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More Than 70 Referenda on November Ballot

This November, along with the high-profile races for governor and control of the state legislature, 71 school districts will pose 78 referenda questions to their voters. Combined with the referenda held in April and August, this marks 154 total referenda across 145 school districts in Wisconsin this year. That marks a significant decline from 2024 — a record-breaking year with 241 referenda held — but is around the average number of referenda held in even years since 2016.

As is increasingly typical, this year will be dominated by operational referenda. The Wisconsin general election on Tuesday, Nov. 3, will see 61 operational referenda — 53 non-recurring and 8 recurring. Combined with the 63 operational referenda from April, this means 124 out of 154 (81%) referenda this year are operational. The November ballot will also see 17 capital referenda. Combined with the capital referenda from April (12) and August (1), this means 30 out of 154 (19.4%) of referenda this year are capital.

This spring saw an overall passage rate of 61.3%. □

This information was compiled with the most recent available data from the Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction.

RECENT POLL

53% of Registered Voters Satisfied With Public Schools

The Aug. 26 Marquette Law School Poll found that 53% of respondents said they are very or somewhat satisfied with the job their local public schools are doing, down from 55% in July. Sixty percent responded that public schools need to be held more accountable for student performance, while 40% said the schools are doing the best they can with the resources they have.

Additionally, 58% of respondents say it is more important to reduce property taxes than to increase funding for K-12 schools (42%). In 11 surveys since June 2023, property taxes have received 50% to 60% of the vote each time. Prior to that,

a majority of respondents said that school funding was more important in 16 polls from April 2015 through October 2022.

Further, 47% of August respondents said schools are getting too little funding from the state, 39% said there is enough state funding, and 14% said schools are getting more than is needed.

Finally, 54% of respondents favored returning collective bargaining for public employees to what it was before Act 10, with 84% of Democrats wanting to see Act 10 repealed and 65% of Republicans wanting to keep the law. Independents are divided, with 50% in favor of keeping the law and 46% in favor of repealing. □

Sevastopol Opens New Outdoor Classroom

According to the Door County Pulse, Sevastopol School held a ribbon-cutting ceremony for an outdoor classroom on Aug. 26. The classroom, which includes a stage, whiteboards, benches that convert to picnic tables, and a shed, is intended to give students hands-on learning in nature.

The Sevastopol Interact Club, sponsored by the Sturgeon Bay Breakfast Rotary, coordinated resources and raised more than \$22,000 to bring the educational outdoor space to life. According to the Pulse, funding included a Volunteer Generation Fund grant through Serve Wisconsin, a Project Grant through Rotary District 6220, a Youth in Action grant through the Door County Community Foundation, and significant contributions from Door County's three Rotary Clubs. □

Current and Former School Board Members on the November Ballot

The Wisconsin general election on Tuesday, Nov. 3, will see many current and former school board members on the ballot. These include seats for statewide, congressional and legislative offices.

The WASB does not make political contributions or endorse candidates. However, we do make an effort to identify current and former members that have stepped forward to place their names on the ballot. These candidates bring personal knowledge of the issues facing their local communities and school districts as a whole. Take a look at the school board members running for higher office below:

Name; School Board (Current or Former); Office Being Sought

- Yee Leng Xiong; DC Everest; State Treasurer
- Sen. Dianne Hesselbein; Middleton-Cross Plains; SD 27
- Sen. Cory Tomczyk; Mosinee; SD 29
- Rep. Joel Kitchens; Sturgeon Bay; AD 1
- Rep. Sequanna Taylor; Milwaukee; AD 11
- Rep. Christine Sinicki; Milwaukee; AD 20
- Christopher Able; Manitowoc; AD 23
- Merlin Van Buren; Rhinelander; AD 34
- Terri Wenkman; Jefferson; AD 38
- Keith Miller; Fall River; AD 42
- Bill Oemichen; New Glarus; AD 50
- Alex Corrigan; Neenah; AD 55
- Bradley Petersen; Kewaskum; AD 59
- Mike Bellagio; Racine; AD 62
- Rep. Robert Wittke; Racine; AD 63
- Paul Johnson; Spooner; AD 74
- Rep. Dave Maxey; New Berlin; AD 83
- Brandy Tollefson; De Pere; AD 88
- Rep. Clint Moses; Menomonie; AD 92
- Michael Ayala; Cochrane-Fountain City; AD 93
- Rick Crosson; Green Bay; CD 8 □



Fall Connections and Opportunities

I hope the new school year is off to a great start in each of your districts. It's hard to believe we are already a full month into 2026-27.

This month, I will be hitting the road to join you at WASB Fall Regional Meetings.

Those meetings allow us to recognize and celebrate the progress many of you have made in the WASB's Member Recognition Program, which rewards participation in WASB-sponsored training and events that we hope will make you more knowledgeable and effective as board members.

Elections for WASB regional directors will take place at the Fall Regional Meetings in Regions 1, 2, 3, 6, 8, 12 and 14.

We include an educational component in these meetings, with presentations by the WASB government relations team and WASB board governance consultants.

A separate pre-meeting workshop will offer a practical, in-depth look at Wisconsin's Open Meetings Law. The hour-long workshop features a special emphasis on the rules, requirements and common pitfalls surrounding closed sessions.

I will close every regional meeting by sharing findings of the WASB member survey conducted between May 20 and June 8 this year. We'll explore your responses and what they tell us about the priorities, challenges and needs of our members — and how the WASB can best serve you moving forward.

