredibly lonely. Those experiences planted the earliest seeds of the teacher I hoped to become — one who sees every child, especially the ones who quietly feel unseen.

I have always been drawn to children and to helping them feel important. While my friends got jobs in stores or malls, I never wanted anything but to work with kids. So I became a camp counselor, a tutor, a babysitter, a Sunday school teacher — anything that allowed me to spend time with young people. I loved playing with them and sharing their joy. I felt I understood kids of all kinds, and I found that I could comfort them. Even when I was a student myself, I naturally befriended people from all different friend groups. I believed everyone deserved to feel like they had someone in their corner.

My brother’s story deepened my



What keeps me in the profession is simple: there is still so much important work to be done.

understanding of why teaching matters. He was diagnosed with ADHD at a time when very little was understood — or done — in schools to support students with attention or learning challenges. So many teachers lacked the knowledge or skills to help him succeed. Watching the challenges he faced was heart-wrenching. He was misunderstood, treated unfairly at times, and rarely given the chance to see himself as capable and full of potential. And yet, he is truly an extraordinary person — beloved by all who know him, the life of every room he walks into, someone who leads with his heart and would help anyone in need.

But I know those early school experiences shaped his path, instead of allowing him to shape his own. Witnessing that as his sister changed me deeply and absolutely influences how I teach today. My students with ADHD or other challenges are often the ones I see most clearly. I know how much they deserve a teacher who believes in them, who listens carefully, who helps them discover

their strengths instead of letting others define their limits.

Even though I always wanted to be a teacher, I spent many years believing I wasn’t smart enough to become one. So I embarked on an alternative path. I majored in Spanish, which allowed me to live in Spanish-speaking countries and discover how much I truly loved teaching. The more time I spent with students, the more I realized I really could do this work — and that I had something meaningful to offer. Eventually, I returned to the United States and pursued an alternative licensure program. I earned dual certification in Elementary and Bilingual Elementary Education, followed by a master’s degree in Curriculum and Instruction. I have had the privilege of teaching at the same Milwaukee Public School, Milwaukee Spanish Immersion, for more than 25 years.

What keeps me in the profession is simple: there is still so much important work to be done. Teaching has never felt like a job I mastered. It feels like a profession of constant growth — a place where there is always more to learn, more to improve, more ways to show up for students. Our community, our district and education as a whole continue to evolve. And because they do, I feel an obligation and a calling to keep growing alongside them. Schools need all hands on deck to meet the needs of today’s students, and I still want my hands to be part of that work.

I became a teacher because I believed in the power of learning and the importance of children feeling seen. I remain a teacher because I still believe in those things — and because every day gives me another chance to be for students what I once needed someone to be for me. □

► LISA VAN HEFTY *Special Education Teacher*

O.H. SCHULTZ ELEMENTARY, SCHOOL DISTRICT OF MISHICOT

Early three decades ago, I stepped into the world of education with a heart full of hope and a deep desire to help others. That calling — to serve, to uplift, to guide — was strong then, and even stronger now. Teaching was never just a career choice for me; it was a purpose. As a special education teacher, I've had the privilege of walking alongside students whose journeys are often marked by unique challenges but also by extraordinary growth, resilience and joy. Each year, each child, each moment has reaffirmed why I chose this path and why I remain so deeply committed to special education.

What brought me into teaching was the belief that every child deserves a champion — someone who sees their potential, even when others might overlook it. I've always felt that students with special needs deserve the same opportunities to excel as any other student. They deserve to be seen, heard and included.

That belief has only deepened over time. I've watched students who once struggled to find their place blossom into confident individuals. I've seen friendships form across differences, and I've witnessed the power of inclusion, not just for the students receiving support but for their peers as well. When students with special needs learn alongside their classmates, everyone grows. It builds empathy, patience and acceptance. It teaches children that diversity is not something to be feared — it's something to be celebrated.

Public schools are the foundation of this vision. They are the places where children from all backgrounds, abilities and walks of life come together to learn, grow and discover themselves. Public education is not just about academics; it's about building communities that reflect the values



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of fairness, opportunity and inclusivity. In a public school classroom, students learn side by side. In doing so, they learn that differences enrich us rather than divide us. This is how public schools make the world a better place: by teaching children to value one another, to work together and to see the humanity in every person.

Remaining in the teaching profession has never been a question for me. The pull to continue is rooted in the countless moments of transformation I've witnessed. I've seen hearts and minds grow in ways that defy expectations. I've seen students discover their voices, their passions and their place in the world. And I've seen the ripple effect that one caring adult can have — not just on a student, but on an entire community. Teaching is about making a difference — one child, one lesson, one day at a time. Each success, no matter how small, is a reminder that the work we do matters.

One of the greatest joys of teaching is that I am constantly

learning from my students. They teach me patience, creativity and resilience. They remind me to see the world through fresh eyes and to celebrate progress in all its forms. Their curiosity fuels my own, and their determination inspires me to grow alongside them. Teaching is not a one-way exchange of knowledge — it is a shared journey where both teacher and student discover new possibilities together.

Education, especially special education, is a team effort. It requires collaboration, compassion and a shared commitment to nurturing the whole child. I've worked alongside incredible colleagues, families and support staff who understand that growing a healthy mind takes more than just instruction — it takes connection. Our classrooms are more than learning spaces; they are communities where students learn to navigate emotions, build relationships and discover who they are. In these communities, inclusivity is not just a goal, it's the foundation.

As I reflect on my years in the classroom, I'm filled with gratitude. Gratitude for the students who've taught me as much as I've taught them. Gratitude for the families who've trusted me with their children's growth. And gratitude for the opportunity to continue doing what I love — helping others, advocating for inclusion and believing in the limitless potential of every child.

The calling that brought me into teaching is still alive, still urgent and still full of promise. It is the calling to make a difference, to build bridges of understanding and to help every child find their place in the world. Public schools embody this mission, and inclusion ensures it reaches every child. Together, they make the world a better place. And that's why I stay. □



Second-grade teacher Jillian Rozanske and her class. Last May's Community Breakfast at Rawson Elementary School in South Milwaukee was an exercise in opinion writing and experience-based learning.

'It Was Great. And It Was Kind.'

How an ELA resource and experience-based professional development created a new tradition at South Milwaukee's Rawson Elementary School.

By Daniel Bader



Rawson Elementary School students Slobodan, Nick, Avi and Keira. Last spring, these then-second graders and their classmates wrote letters to businesses and individuals about proper nutrition, inviting them to participate and requesting donations for a healthy community breakfast at the school. To their surprise, many responded by donating or attending the breakfast.

When Avi walked into the first-ever Rawson Elementary Community Breakfast last spring, she didn't believe what she saw. The whole cafeteria was decorated, and tables were piled high with food.

The feast that she and her fellow second graders walked into was all donated, thanks to opinion letters they wrote to area businesses, sharing their new knowledge about nutrition and requesting donations for the community breakfast.

"I didn't really think that they would do this," Avi remembers. "I thought the teachers were just joking (that the food was donated)."

Like every other school in Wisconsin, Rawson Elementary has implemented the literacy standards required under Act 20. In the School District of South Milwaukee, a team of teachers spent the spring and summer of 2024 reviewing various resources that fit the needs of stu-

dents and Act 20. The curriculum vetting process allowed the district to make a uniform decision. Teachers in each of the district's four elementary schools introduced the new curriculum in their classes during the 2024-25 school year — a full year before the July 1, 2025, statutory deadline.

While reviewing the potential resources, School District of South Milwaukee leaders valued "knowledge-building" resources that were strategically designed around key science, health or social studies topics, enabling students to gain not only the literacy skills they need but also insight and a deeper understanding of the world.

The opinion letters and ensuing community breakfast were real-life learning activities that the district had been working on as part of the strategic plan passed in March 2024. The breakfast developed from a module that focused on

reading and writing instruction through the topic of body systems and nutrition. The idea of tying the letters to an activity like a community breakfast was a direct result of professional development the district recently completed.

"It was really special for us," teacher Shannon Dardis says. "We felt really good seeing how the community breakfast connected to their learning."

After the letters were sent, one by one, replies trickled back to the classrooms and were read aloud for the entire class.

Teachers Jillian Rozanske and Kalla Hornick say their students would get so excited when a reply letter arrived.

"They would ask about the letters every day," Rozanske recalls.

"You'd have students say: 'I wrote a letter to so and so, and I got the bacon,'" Hornick says of how the replies and donation pledges were a

“They learned that there’s a power in writing, and they really embraced the fact that they could have an impact and help to organize it.”

— Shannon Dardis, Rawson Elementary School teacher



point of pride.

It wasn’t only the food, though. Since it was a community breakfast, students wrote to grown-ups inviting them to join them.

Keira, then a second grader with a big personality and an imagination to match, found Superintendent Deidre Roemer waiting in the cafeteria to join her for breakfast.

“I invited her, and then she came. I was talking, and I said ‘Hey, can I have a job?’ and she told me to write her a resume,” Keira says. “I was like ‘Yesss!’ ... and I did (write) a big, big resume (good enough) for like 30-year-old people.”

“The students got that direct feedback,” Dardis says. “They

learned that there’s a power in writing, and they really embraced the fact that they could have an impact and help to organize it.”

Roemer was honored to receive the invitation, saying she was “blown away by the way our teachers were thinking about ways to make the learning come to life for students. The joy in that room was captivating, and students are growing academically through the process as well.”

More than half of the students in South Milwaukee are eligible for the free-and-reduced breakfast and lunch program. Putting on the community breakfast and talking about food and nutrition gave the second-grade

teachers a perspective into their students’ lives and habits, challenging some everyday assumptions.

“There are students who said they don’t ever eat with adults,” Rozanske says. “That was a new experience for kids.”

Slobodan, a student who wrote to O&H Danish Bakery, was surprised when eight of their signature Kringle pastries were delivered for the community breakfast.

“I was thinking that they wouldn’t, but they did,” he recalls. “It was great. And it was kind.” ■

Daniel Bader is the communication coordinator at the School District of South Milwaukee. Daniel can be reached at dbader@sds.m.k12.wi.us.

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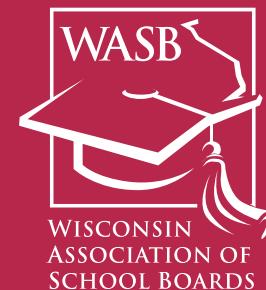
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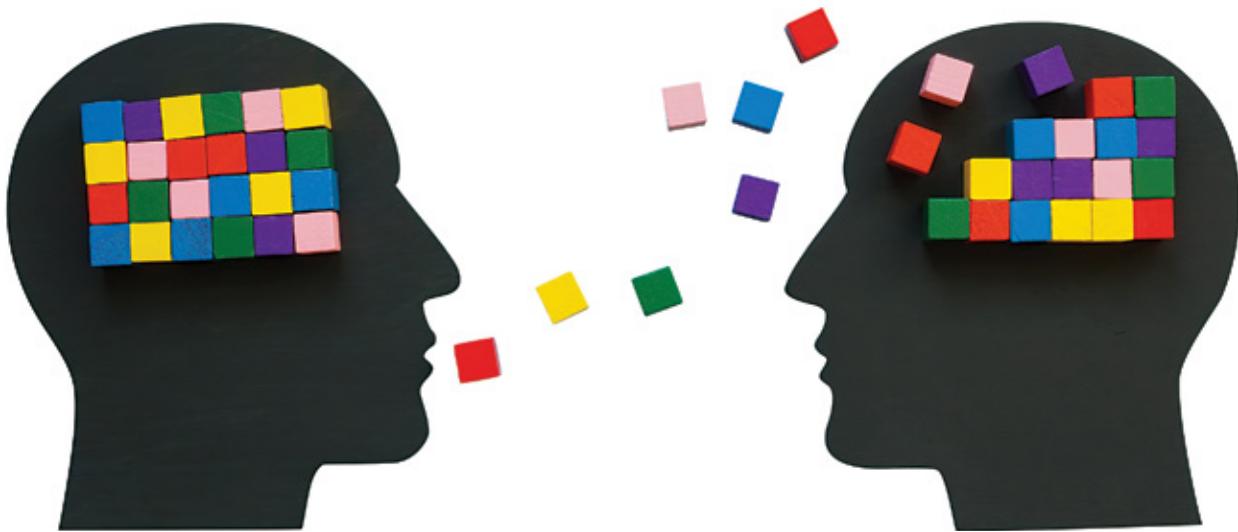
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‘Keep It SIMPLE and RELATABLE’

How to inform the community and translate policy into meaningful dialogue.

By Brock Fritz

Gov. Tony Evers signed the 2025-27 Wisconsin state budget into law on July 3, 2025. But beyond the headlines, how can education leaders effectively communicate what these decisions mean for local schools, communities and students?

State budgets are complex, and many community members don't have the time to sort through the details. That's why public education leaders play a critical role in translating the budget and its policies into meaningful, actionable dialogue.

“You need to keep it simple and relatable,” says WASB Director of Member Services Ben Niehaus, speaking during the “Understanding the 2025-27 State Budget” breakout session at the Fall Legislative Conference on Nov. 8, in Stevens Point. “Go back to how it's impacting students

with some relatable stories.”

The 2025-27 state budget included no increase in general aid, while increasing the per-pupil revenue limit by \$325 from the 2023-25 budget. Therefore, all increased revenue authority is coming from property taxes, making it especially important local leaders communicate with their communities.

“Explain it to a normal taxpayer in a way they could understand it,” adds WASB Search and Governance Consultant Bruce Quinton, former superintendent of Pepin Area Schools, noting that a communications plan is essential today because “20 years ago we had less ways to get information out to people. Now there are so many venues that it's hard to get people to listen to them.”

Every community is different, with its own demographics, characteristics

and events. However, the goals and fundamentals of effective communication remain the same across the state.

It starts with strengthening communication within the community by:

- Establishing clear, consistent and transparent communication channels.
- Frequently sharing district goals, priorities and achievements.
- Using multiple platforms to communicate, such as newsletters, social media, local news and in-person forums.
- Highlighting student and staff success stories to build trust.

But building trust and communication isn't a one-way conversation. It's more than just sending out messages through media channels.

“You have to be visible,” says

When trust and communication channels are built ahead of time, it becomes simpler to engage the community regarding specific events or policies.