I hope to increase your awareness of the many member benefits included with your WASB member-

ship, including roughly 50 videos in the WASB Online Learning Platform covering all aspects of school board service, as well as nine WASB Finance 101 videos designed to help school board members better understand school finance and become better stewards of taxpayer dollars. Log in and watch these videos to learn while earning points in the Member Recognition Program.

I also hope to familiarize you with the WASB Insurance Plan and the discounted school safety training available to WASB members through the plan, while encouraging you to attend the Wisconsin State Education Convention from Jan. 20-22, in Milwaukee to expand your knowledge and continue networking with board members from around the state.

Finally, I'm excited to be in person with many of you during Wisconsin School Board Week — October 4-10. Visit WASB.org to access the Wisconsin School Board Week Recognition Kit and help districts celebrate their school board members. The kit features a sample press release, recognition activities, social media posts, graphic templates and more.

We are pleased by increased participation in the WASB Business Honor Roll, with nine more districts submitting the names of businesses who partner with them, and more than 200 businesses receiving well-deserved recognition. Five of those school-business partnerships will be featured in the December issue of Wisconsin School News.

As this is the last School News issue likely to arrive in your mailboxes ahead of the Nov. 3 Wisconsin general election, it presents

a feature highlighting the educational platforms of the two major gubernatorial candidates.

November's election will have important implications, as voters will elect a new governor and, due to retirements, there will be new leadership in both houses of the Legislature come January.

At least 61 school districts will be asking district voters to approve additional revenues via an operating referendum, and an additional 17 districts will be asking local voters to approve borrowing for district facilities.

As you prepare for election day, the WASB government relations team will host a special webinar at 12 p.m. on Oct. 23. Chris Kulow and David Martin will preview the election by exploring the education platforms of the candidates, reviewing recent polling, and examining how the parties are preparing for the next legislative session amid predictions of a larger state surplus. They will briefly review state constitutional amendments on the November ballot that could impact public education.

In addition to previewing the upcoming election, this issue of School News explores school district cellphone policies, special education funding and SkillsUSA — a workforce development organization for career and technical education-focused students that organizes competitions and aims to empower those students to become skilled professionals, career-ready leaders and responsible community members.

Happy reading, and I look forward to connecting this fall. ■



DECISION 2026

WISCONSIN'S GUBERNATORIAL CANDIDATES ON **K-12 Education**

By Chris Kulow and David Martin

Every gubernatorial election cycle, WASB has a tradition of providing our readers with a Wisconsin School News feature that compares the two major candidates for governor and their respective views on K-12 education policy. This November, those two candidates are Congressman Tom Tiffany (Republican) and Milwaukee County Executive David Crowley (Democrat).

This article is not an endorsement of either candidate or the views they express, but rather a resource for school leaders to use when evaluating how the next governor

— regardless of who wins — may impact public education in the state.

The WASB has provided brief biographies and relevant sections from each of the candidates' platforms that are taken straight from their official campaign websites. Beyond this article, both candidates have confirmed their participation in a Wednesday, Oct. 23 debate hosted by WISN-TV, in partnership with WisPolitics. The WASB Government Relations Team will also be hosting an election preview webinar at 12 p.m. on Friday, Oct. 23. Visit WASB.org/meeting-and-events/webinar-catalog for more information.



TOM TIFFANY

Campaign Website: tomtiffany.com

Biography: Congressman Tom Tiffany (68) was born in Wabasha, Minn., before his family moved to a dairy farm in Elmwood, Wis., where he grew up. He graduated from Elmwood High School before attending and graduating from UW-River Falls with a bachelor's degree in agricultural economics. After graduating, he worked managing petroleum distribution for two different companies in Plainview, Minn., and then Minocqua, Wis. Congressman Tiffany later opened an excursion business with his wife, called Wilderness Queen Cruise Line, that they owned and operated until selling the business in 2012. Tom also previously served as a supervisor in Little Rice, Wis., as well as worked as a dam tender in northern Wisconsin. In 2010, he was elected to the 35th Assembly District before being elected to the 12th Senate District in 2012. In 2020, Tiffany was elected to the U.S. House of Representative in a special election and has represented the 7th Congressional District since that time.

■ Taxes & state budget surplus

Property taxes.

Wisconsin has some of the highest property taxes in the country, ranking among the top 10 states. As governor, I will end the 400-year property tax increase. Then, as we work to lower property taxes even further, I will implement a property tax freeze so families and seniors have the certainty that they won't be taxed out of their homes.

Return the surplus.

Wisconsin taxpayers are overtaxed. The last state budget increased spending by 15%, pushing the budget above \$100 billion for the first time in state history, and Madison is still sitting on a surplus. As governor, I will return the entire surplus to taxpayers.

■ K-12 programming and funding

Invest in education and demand results.

I went to public school, and so did my three daughters. I support additional funding for Wisconsin schools, but it must come with accountability for results. We are spending more per student than ever before, yet just 31% of fourth graders are proficient in reading. Taxpayers deserve to know their

investment is reaching classrooms and improving outcomes. Whether parents choose a public, charter, private or home school, every Wisconsin child deserves a high-quality education regardless of their ZIP code.

Raise standards and restore accountability.

Every Wisconsin child should be able to read proficiently by fourth grade and graduate prepared for college, a career or the workforce. I will restore higher academic standards and require honest school report cards that give parents a clear picture of how their schools are performing. We will get back to the fundamentals, using proven, science-based reading instruction to teach kids how to read, strengthening writing and math, and expanding career and technical education so students graduate with the skills they need to enter the workforce.