WASB Search and Governance Consultant Randy Guttenberg, a former Waunakee and Montello superintendent. “If you want people to listen to you, they have to trust you. That means they have to see you in other places to build that trust.”

“One of the most important things we can do is be visible,” Quinton adds. “Build relationships with people of the community. That’s a very important feature of a rural school leader — attending events, being visible and being seen.”

Therefore, districts must deepen community engagement by:

- Creating authentic opportunities for parents, families and community partners to participate.
- Forming advisory groups and inviting local leaders to district discussions.
- Partnering with civic organizations and businesses to expand support networks.
- Encouraging volunteerism and mentorship in schools.

When trust and communication channels are built ahead of time, it becomes simpler to engage the community regarding specific events or policies.

“You already have that relationship,” Niehaus says. “It’s not going out and communicating with stakeholders just when you need something.”

When that relationship is built and it’s time to educate the public on state education policy, local leaders should:

- Provide clear, accessible information about how state decisions affect local schools
- Offer fact sheets and community briefings on key education issues.
- Use storytelling to connect policy impacts to student

experiences — “Show how strong schools attract families,” Quinton says. “By connecting policy to people, we shift the conversation from politics to shared values.”

- Encourage informed participation in state education initiatives.

Guttenberg suggests creating talking points that school board members can use when out in the community.

“You need to be able to articulate how that actually impacts education, impacts us,” he says. “If you don’t have talking points as school board members, ask for them. What are the main things impacting our school district? Storytelling is the power of how you get the message across. Tie legislative pieces to programs, stories, things you want to do ... tell that story first and then say, ‘Here’s the impact of what that means.’”

The more districts communicate with community members, the more advocates they have. When connecting with state legislators, it’s crucial to:

- Build respectful, ongoing relationships with state representatives and senators.
- Invite legislators to visit schools and meet students, educators and families.
- Provide concise data and real-world stories illustrating local needs and outcomes.
- Encourage community members to share their own perspectives with policymakers.

“When I would write to our legislators, I would send it out to a network of people. We could get it out to the whole community through an email chain,” says Quinton, who would tell people to “feel free to cut and paste my letter, reword it and send it.” And feel free to tell them you got this info from me, because if they know that 150 people reached out to them and got this information from Bruce Quinton, that opened doors to me.” ■

Brock Fritz is the WASB director of communications and editor of the Wisconsin School News. He can be reached at bfritz@wasb.org.



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TRACKING Legislative Issues AT THE BOARD LEVEL

Wisconsin board members share
how they stay engaged.

By Brock Fritz

There are 421 public school districts in Wisconsin — and at least 421 different ways to approach legislative advocacy.

That's OK, according to WASB Government Relations Specialist David Martin, who says the most important thing is that school boards agree on and create a legislative advocacy plan — whether by motion, general consensus, written plan or official board policy.

"A single approach likely will not work for every board," says Martin, who moderated a panel of Wisconsin school board members on Nov. 8 at the Fall Legislative Conference in Stevens Point. "Find the best fit for your board."

Potential legislative advocacy plans include:

- **Identifying a legislative liaison**

to track legislative issues and decide whether that person is authorized to communicate on behalf of the board/district without first obtaining a majority vote in favor of the specific advocacy position. "The advantage of this method is having the ability to act quickly on time-sensitive issues, but it requires trust in the person given this responsibility," Martin says.

- **Creating a legislative committee.** "The advantage of a committee is having multiple people vetting the board's position," Martin says. "The disadvantage is that meetings of committees still require the same open meetings law notice requirements as a regular board meeting, and it may be harder to advocate quickly on timely issues via the committee approach."

- **Discussing at least one legislative issue during each school board meeting.** In practice, the topic could come from a legislative liaison or committee updating the board on recent developments. Liaisons can utilize WASB services, such as the Legislative Update Blog, to determine which issues to bring to the table. "There's a lot of legislative activity," WASB Director of Government Relations Chris Kulow says. "Knowing board members have limited capacity to advocate, we try to whittle that down into what's actually real and what you should be prioritizing."

- **Passing a board resolution** to take official positions on identified legislative issues and priorities. "Those are a formal statement of what you think about a particular issue," Martin

THE MOST IMPORTANT THING is that school boards agree on and create a legislative advocacy plan — whether by motion, general consensus, written plan or official board policy.

says, suggesting boards assign the legislative liaison or committee the task of communicating their official positions with legislators. “What you do with the resolution afterwards is the more important part. Are you sending it to your legislators? Not just sending it to them, but providing an explanation of what it means. Your board resolutions are only as good as how much you follow up and continue to push them out.”

Martin sat down at the Fall Legislative Conference with four engaged advocates — Hudson School Board President Bob Baumann, DC Everest School Board Vice President Shannon Grabko, Franklin School Board President Mike Spragg and Chequamegon School Board President Victor Ambrose — to hear how they stay on top of legislative issues, engage their boards and communities, and share their message with legislators.

Their discussion included questions and answers such as:

1. Does your board have a legislative advocacy plan?

GRABKO: We have a WASB representative, which has been me the last two years. I keep track of the WASB Legislative Update Blog and make sure my report each board meeting includes any pressing items so that the board and public are aware. I’m hopeful those reports help all the board members be on the same page of what’s going on, what issues we need to be paying attention to and how they might affect us.

SPRAGG: We have a legislative liaison. It’s generally the person who’s the board president. You have to be proactive instead of reactive, and you have to create relationships with city officials, legislators at the state level and people at the county level. You need to engage with them. If you want to continue to have local

Building a Legislative Advocacy Plan

CONSIDER THESE STEPS...



Identify a legislative liaison to track legislative issues



Create a legislative committee



Designate time during each board meeting to discuss legislative issues



Pass a board resolution to take official positions on identified legislative issues and priorities

control, you need to know these people so that when something comes up, you know the issue, they know the issue and you can speak about it without it being an emergency.

2. How does your board track legislative developments?

BAUMANN: There’s a lot out there. The key is to make the statewide concerns known to your local municipalities. We have three or four townships in our district that all have different goals, and getting that information out to them is hard because they’re focused on what’s important to them.

GRABKO: I will follow our legislators on social media to pay attention to the bills they’re talking about. As a board member, you need to be aware of these educational bills and what impact they might have. It gives you an opportunity to reach out to your representative if you have questions. Ask, “What does this mean? How does it impact our area?” And also for you to let your legislator know, “This may not work for us. If you support this, this is what’s going to happen to us.”

SPRAGG: When something’s important, it probably needs to be on an agenda to talk about it at a meeting. People pay their taxes and they think that all people they elect work together. It’s important that you try to do that. Work collaboratively as much as possible and show constituents that that’s what you’re doing. It’s important your community knows you’re trying to work with them.

3. Does your board take formal positions on legislative issues? If so, what process do you use?

AMBROSE: We don’t have a formal process, but we are flexible and able to address this. It’s an expectation that the superintendent brings it to

our attention. If it's a real emergency, we may need to have a special meeting to address that. **Grabko:** With the state budget, it was important for us this year to step up and have testimony at the Joint Finance Committee public hearing. And it did make an impact, because we did see a shift with the special education reimbursement. A lot of times we don't bring things forward because we try to keep the politics out of the board room, but when it makes sense and it intersects with the things that matter to our local community, our schools, our students, then those are conversations we have. Then certainly action could arise from that.