Support teachers and safe classrooms.

Wisconsin's average starting teacher salary ranks 44th in the nation. To attract the best teachers, I will set strong minimum salary standards, just as many other states like Iowa and South Dakota have successfully done. Teachers also deserve safe

classrooms where they can focus on teaching. Administrators must be held accountable for addressing chronic disruption and discipline.

Put parents in the driver's seat.

I will strengthen parental rights, increase transparency over curriculum and what is happening in the classroom, and require parental consent before a K-12 school changes a child's name or pronouns. Parents should have access to honest information about how their schools are performing and have the leading voice in their child's education.

■ Technology

Protecting kids online.

As governor, I will support common sense age-verification requirements for app providers, strengthen parental-consent protections, and empower parents to stay in control of their children's online activity. We will hold Big Tech accountable when platforms enable the sexualization or exploitation of children, including through AI-generated explicit images or sexually inappropriate chatbot conversations with minors. We will also strengthen bell-to-bell school cellphone restrictions. □

David Crowley on next page ...



DAVID CROWLEY

Campaign Website: crowleyforwi.com

Biography: County Executive David Crowley (40) was born and raised in Milwaukee. After graduating from Bay View High School, he enrolled at UW-Milwaukee in 2006 before leaving for a number of years. He ultimately returned to UWM, graduating with a bachelor's degree in community engagement and education in 2024. Crowley started his career as an organizer for U.S. Senator Russ Feingold's 2010 re-election campaign. He then was a legislative aid to a Milwaukee County Supervisor, working there until he ran for and won the 17th Assembly District in 2016. He was re-elected to that seat in 2018. Crowley then ran for Milwaukee County Executive in 2020, narrowly winning the election before being reelected to that position in 2024.

■ K-12 programming and funding

Strong schools that don't rely on constant referendums.

- Invest in robust, reliable K-12 funding year after year so schools can plan long-term instead of lurching from referendum to referendum.
- Close the special education funding gap so every student gets what they need and districts aren't forced to cut other programs to make up the difference.
- Recruit and retain great-teachers by making Wisconsin a place where educators are paid fairly, respected professionally and supported to do their best work.

Earn-and-learn pathways for high-demand careers.

- Expand apprenticeships, dual enrollment and earn-and-learn partnerships starting in high school and continuing through technical colleges and UW campuses.
- Build targeted loan repayment pipelines for high-need professions like nurses, teachers and mental health workers in underserved communities; particularly Health Professional Shortage Area Designations.
- Grow industry-aligned training programs so certifications and credentials lead directly to good-paying jobs, not dead ends.

Dual enrollment that fast-tracks Wisconsin talent.

- Strengthen and expand dual-enrollment partnerships statewide so students can take college or technical courses in high school — earning degrees, certifications or licenses before they ever leave the classroom.
- Let students graduate with college credit, industry credentials or a two-year degree pathway already underway — cutting cost and time to career.
- Tie dual enrollment to local workforce needs so communities grow their own talent instead of losing it.

Repeal Act 10 and restore workers' rights

- Repeal Act 10 and restore full collective bargaining rights for public sector workers.
- Stand firmly with unions — public and private — because when workers have power at the table, everyone does better.
- Protect workers' right to organize, bargain and strike without fear of retaliation.

■ Technology

AI protections for students and their futures.

- Establish a team in the State Health Department to coordinate enforcement, oversee platform compliance and lead state efforts on online safety, AI oversight and emerging technology policy as AI has become a health issue.

- Establish an AI & Children Commission including educators, parents, industry representatives and youth voices.
- Require platforms to disclose how their algorithms work, what content is being promoted to children and what data is being collected.
- Schools must disclose which AI tools are in use, their purpose and data handling practices. Parents have the right to opt out of non-essential AI tools.
- Minors' data cannot be used to train commercial AI models or licensed to third parties under any circumstance; Ed-tech AI may only collect data directly necessary for stated learning outcomes, with strict retention limits.
- Restrict AI companion and relationship apps for children under 13.
- Require clear disclosures on any AI product designed to form emotional bonds with teenagers.
- Zero tolerance for deepfakes and child sexual abuse material; criminal penalties for AI-generated child sexual abuse material and deepfakes targeting minors, equivalent to non-AI offenses.
- Support transitioning to analog methods (i.e. removal of laptops in classrooms and cellphones). □

Chris Kulow, the WASB director of government relations, can be reached at ckulow@wasb.org. David Martin, government relations specialist, can be reached at dmartin@wasb.org.