SPRAGG: With the budget, we took a formal position. It was an agenda item, and we wrote a letter together with the superintendent. Then we presented together in front of the Joint Finance Committee. I've been

impressed with the WASB, especially in the last several years, bringing us together to have a consistent message on "This is the big thing we need to take care of," rather than 100 little things. That was important in getting across special education funding last year. We're all coming together, even though we don't think the same things. It's important to sometimes have a formal position and say it in front of your community.

4. How do you message your board's opinion with your lawmakers?

Who handles the communication of board positions to legislators?

AMBROSE: I encourage the rest of the board members as citizens to be able to do that on their own. And it depends on what kind of passion, story and message you want to send. Board positions are generated administratively, voted, discussed,

refined and tweaked by the entire board, with input across all members.

BAUMANN: We have board members from all sides of the political arena. We advocate nonpartisanship and you're free to speak on your own. But all the potentially agenda-driven things are not brought up during our board meetings.

GRABKO: We are the eyes and ears of our legislators, to let them know what's going on. They're busy. But there are opportunities for you to let them know what's going on, issues you care about. I see mine at the grocery store all the time and that's an opportunity to say, "Hey, how's it going? Anything I need to be aware of? Anything you want to know?" These aren't formal conversations, but they're communications between community members. In a more



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**When something's important, it probably needs to be on an agenda to talk about it at a meeting...
It's important your community knows you're trying to work with them.**

— Franklin School Board President Mike Spragg

formal setting, our superintendent will bring those issues forward in a report where we as a board can decide to take a position, give him permission to communicate with legislators and officially speak on behalf of the board.

5. Have your efforts been successful in developing a relationship with your legislators?

AMBROSE: The WASB Day at the Capitol. If you haven't done it, plan on it and you'll reap the benefits. Make sure you maintain that visibility. I see it as a success when the legislators recognize you because

they've seen you before.

BAUMANN: We've seen good gains in communication with our legislators. It had been a struggle. We've thrown out there, "Hey, we're the largest employer in the county, we're the largest population base in your district." We invite them to meetings. It's a warm room. There are questions, but it's not a "gotcha" situation or anything like that.

6. How does your board work on fostering relationships with local community stakeholders?

GRABKO: A lot of our local businesses are very involved with the

school district. It strengthens those ties, and it really does make a community. When it comes to referendums or things you need for your school, these organizations are aware of it and are willing to step in and say, "How can we help?"

SPRAGG: Schools are really the only "community" in our community. It's the only place people can get together in large quantities, and the only place people have the opportunity to get in front of the community. People want to be involved in the community, and if you're all working together, it makes it a lot easier. ■

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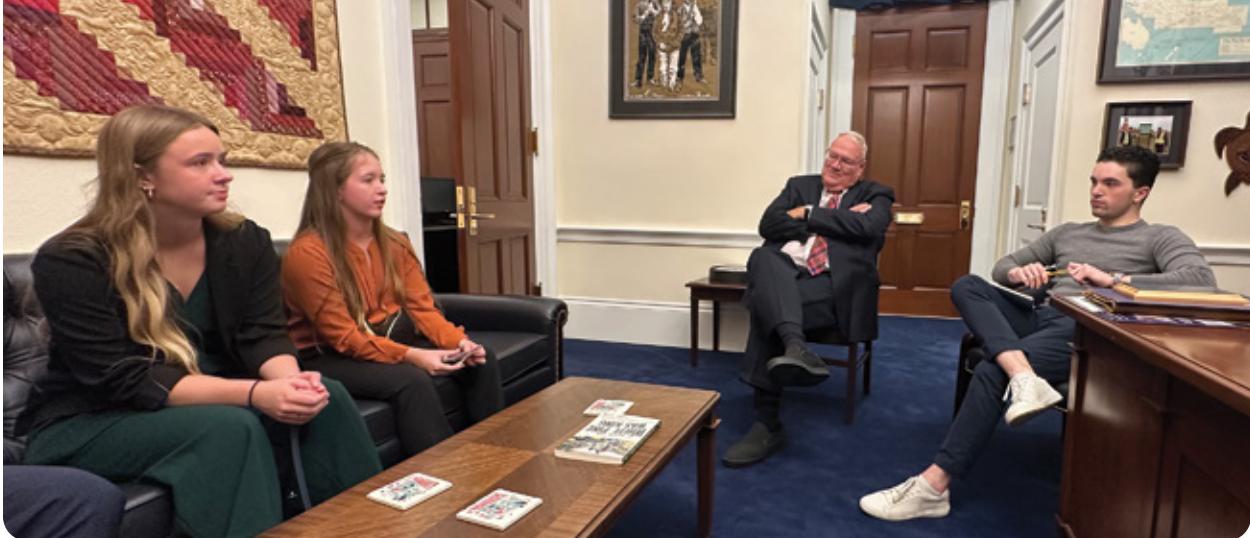
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Explore Our Work!

Voices in the Capital



Crandon High School students visit Washington D.C., to share the importance of Secure Rural Schools funding.



By Brock Fritz

While the goal of public education is simple, achieving it can be complex. It's easy to get wrapped up in line items and forget that students are at the heart of every budget decision.

The School District of Crandon made sure student voices were heard by bringing them directly to the table. High school juniors Emma Koplien and Lindsey Mihalko traveled to Washington, D.C., in October to meet with lawmakers about the importance of the Secure Rural Schools Act, which provides Crandon with up to \$277,767 annually.

"It's great that we as students get to experience things like this and make a change," Koplien says. "I'm so thankful that we got to make our voices heard. Small towns in general are overlooked. It brought light to how much their decisions in D.C. affect us."

"It was inspiring to watch these two young women confidently share how programs like Secure Rural Schools directly impact their education and opportunities," adds Crandon District Administrator Jason Bertrand, who joined Koplien, Mihalko and Crandon Middle/High School Principal Joshua Jaeger in D.C. "These memories will last a lifetime. Trips like this remind me why I'm so proud to work in education and represent our small but mighty community. Rural schools matter, and so do our students' voices."

According to the U.S. Department

of Agriculture, Congress passed the Secure Rural Schools and Community Self Determination Act in 2000 in response to decades of declining U.S. Forest Service revenues. Prior, the Act of May 23, 1908, ensured that a portion of Forest Service funds generated through multi-use activities, such as grazing, timber production and special use permits, were distributed to eligible counties to help maintain local roads and schools.

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"Trips like this remind me why I'm so proud to work in education and represent our small but mighty community. Rural schools matter, and so do our students' voices."

— Jason Bertrand, Crandon District Administrator

properties being removed from tax rolls, the Secure Rural Schools Act was authorized to ensure stable funding for schools, roads and other municipal services in more than 700 counties. Payments are divided into Title I for roads and schools, Title II for projects on Federal lands and Title III for county projects.

Wisconsin communities are heavily impacted, with Forest County — where Crandon is located — receiving more than \$1 million each year for schools, roads and community services. In total, the most recent authorization provided for more than \$1.8 million annually to 27 northern Wisconsin school districts.

However, the Secure Rural Schools Act expired at the end of fiscal year

2023, and Congress has yet to reauthorize it. When reauthorization stalled in the House this year, the Crandon contingent brought their message to the Capital. Koplien and Mihalko joined students from nine other rural school districts across the U.S. to meet with top staff from Speaker of the House Mike Johnson's office on Oct. 20.

"Speaker Mike Johnson has the power to bring the bill forward for a vote, which is why our students spoke directly with his key staff," Bertrand says, noting the idea originated with Great Lakes Timber Professionals Association Executive Director Henry Schienebeck and was made possible by the FISTA Earl St. John Education Fund.

Mihalko and Koplien delivered. Over the course of two days, they met with staff from the offices of Speaker Mike Johnson, Congressman Tom Tiffany, Senator Tammy Baldwin and Senator Ron Johnson. On Dec. 9, the House of Representatives voted to pass S. 356, which would reauthorize the Secure Rural Schools program for fiscal year 2026 and provide back payments for FY 2024 and 2025. The Senate passed the bill unanimously in June, meaning the bill now awaits President Trump's signature.

"I really enjoyed going to D.C. to try to make a positive impact on our nation's rural schools," Mihalko says. "I have gained so much political



experience, and I have made memories that will last a lifetime. I mentioned how this bill directly impacts me and the many students like me who attend rural schools. I feel that what the other students and I had to say made a big impact."

"Lindsey talked about her experience as a UW-Green Bay Rising Phoenix student and her family's long history in the logging industry, even mentioning how she skids for her dad's operation," Bertrand says. "Emma spoke passionately about how this funding helps make athletics

and Nicolet College courses accessible for students."

They also found time to explore D.C., from the Washington Monument to Arlington National Cemetery and the White House. Senator Johnson invited them to witness Congress voting on reopening the federal government, which Bertrand called a "fascinating moment to see firsthand."

"I also learned more about the potential loss of Impact Aid, which makes up about 7% of our annual budget," he says. "I even walked over to the Department of Education

hoping to talk with someone who survived the recent 50% layoffs. Unfortunately, the stairs and elevators were locked down, so my meeting dreams were short-lived."

But they returned home confident that the trip's impact would last.

"I believe that letting our students push for the things that affect us in rural communities helps set up our future generations for success," Koplien says. "You build leaders by letting teenagers express their beliefs and reasons and go to important meetings." ■



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TEN-YEAR LOOK BACK

“With the number of challenges facing public education, it is important for us to collaborate and share ideas. Who knows what solutions or ideas will be waiting for you at the convention?”

— **Former WASB Executive Director John Ashley** on how the State Education Convention can help bring school board members together to tackle the challenges facing public education.



◀ **The January-February 2016 issue of Wisconsin School News** highlights key topics in education, including adapted sports leagues for students with disabilities, character education initiatives in South Milwaukee and River Falls, and challenges facing rural schools due to declining enrollment and rising costs. It discusses family engagement strategies to close achievement gaps and the importance of staff surveys to improve school culture. The magazine also covers legal updates on regulating students' social media use and the Every Student Succeeds Act, replacing No Child Left Behind.



'I BELIEVE IN PUBLIC EDUCATION BECAUSE...'

In recent Wisconsin School News Q&As and during in-person WASB events, we've invited members to finish this sentence: "I believe in public education because..."

We've loved the responses we've heard and appreciate all your "whys" for engaging and supporting your students, schools and communities.

We'd love to hear yours, too!

Stop by the WASB Commons (Booth 439) at the 2026 State Education Convention and share why you believe in public education by adding your answer to our graffiti wall.

For a bit of inspiration, here are some of the answers we've received thus far:

"Kids deserve it. Smart kids make smart adults."

— *Micaela Conlon-Bue, Black River Falls School Board*

"Everybody deserves a high-quality education. It's the backbone of our communities."

— *Calandra Zebro, Mosinee School Board*

"All children deserve the opportunity to be their best selves, as they are the framework of our future."

— *Lisa Fox, Jefferson School Board*

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KEN NEUBURG COLFAX AREA SCHOOL BOARD PRESIDENT

Ken Neuburg has served on the Colfax Area School Board for 17 years and now leads as board president. A former University of Wisconsin-Stout instructor, he is a husband, father and grandfather who has called Colfax home for more than three decades. This fall, he was honored at the Region 4 Fall Regional Meeting for achieving Level 5 in the WASB Member Recognition Program.

In this Q&A, Neuburg reflects on Colfax's accomplishments, the vital role of community partnerships, advice for future board presidents and more.

WSN: Tell us about yourself.

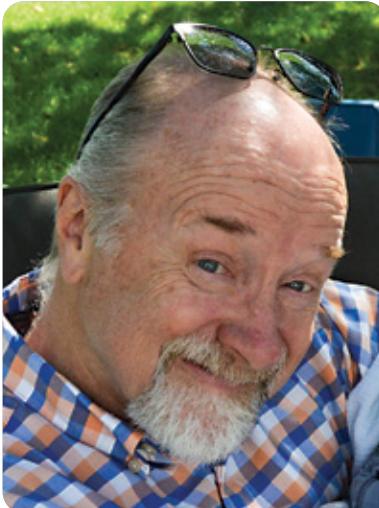
Kenneth Neuburg: I'm a native of Milwaukee. I grew up and attended public high school at Milwaukee Trade and Technical High School, which is now Bradley Tech. I've always loved learning by doing and continued this applied learning philosophy at both the University of Wisconsin-Stout and the Rochester Institute of Technology in New York.

I'm still actively working in the electronics industry with Hewlett Packard Enterprise, following career-enhancing stints at IBM, Cray Research and SGI. Part of my working experience has also included 16 years of teaching at the university level.

I met my wife, Lisa—my best friend—in college and we're soon to celebrate 42 years of marriage together. Lisa and I have three grown children and nine grandchildren. We're blessed with two more on the way in April.

How long have you lived in Colfax? What do you enjoy or find unique about the area?

KN: Lisa and I have lived in Tucson, Ariz., Rochester, Minn. and Colfax. We've lived as a family in Colfax for the past 32 years, with all three of our children going through the



public school system here.

Moving to a rural, close-knit community not much larger in population than the size of my high school graduation class has offered a rewarding lifestyle. I love coming home each day to the space and peace that a smaller town like Colfax provides. I enjoy the nature, wildlife and beauty. I love how my wife and I were accepted into this community from the start and for the upbringing each of our children has experienced here. While all three of our children have moved away, Colfax is still home to them, and our

physical home continues to bring us together as our children's families grow and expand.

How long have you been a school board member and what has made you want to serve as long as you have?

KN: My wife, Lisa, spent her entire working life as a teacher, most of it in the School District of Colfax. Teaching others, giving back and investing in the future through the education of others is important to both of us.

In that effort, I chose to run for a position on the school board 17 years ago. I was elected and am currently in my sixth term, where I now serve as the school board president. Additionally, I've held a position on the state's Policy & Resolution Committee and continue to actively participate as a board member, personally growing along the way.

What School District of Colfax initiatives or accomplishments are you most proud of right now?

KN: I'm extremely proud of what we do in this district to be fiscally responsible and on budget. As a smaller rural community, we're experiencing declining enrollment, especially post-COVID. At the same



I don't believe anything in our community is more important than the success and growth of our children.