Hey Wisconsin Schools, Smoother Meetings Are Here

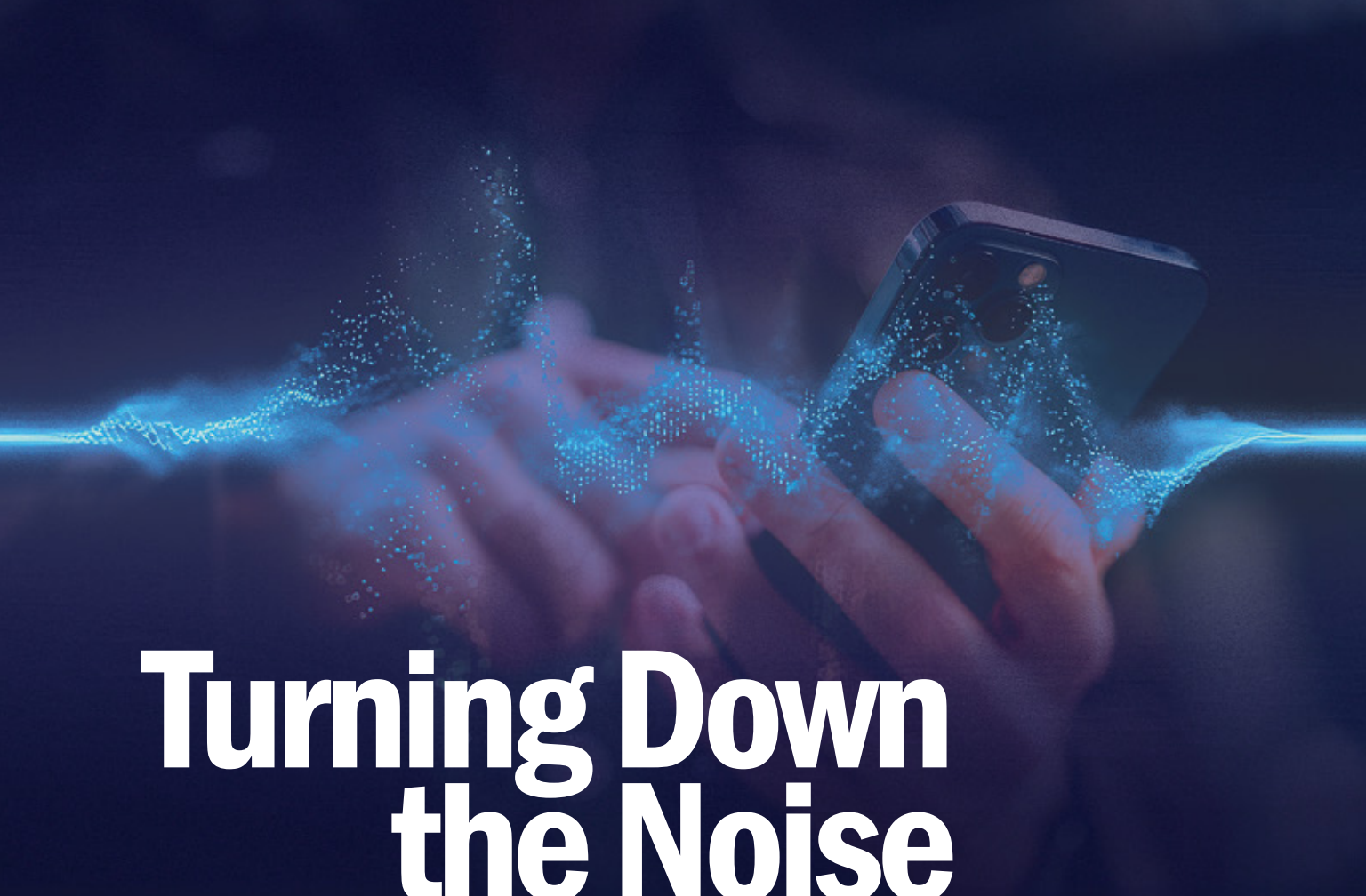
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Turning Down the Noise

How two Wisconsin school districts are limiting student cellphone use.

By Anne Davis

When the Medford Area School District banned student use of cellphones three years ago, officials noticed an immediate difference. Students were more engaged in the classroom, visits to the school nurse decreased, referrals for behavior infractions dropped and the lunchroom became a very noisy place.

“It was the best thing we ever did,” Medford Area Senior High School Principal Jill Lybert says of

implementing the ban in the 2024-25 school year.

Lybert initiated the effort because she was concerned about the effect of cellphone use on student well-being. She is not alone.

Last fall, Wisconsin became the 36th state in the nation to limit cellphone use after Governor Tony Evers signed a bill requiring districts to prohibit student use of cellphones during instructional time. The bill

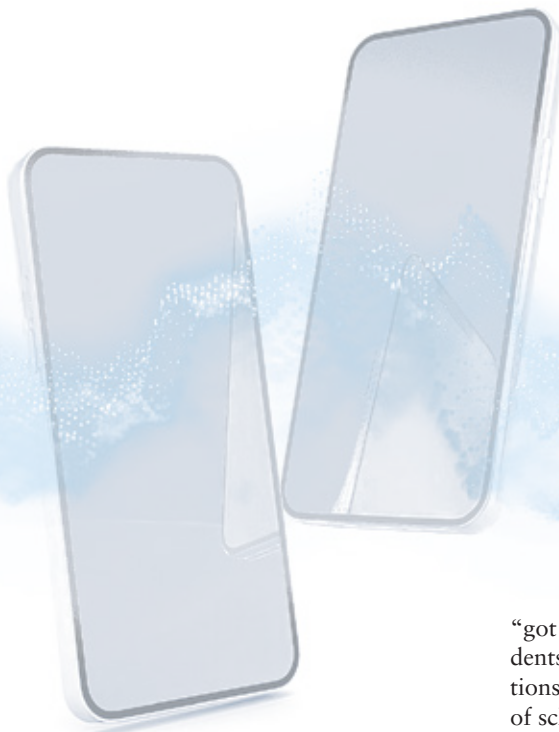
had bipartisan support and Evers said he was concerned that phones were a distraction to students and a source of bullying.