Each of us wants our children to succeed in life. For this to happen, each needs a strong foundation at home and the opportunity to excel in our education system.

time, our special education initiatives now encompass 21% of our budget. We continue to provide for our children and the families in this community so that each child has a chance to fulfil all that their potential presents.

I'm most proud of the sense of community our school district offers and how stakeholders want to be heard and participate in the continued success of our children. Simply put, it confirms to me that this is the collective priority of Colfax that we all care about and want to assure evolves and never stops improving. I heard an excellent quote recently that is a driving force for our board and community: "What does good/great really look like?" We better never forget this level of focus in any aspect of what we do as a community, school district or in our roles as a school board member.

Your district nominated three businesses for the 2025 WASB Business Honor Roll. How did those businesses make an impact on the district?

KN: All aspects of our community play a role in the growth and development of our students. Three local businesses were nominated this year for the Business Honor Roll: Kyle's Market, Viking Bowl & Catering and Synergy Cooperative. We are incredibly fortunate to have the dedicated support of these generous sponsors for our district and the entire Colfax community.

Some examples of their support include offering food items at cost to assist with many extra-curricular activity fundraisers and class projects, the utilization of facilities for middle and high school bowling team members to practice free of charge, the support of tractor safety

classes, providing a tractor and wagon for use in the testing of our students, and awarding our district grants toward the purchase of our propane buses. This type of support is not taken for granted and we are most grateful for each of this year's honor roll recognition recipients.

What advice would you offer to board members across the state who aspire to be a board president?

KN: Active listening is essential! I've learned that this position requires exceptional listening skills. You must realize that people in your community want to be heard. That means you'd better be listening and come to a realization that you might not always like what you hear.

Differences of opinion will be shared, often strongly stated by your community members, and these can't be taken personally. Each parent is wearing different shoes than those that I walk in. Empathy, compassion, mercy for others and for their situations and unique experiences that I can't possibly fully know require servant leadership.

I don't believe anything in our community is more important than the success and growth of our children. Each of us wants our children to succeed in life. For this to happen, each needs a strong foundation at home and the opportunity to excel in our education system. That's quite a responsibility for our school boards.

The State Education Convention is quickly approaching. What are some things you enjoy most about the convention?

KN: I take much back to Colfax with me from the convention. The keynote speakers inspire each of us to be the best we can be and to find

that "just right" level of application for our district. I absolutely love the Education Tour to learn more about what other leaders are doing in their community with and for their students.

As our school's delegate, I'm always amazed at what I learn each January at the Delegate Assembly. Our discussions and debates help position all our schools through WASB political lobbying action to better us as a whole in our collective mission. I love meeting fellow board members, asking questions and sharing face-to-face interactions as we learn together.

What can board members around the state do to help public education continue to prosper this year?

KN: We must focus more state funding to help offset growing special education costs in our school district. Our district is not alone in this cost-balancing initiative; we need the state's help. We continue to pull money each year from our general budget to zero out special education costs.

Declining enrollment is a concern for all of us, especially in rural communities. Add the financials involved with these two topics alone and you can see that this is not sustainable or, at the very least, does not allow for us to be all that we can be for each of the students/stakeholders in our district.

Many opportunities for our board to provide leadership exist in this environment. Together, with the help of our staff, teachers, administration and community, these opportunities make for a bright future for each child in our district. A rewarding role to say the least! ■



WASB/WSAA School Law Conference

THURSDAY, FEB. 19 | The Osthoff Resort, Elkhart Lake

Register now for the 2026 WASB/WSAA School Law Conference on Thursday, Feb. 19, at The Osthoff Resort in Elkhart Lake. This joint seminar, hosted by the Wisconsin Association of School Boards and the Wisconsin School Attorneys Association, features school law attorneys discussing the key legal issues facing school districts.

Sessions will explore complaint investigations, technological advances, free speech, arrest and conviction record discrimination, and more.

■ REGISTER AT WASB.ORG

Visit [WASB.org](http://WASB.ORG) for more information and to register online. Click the “Training & Events” tab, follow a link to the event webpage and click “Register.” The \$209 registration fee includes breakfast, lunch and digital access to materials.

■ HOTEL RESERVATIONS

Room rates at The Osthoff Resort start at \$154. Reservations can be made at 1-800-876-3399 or osthoff.com. When making a reservation, ask for the Wisconsin Association of School Boards group to get the special group rate. The cut-off date for hotel rooms is Jan. 26, 2026.

■ CONFERENCE SCHEDULE

8 a.m. REGISTRATION and Continental Breakfast

8:30 a.m. Sessions

- How to Deal With the Records Requester Who Wants Everything—and the Kitchen Sink!
James Carroll, Buelow Vetter Buikema Olson & Vliet, LLC; Ryan Heiden, von Briesen & Roper, s.c.
- Roles and Responsibilities of School Board Members
Ben Richter, WASB

9:30 a.m. BREAK

9:40 a.m. Sessions

- Arrest and Conviction Record Discrimination: How to Protect Yourself
Dean Dietrich, Weld Riley, s.c.
- Understanding the Teacher Nonrenewal Process
Kara Conley, WASB

10:40 a.m. BREAK

10:50 a.m. Sessions

- Navigating Complaint Investigations
Alana Leffler and Laura Pederson, Renning Lewis & Lacy
- Interactions With Law Enforcement
Bob Butler, WASB

11:50 a.m. LUNCH

12:50 p.m. Sessions

- The Latest Advances in Technology for Schools and Action Items for Your District
Chrissy Hamiel and Kylie Owens, Attolles Law, s.c.
- Public Participation at School Board Meetings
Scott Mikesh, WASB

1:50 p.m. BREAK

2 p.m. Plenary Discussion

- ‘Freedom of Speech?’ Understanding the First Amendment’s Application to Student and Employee Speech
Brian Goodman, Boardman Clark

3 p.m. ADJOURN

Visit [WASB.org](http://WASB.ORG) for more detailed descriptions of each session.

Finance and Operational Consultant Todd Gray Joins the WASB

The WASB welcomes Todd Gray to the consultant team.

Todd focuses on operational effectiveness and all facets of budgetary planning and Wisconsin school finance. He spent his 39-year career engaged in all aspects of educational operations and business management, serving as a superintendent, chief business official and K-12 classroom teacher.

He also brings seven years of experience as a CPA in public accounting with international accounting firms.

Todd earned his Ph.D. in educational leadership and policy analysis from UW-Madison, as well as master's degrees in accounting and school business management from UW-Whitewater. The 2017 president of WASDA has served as an adjunct professor at UW-Whitewater since 2017 and has provided consulting services to various school districts over the past five years.



Updated Superintendent Evaluation Framework

We've updated our webpage to make using the revised WASB Superintendent Evaluation Framework easier than ever. The new design is organized section by section with streamlined, easy-to-navigate content.

The \$395 annual subscription includes access to the online platform, training modules and a comprehensive survey summary report. Visit WASB.org/customized-leadership-services/superintendent-evaluation-framework-homepage to explore the benefits of the online framework and purchase a subscription.

Upcoming Webinars

■ WASB LEGAL AND LEGISLATIVE VIDEO UPDATE

FEB. 18, MAR. 18 | 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.

This webinar is complimentary, and no registration is required. The Zoom link will be emailed to you as the event approaches.

Browse the WASB's catalogue of recorded webinars on the Online Events page at WASB.org.

Share Your Story With Us

We want to share stories of the amazing students in your district. Please submit what your students are doing to make a difference in their school and community for a chance to be featured in an upcoming School News issue, as well as on the WASB's Facebook and X pages. To participate, email Media Design and Marketing Specialist RJ Larson at rjlarson@wasb.org to tell us how your students are making an impact and share a couple photos. Let's share the good happening throughout Wisconsin's public schools.

Wisconsin State Education Convention

Registration Deadline | FRIDAY, JAN. 9

The registration deadline for the 2026 Wisconsin State Education Convention, scheduled for Jan. 21-23 at the Baird Center in Milwaukee, is Friday, Jan. 9! Visit WASB.org/convention to view hotel options. A booking link will also be included in your confirmation email upon convention registration.

Our 2026 theme — Collaborate. Innovate. Elevate. — reminds us of our shared mission. We can't wait to see you there as we gather once again to advance public education and elevate the futures of the incredible students across Wisconsin.

To plan your time in Milwaukee, visit WASB.org/convention and review the full list of events, speakers, exhibitors and more. Thank you and we'll see you soon! □

From the Capitol to the Convention

Legislative Session updates and what to expect from the State Education Convention.



The 2025-26 State Legislative Session is expected to go through mid-March of 2026. For those following closely, the legislature has taken a break from floor activity since mid-November. The next floor period reserved is Jan. 13-15. While floor activity has paused, committee-level action has continued, including some work on K-12 issues.

Forecasting the plans of the legislature is never an easy task, but some education bills that legislators may still work on in the spring 2026 floor period include school consolidation incentives, proposals related to creating a crime of grooming a child for sexual activity and requiring school board policies related to appropriate communication with students. Follow the WASB Legislative Update Blog and/or tune into the monthly WASB Legal & Legislative Video Updates for additional information and developments.

Before the New Year, legislators sent several K-12 proposals to Gov. Evers' desk. He ultimately signed three pieces of legislation into state law that school leaders should be aware of.

1. 2025 Wisconsin Act 57

Generally, this act requires each school board, governing body of a private school and operator of a charter school to notify a pupil's parent or guardian if the school board, governing body or operator receives a credible report alleging sexual misconduct by a school staff member and the pupil is identified as an alleged victim, target or recipient of the misconduct. The notification must be no later than the end of the day on which the school board receives the report.

The act also requires school boards to annually provide information about how parents and guardians may access records related to school employee discipline under the state public records law.

The act was amended in a variety of ways, including changing who must receive an allegation to trigger the outlined processes in the bill, as well as stating that if an allegation is received during the instructional day, the notification must be sent by 5 p.m. If the allegation is received outside the instructional day, the notification must be sent by noon on

the next business day.

2. 2025 Wisconsin Act 79

Beginning in the 2026-27 school year, at the beginning of a school term, a youth membership organization may request that the governing body of a school allow representatives of the youth membership organization to provide oral information or written information, or both, regarding the youth membership organization to pupils during a school day on school property, including information about how the youth membership organization furthers the educational interests and civic involvement of pupils consistent with good citizenship, for the purpose of encouraging pupils to join the youth membership organization.

If a youth membership organization submits a request to the governing body of a school, the governing body or its designee may schedule at least one date and time, which may be noninstructional time as determined by the governing body or its designee, during the beginning of the school term for representatives of the youth membership organization to

Before the New Year, legislators sent several K-12 proposals to Gov. Evers' desk. He ultimately signed three pieces of legislation into state law that school leaders should be aware of.

provide information to pupils.

3. 2025 Wisconsin Act 80

Under current law, certain high school seniors who have the highest grade point average in their class may be eligible to receive an “academic excellence higher education scholarship” amounting to not more than \$2,250 per academic year to attend a Wisconsin technical college, UW System schools or private college/university. The criteria used to determine the selection of the individuals who will receive the scholarship differ by the number of pupils enrolled in each high school. The governing body of a high school of fewer than 80 pupils may nominate one senior from that high school, and then the Higher Educational Aids Board may only designate 10 individuals statewide who were so nominated under that category to receive the scholarship. For high schools of more than 80 but less than 500 pupils, the governing body of the high school may designate one senior to receive the scholarship with no required nomination process or designation from HEAB. Governing bodies of high schools with more than 500 pupils may designate multiple seniors to receive the scholarship.

Under this act, the governing body of a high school with

enrollment of at least one pupil, but less than 500 pupils, may designate one senior to receive the scholarship with no nomination process or designation from HEAB. The act also allows homeschool seniors who receive a 33 on their ACT or a 1500 on the SAT to be designated for scholarships.

■ Previewing the Delegate Assembly

The Delegate Assembly is the annual meeting of WASB members.

Delegates are comprised of one representative from each member school board, CESA board of control and each regional director of the WASB Board of Directors.

The Delegate Assembly debates and votes on policy resolutions that form the advocacy positions of the WASB. As a WASB member, you can shape the future of both public education policy and our association.

Delegate materials were mailed to each member school board’s designated delegate (if you told us who that is) or the board president by default (if you didn’t tell us who your delegate is). The mailing also went to all district administrators. These materials are also available on WASB.org.

Proposed resolutions (sent in by member school boards) are vetted by the WASB Policy & Resolutions Committee based on three criteria.

Is a proposed resolution:

1. Timely?
2. Worthy of debate?
3. In need of consideration by the full WASB membership?

The committee forwards those it believes meet these criteria and turns down those it believes do not. The committee does not consider the merits of the resolutions in its vetting, nor does it recommend that delegates approve the resolutions.

As mentioned in the Viewpoint column earlier in this issue, this year’s Delegate Assembly will allow delegates to weigh in on an amendment to the WASB Bylaws and on two resolutions taking contrasting positions on the issue commonly referred to as “decoupling.”

In short, we have boards that have different opinions on “decoupling.” Some believe it is in their district’s best interest to make this change, while others do not. The committee felt that this is a very timely issue and in respect to our boards who submitted their “decoupling” resolutions, they would give the Delegate Assembly the ability to vote on both.

There is a document included in the delegate mailing and on our website that further explains these resolutions and the floor procedure for taking them up. ■

LEGISLATIVE UPDATE CONVENTION SESSION

The WASB Legislative Update breakout session will be held on Thursday, Jan. 22, at 8:45 a.m. in room 103 A/B of the Baird Center (please note this is a day earlier than the traditional Friday morning timeslot).

We will detail legislation still being considered in the final floor period of the 2025-26 legislative session, as well as what bills have been acted on by the governor up to that point.

We look forward to seeing you in Milwaukee! □



An Overview of Wisconsin's Public School Open Enrollment Process

Wisconsin law states that every elementary school and high school "shall be free to pupils who reside in the school district."¹ As a result, pupils who reside in Wisconsin can attend school for free in their resident school district. However, in some instances, a pupil is interested in attending a school in a non-resident school district in the state. A non-resident school district is a Wisconsin public school district in which the pupil does not reside.