Under the bill, districts were required to pass a policy limiting cellphone use by July 1, 2026, although Medford and other districts had already passed such a policy. It is up to individual districts to determine how the limits are enforced.

Medford Area Middle School Principal Jodi Butler believes the ban at the high school reinforced what they were doing at the middle school and gave staff an additional level of support. She adds that parents have been supportive because “they like the disconnect.”

Out of approximately 1,700 students in Hudson, there were 319 students cited for violating the policy.

Of those 319 students, 62 became second-time offenders, 20 third-time offenders and four fourth-time offenders.



Medford initiated the ban after discussions with students and parents. A \$40,000 grant from Aspirus Medford Hospital and Clinics supported the effort.

In Medford, middle school and high school students may not use cellphones throughout the entire school day. Each student is assigned a Yondr pouch — a secure, lockable fabric bag. The bags have a magnetic seal that can only be broken when tapped against a special unlocking base. Phones are placed in the pouches before the start of the school day and remain there, either in lockers or cars, until the end of the day. Students then unlock the pouches at the designated unlocking stations before leaving school.

Before the ban, the district allowed high school students to use phones during lunch or study halls. At the middle school level, phones were banned all day.

Medford Area Middle School Principal Jodi Butler believes the ban at the high school reinforced what they were doing at the middle school and gave staff an additional level of support. She adds that parents have been supportive because “they like the disconnect.”

The School District of Hudson began limiting cellphone use in the 2025-26 school year, although discussions of a limit had begun several years earlier. Hudson High School

Principal Michael Ballard said it was important to discuss the issue in depth and have all staff committed to the idea before the new policy was put in place, which made the actual implementation seamless.

“We had given people time to think about it,” he says. “We laid the foundation early.”

Before the policy was implemented, individual teachers decided whether students could use cellphones during class time. Now students are not allowed to use phones during class time, but they have access to them before and after school, during lunch and in between classes. The policy also applies to smartwatches, personal laptops, tablets and non-corded headphones.

Although Medford and other districts decided to ban phone use throughout the school day, Ballard says Hudson officials wanted lunch to be a social time. Allowing students to choose how to use their phones outside of class time also teaches them to be responsible technology users, Ballard believes.

Messaging about the new policy to the community and parents was clear. Teachers told Ballard that they

“got their classrooms back.” Students complained about the restrictions during the first couple of days of school, but within two weeks, they were telling teachers it wasn’t as bad as they had expected. Having a universal policy also helped, as students understood that everyone had to follow the same rules.

Hudson’s policy contains consequences for students caught using their phones during class hours. According to Ballard, the first-year statistics tell a powerful story. Out of a total student body of approximately 1,700, there were 319 students cited for violating the policy. Of those, 62 became second-time offenders, 20 third-time offenders and four fourth-time offenders.

“I was super proud of our kids and their families,” Ballard says, adding that a successful implementation of a cellphone limit policy requires universal support from not just teachers and staff but also from the school board. “Because not everyone in the community is going to agree.”

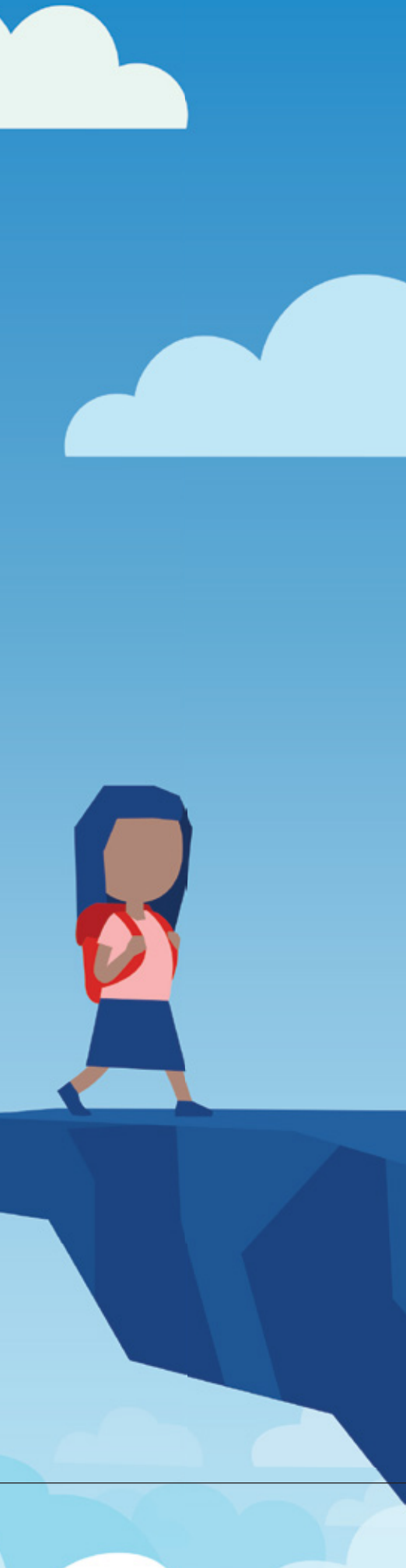
By making the restrictions part of the school culture, Ballard says the implementation becomes “transactional, not personal procedure.”

“It really worked out,” he adds. “The kids really do enjoy talking to each other again.” ■

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

‘It’s Just Not Fair!’





Unpacking ‘Fairness’ in Wisconsin’s Special Education Funding

— PART ONE —

By Julie F. Mead

In 2015, The Wisconsin Legislature created the Special Needs Scholarship Program (SNSP).

It provides state funding to allow children with disabilities to attend private schools that elect to participate. The Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction (DPI) reports that for the 2025-26 school year, 215 private schools participated in the program, enrolling a total of 3,436 students.

Critics have long complained that the SNSP provides more generous support for children in private schools than similarly situated children in public schools. A review of the statute and its application shows that the legislature has privileged SNSP funding when compared to public school special education reimbursement in three ways:

- Legislated reimbursement rates provide far more funds for SNSP students than similarly situated public school students.
- Sum sufficient versus sum certain funding.
- Differing requirements for personnel and verifying use of funds.

This article is the first of a two-part series and details the first issue. It provides four examples to illustrate and quantify the different levels of funding available to schools in each sector.

■ More funds for SNSP students

Legislative decisions result in far more generous funding for SNSP students when compared to similarly situated children with disabilities in public schools. For public schools, the legislature approved allocations they estimated would result in reimbursement rates of 42% and 45% for 2025-26 and 2026-27 respectively. In fact, for the 2025-26 school year, the allocated funds proved insufficient to provide that level of reimbursement covering only 38.39% of costs. In contrast, the current statute makes it mathematically impossible for SNSP schools to receive less than 90% of special education costs. If the private SNSP school spends funds equal to or less than the voucher amount, they get 100% of costs. If the school spends funds equal to or less than 150% of the voucher amount, they receive 100% of costs. And if the school spends above 150% of the voucher, they get 90% of the overage in addition to 150% of the voucher.

A comparison of four scenarios vividly illustrates these differences. Scenario 1 imagines \$5,000 of special education services for an elementary aged student with disabilities; Scenario 2 imagines \$10,000; Scenario 3, \$25,000; and Scenario 4, \$50,000.

Public school officials are left to guess each year what their share of the Legislature’s “sum certain” might be — which depends both on their district’s needs and the needs of all other public schools in the state.

To accomplish these comparisons, it is necessary to isolate special education costs. For public schools, that includes identified expenses eligible for reimbursement. For private SNSP schools, special education costs would be any costs that exceed the voucher amount for a child without disabilities used in the Wisconsin Parental Choice Program (WPCP), the Milwaukee Parental Choice Program (MPCP), or the Racine Parental Choice Program (RPCP). In fact, any child enrolled in the SNSP who is later found not to have a disability receives a voucher amount equivalent to the WPCP/MPCP/RPCP voucher.

For an elementary student in the 2025-26 school year, the WPCP/MPCP/RPCP voucher is \$10,877. Any difference between that amount and the SNSP payment would effectively capture the “excess costs” attributable to special education.

The private school in Scenario 1 (*see table above*) would receive more than 100% of special education costs, while the public school would be limited to a maximum of 38.39% of costs. The private school would receive \$3,252.50 more than the public school.

► Scenario 1 SPECIAL EDUCATION COSTS \$5,000

PUBLIC SCHOOL	SNSP PRIVATE SCHOOL
Base voucher: N/A	Base voucher: \$10,877
Special education costs: \$5,000	Special education costs: \$5,000
Reimbursement: $\$5,000 \times 38.39\% = \$1,919.50$	Total costs for SNSP payment: $\$10,877 + \$5,000 = \$15,877$
Standard SNSP voucher: N/A	Standard SNSP voucher: \$16,049 The private school would not need to submit actual costs to DPI (no verification of services & costs required). It would get the full \$16,049.
Total SNSP payment: N/A	Total SNSP payment: \$16,049
Special education reimbursement: \$1,919.50	Special education reimbursement: $\$16,049 - \$10,877 = \$5,172$
% of special education costs reimbursed: 38.39%	% of special education costs reimbursed: 103.44%

Now imagine Scenario 2 with \$10,000 of verifiable special education costs and assume that child’s private SNSP school elects to submit actual costs to DPI for reimbursement (*see Scenario 2 right, top*).

Once again, the SNSP school would receive 100% of costs, while the public school would be limited to 38.39% reimbursement, resulting in \$6,161 more for the SNSP school.

Scenario 3 (*see table right, bottom*) illustrates what happens when costs exceed 150% of the SNSP voucher amount. Again, imagine that both schools have \$25,000 of verifiable special education costs for an elementary school child and that the SNSP private school submits actual costs for reimbursement.

For scenario 3, the public school would still be limited to “sum certain”



► Scenario 2 SPECIAL EDUCATION COSTS \$10,000

PUBLIC SCHOOL	SNSP PRIVATE SCHOOL
Base voucher: N/A	Base voucher: \$10,877
Special education costs: \$10,000	Special education costs: \$10,000
Reimbursement: $\$10,000 \times 38.39\% = \$3,839$	Total costs for SNSP payment: $\$10,877 + \$10,000 = \$20,877$
Standard SNSP voucher: N/A	Standard SNSP voucher: \$16,049 SNSP schools may recoup actual costs up to 150% of the standard SNSP voucher ($\$16,049 \times 1.50 = \$24,073.50$). Because \$20,877 is less than \$24,073.50, the SNSP payment would be the full \$20,877.
Total SNSP payment: N/A	Total SNSP payment: \$20,877
Special education reimbursement: \$3,839	Special education reimbursement: \$10,000
% of special education costs reimbursed: 38.39%	% of special education costs reimbursed: 100%