In those instances, the full-time inter-district public school open enrollment program (open enrollment) offers an opportunity for pupils to apply to attend school for free in a non-resident school district. School board members have an important role during the open enrollment process and should be familiar with this process. This Legal Comment provides information for school board members about open enrollment, including considerations for determining a pupil's resident district, requirements for setting aside space for open enrolled pupils, and criteria for accepting and denying applications for open enrollment.

Determining a pupil's residency

Before applying for open enrollment, a pupil must consider their residency. In general, a pupil is a resi-

dent of the district where the pupil lives. This school district is identified as the pupil's resident school district. The resident school district of the pupil is sometimes also the school district where the parents or legal custodian reside. However, that is not always the case, such as instances where a pupil is living with relatives. Still, it is the residency of the pupil, not the parents or custodians, that is important for residency determinations.

Residency is sometimes a challenging determination in other situations, including situations involving foster children or children with divorced or separated parents. A foster child's resident school district is typically determined by the foster parent's residence. However, depending upon the student's date of move, a foster child may be able to remain in their school of origin. If a student has parents who are divorced or separated, and each parent lives in a different school district, the student could be a resident of both school districts. As a result, school district officials must carefully review applications for open enrollment and accurately determine the resident school district for any pupil.

Applications for open enrollment

Any pupil in 4-year-old kindergarten

through 12th grade in a Wisconsin resident school district may apply to attend a non-resident school district in the state. Applications can be submitted through a regular or alternative application process. For the regular open enrollment process, a pupil (or the pupil's parent or legal custodian) can apply for enrollment for the following school year. To this end, for the 2026-27 school year, a pupil can submit applications for regular open enrollment from Feb. 2 through April 30, 2026. Pupils may submit applications to no more than three non-resident school districts in any school year. The cumulative limit includes both regular and alternative applications, but the limit excludes any applications to attend a virtual charter school. Untimely applications or excess applications are considered invalid.

Alternative open enrollment applications have a different timeline. For the alternative open enrollment process, pupils apply for immediate enrollment. However, pupils must meet certain criteria for such applications. For example, a pupil can submit an alternative application if the pupil's place of residence has changed due to the parent's military orders. A pupil may submit alternative applications during the school year in which a

School district officials must carefully review applications for open enrollment and accurately determine the resident school district for any pupil.

If a school board wishes to establish space limitations, it must set specific criteria in its open enrollment policy and apply it consistently to all applicants.

pupil wants to attend. For the 2026-27 school year, a pupil may apply for alternative open enrollment starting on July 1, 2026.

■ Determining space for open enrollment applications

Before considering applications in the regular open enrollment process, school boards must meet and discuss space for open enrolled pupils for the following school year. Every January, school boards must determine whether to specify the number of seats available for open enrolled students. To this end, board members must examine the amount of space available for both regular and special education students based on “programs, classes, or grades” or “class size limits, pupil-teacher ratios, or enrollment projections.”² If a school board wishes to establish space limitations, it must set specific criteria in its open enrollment policy and apply it consistently to all applicants. If the board elects not to establish space limitations, the board must indicate that at the January board meeting and record it in the board minutes. Space determinations set in January remain valid until the third Friday in September.

When considering space limits in the district for special education pupils, board members cannot limit special education spaces based on disability categories. Examples of disability categories include autism, specific learning disabilities, and other health impairments, which may include ADHD. If a school board contracts outside the district for special education services, school boards may designate spaces that

require such services. However, school boards do not have to designate special education spaces in these instances because such services are not available in the district.

■ Reasons a school board may deny pupil applications

When reviewing applications for open enrollment, a non-resident school board may choose to deny applications if the reason for denial is permitted under state law and consistent with the school board’s open enrollment policy. For example, a school board may deny an open enrollment application based on space limitations provided that the school board adhered to the space-availability criteria established in the district’s policy and, at least as applied to regular open enrollment applications, provided that the school board made valid space-availability determinations in January. School boards may also deny open enrollment applications based on limited aspects of the pupil’s disciplinary record, including in connection with certain expulsions and certain pending disciplinary proceedings.³ As another example, a non-resident school board has authority to deny an open enrollment application if the pupil was habitually truant during any semester of attendance at that non-resident school district in the current or previous school year.

When reviewing applications from special education pupils, school boards may also choose to deny such applications, but such denials must be based on certain criteria. For example, a school board may receive an open enrollment application from

a pupil with an Individualized Education Program. In those instances, the board must consider if the special education services described in a pupil’s IEP are available in the district and if there is space available to provide special education or related services as provided in the pupil’s IEP.⁴ A board may deny applications if such services are not available in the district or if there is no space available to provide such services. For purposes of open enrollment, pupils who may qualify under Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act are considered as regular education pupils and not pupils with disabilities.

If a pupil does not have a current IEP, but the resident district has a completed special education evaluation or has referred a pupil for a special education evaluation, there are different criteria the non-resident school board must consider. For pupils identified as a pupil with a disability from a completed special education evaluation, the school board should evaluate those applications based on the availability of special education seats and related services. If a resident school district has referred a pupil for an initial special education evaluation but it never completed that evaluation, school boards should review those pupil applications as regular education students. If a school board approves the pupil application, then the non-resident district should then evaluate the pupil.

■ Appeals of open enrollment denials

In some instances, when a school board denies an application from a pupil seeking open enrollment, the

pupil (or parents or legal custodian) may want to appeal the school board's decision. In general, a pupil may appeal that decision to the Department of Public Instruction, but the pupil must appeal the open enrollment denial within 30 days from the denial's postmark or from receiving the denial, whichever is earlier. For a pupil to appeal a decision, the denial must be based on a specific rationale. Specifically, the denial must be based on regular education or special education space limitations or due to the pupil's habitual truancy. Appeals cannot be based on issues such as the location of the parent's job or daycare, the location of the home address in relation to the non-resident district, or transportation issues. There is no

appeal process in place for pupils who applied through the alternative application procedure.

DPI will typically support the school board's decision, unless "it finds the decision was arbitrary and unreasonable."⁵ If the school board's policies comply with state law, the district established criteria upon which it based its decision to deny an application, considered all factors (including reading IEPs), and followed its policy with fidelity, DPI will likely uphold the school board's decision.

Conclusion

Open enrollment is a benefit for families, which allows them to choose where to educate their pupil. However, the open enrollment process can be complicated for

school boards. School boards bear significant responsibility to create open enrollment criteria and apply it consistently to regular and special education pupil applicants. These are important matters for school boards to consider as they begin setting open enrollment seats for the upcoming school year. ■

This Legal Comment was written by Sandra Cohen, Rick Verstegen and Brian P. Goodman of Boardman & Clark LLP, WASB Legal Counsel. For related articles, see Wisconsin School News: "What School Board Members Need to Know About Open Enrollment" (Apr. 2023).

1. Wis. Stat. § 121.77(1)(a).
2. Wis. Stat. § 118.51(5)(a)1.
3. Wis. Stat. §§ 118.51(5)(a)2 and 120.13(1)(f)1.
4. Wis. Stat. § 118.51(5)(a)4.
5. Public School Open Enrollment Appeals Information, Public School Open Enrollment, Dep't of Pub. Instruction.

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.

— 2026 WASB/WSAA — **SCHOOL LAW CONFERENCE**



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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 50 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
sweild@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.



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