► Scenario 3 SPECIAL EDUCATION COSTS \$25,000

PUBLIC SCHOOL	SNSP PRIVATE SCHOOL
Base voucher: N/A	Base voucher: \$10,877
Special education costs: \$25,000	Special education costs: \$25,000
Reimbursement: $\$25,000 \times 38.39\% = \$9,597.50$	Total costs for SNSP payment: $\$10,877 + \$25,000 = \$35,877$
Standard SNSP voucher: N/A	Standard SNSP voucher: \$16,049 SNSP schools may recoup actual costs up to 150% of the standard SNSP voucher. Costs exceeding 150% are reimbursed at 90%. • $\$35,877 - \$24,073.50 = \$11,803.50$ • $\$11,803.50 \times 0.90 = \$10,623$
Total SNSP payment: N/A	Total SNSP payment: $\$24,073.50 + \$10,623.15 = \$34,696.65$
Special education reimbursement: \$9,597.50	Special education reimbursement: \$10,000
% of special education costs reimbursed: 38.39%	% of special education costs reimbursed: 95.28%



reimbursement rate. The SNSP private school would first receive 150% of the voucher amount (\$24,073.50) and then 90% of the costs above that amount, resulting in 95.28% reimbursement or \$14,222.15 more.

The final scenario imagines elementary school children who have \$50,000 of verifiable special education costs (see *Scenario 4 below*). This comparison is necessary to show what happens when public schools can access the High-Cost Special Aid fund. The last appropriation for this fund

was \$14,480,000, from which DPI was able to reimburse 19.22% of claims made for services costing more than \$30,000. That means that districts made claims to that fund totaling \$75,388,189 and leaving \$60,858,189 of unreimbursed claims. Even though the Legislature more than doubled this fund for 2025-26 (\$29,086,700), if a similar number and amount of high-cost claims are made, the fund will only cover approximately 38.58% of claims. As with the two previous

scenarios, imagine the private SNSP school elects to submit actual costs to DPI for reimbursement.

Like the previous examples, the SNSP child would receive substantially more reimbursement (\$19,408.65) than the public school child. In this situation, the public school reimbursement increases to 53.82%, while the private school would recoup 92.64% of costs. It is also important to note that the threshold for more funds for children with disabilities requiring

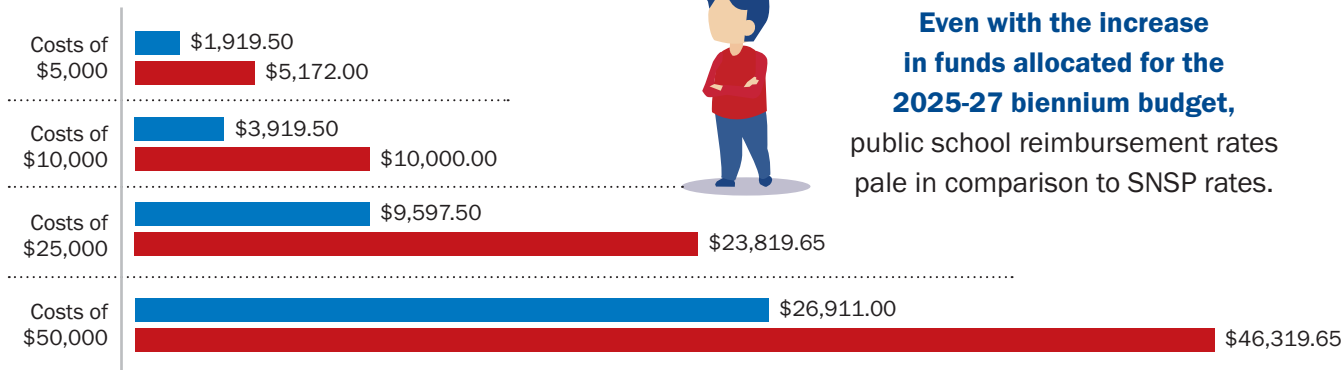
► Scenario 4 SPECIAL EDUCATION COSTS \$50,000

PUBLIC SCHOOL	SNSP PRIVATE SCHOOL
Base voucher: N/A	Base voucher: \$10,877
Special education costs: \$50,000	Special education costs: \$50,000
Reimbursement: $\$50,000 \times 38.39\% = \$19,195$ Public school districts with costs that exceed \$30,000 may apply for additional reimbursement at a rate of approximately 38.58%. • $\\$50,000 - \\$30,000 = \\$20,000$ • $\\$20,000 \times 0.3858 = \\$7,716$	Total costs for SNSP payment: $\$10,877 + \$50,000 = \$60,877$ Standard SNSP voucher: \$16,049 SNSP schools may recoup actual costs up to 150% of the standard SNSP voucher. Costs exceeding 150% are reimbursed at 90%. • $\\$60,877 - \\$24,073.50 = \\$36,803.50$ • $\\$36,803.50 \times 0.90 = \\$33,123.15$
Standard SNSP voucher: N/A	Total SNSP payment: $\$24,073.50 + \$33,123.15 = \$57,196.65$
Total SNSP payment: N/A	Special education reimbursement: $\$57,196.65 - \$10,877 = \$46,319.65$
% of special education costs reimbursed: 38.39%	% of special education costs reimbursed: 92.64%



► Reimbursed Costs ESTIMATED 2025-26 REIMBURSEMENT of special education costs

■ Public Schools ■ SNSP Private Schools



Even with the increase in funds allocated for the 2025-27 biennium budget, public school reimbursement rates pale in comparison to SNSP rates.

high-cost services in the SNSP (\$24,073.50) is substantially lower than the \$30,000 threshold for public schools.

■ In summary

As the analysis of these scenarios shows, the Wisconsin Legislature has consciously elected to provide more generous special education funding to SNSP schools than provided for children with disabilities in public schools. Even with the increase in funds allocated for the 2025-27 biennium budget, public school reimbursement rates pale in comparison to SNSP rates.

One implication of these differences relates to predictability of school budgeting. SNSP schools enjoy a predictable level of reimbursement. They know what the voucher amount will be each year and that they are guaranteed 100% of any costs up to 150% of the voucher and 90% of costs that exceed that amount. What other schools do or spend has no bearing on the reimbursement they can expect. Private SNSP schools have no set obligation to serve, but a set guarantee of funding. In contrast, public schools have a set obligation to provide the services, but no guarantee of funding. Public school officials are left to guess each year what their share of the Legislature's "sum certain" might be — which depends both on their district's

needs and the needs of all other public schools in the state. Strong fiscal management requires predictability, a feature the current system denies to public schools.

The next article in the series will examine two other features of the legislature's treatment of the SNSP — the effect of sum sufficient funding and the limited requirements private schools must meet to obtain funds. As with this comparison, the purposeful decisions the legislature made when crafting the SNSP privilege those private schools that elect to participate

when compared with the provisions that govern public schools. ■

Julie F. Mead, Professor Emerita, at the University of Wisconsin-Madison can be reached at jmead@education.wisc.edu.

1. dpi.wi.gov/sites/default/files/imce/policy-budget/pdf/2025-27_Budget_Summary_DPI-Gov-JCF_Final_Act_15_7.24.25.pdf
2. dpi.wi.gov/sfs/aid/special-ed/sped-sap/overview
3. dpi.wi.gov/sfs/aid/special-ed/high-cost

Look for Part 2 in the December issue of Wisconsin School News.



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Ben Strupp (left) on the champions podium at the 2025 SkillsUSA National Leadership & Skills Conference.

A World of OPPORTUNITY

SkillsUSA propels Holmen alum to China for “the Olympics of skilled trades.”

By Brock Fritz

SkillsUSA has opened up countless doors for Ben Strupp.

The latest door will send the 2023 Holmen High School graduate to China to compete in the 2026 WorldSkills Competition, which brings young people together alongside industry, education and government leaders to advance career and technical education and training. Strupp, who is co-sponsored by John Deere and Caterpillar and will be joined by his expert, John

Deere Product Consultant Greg Vannorsdel, will represent the United States in Heavy Vehicle Technology from Sept. 22-27 in Shanghai.

“It’s basically the Olympics for what we’re doing,” Strupp says, noting there’s an opening ceremony, four days of competition and a closing ceremony. “We have our own place to stay, kind of like the competitor village of the Olympics. I’ve been to Canada a couple times and that’s it, so this is going to be

something for me. I want to thank Greg, my expert and trainer, as well as my instructors at MATC and everyone who has supported me on this journey.”

Strupp, a diesel technician, was the SkillsUSA Wisconsin state champion in Diesel Equipment Technology while at Holmen in 2023. He also won the college-postsecondary division state championship in 2025, when he graduated from Madison Area Technical College. It was a

second-place finish at the 2025 SkillsUSA Championships in Atlanta that put Strupp on the path to Shanghai.

“There’s a whole selection process that goes into it,” Strupp says of being selected as part of the U.S. delegation. “They use the top three finalists from the high school and college division for two years, so there’s a pool of 12 people that the experts can pick from. There’s an interview process and resumes ... and I ended up being the lucky competitor.”

At WorldSkills, which is held every two years, competitions involve anything where people are working with their hands, including cooking, cutting hair, CNC milling, mechanics, carpentry, electrical and more.

Strupp will compete in four 3-hour stations over the course of two days, plus two more days he’ll be competing for half the day. He’ll cycle through stations that test and troubleshoot engines, electrical and electronics systems, and powertrain systems. They demonstrate skills in hydraulic systems, vehicle inspections, fundamental failure analysis, brake systems, air-conditioning systems and general shop skills. They also perform a job interview and complete a written test.

“You learn a lot about being a professional and how to talk on stage,” says Strupp, who also serves as a Wisconsin SkillsUSA officer. “You learn a whole lot about being a professional, how to lead and how to run things. There’s a thing called the Expo where they have booths with companies in the industry, and you can connect with them there. Most of the competition is also run people in that industry. So you get connections, learn and meet with a lot of business professionals. A lot of these companies hire from SkillsUSA because they know that they’re learning the right things. It just opens up a huge path for your career. Now with me being a WorldSkills competitor, I have so



**“It helps you because
it’s simulating what you
would be doing as a job.
And it gets you in this
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Even if you don’t know
a lot, who cares?
The industry just wants
to see people out there.”**

— Ben Strupp
WorldSkills state champion

many doors open. You have such a bright future being in Skills.”

Industry professionals volunteer their time to help put the events on, which helps them advance their industry and find potential future employees.

“It helps you because it’s simulating what you would be doing as a job,” Strupp says. “And it gets you in this position of, ‘I want to do

this.’ Go try it out. Even if you don’t know a lot, who cares? The industry just wants to see people out there. They’d rather see you try and fail. And if you don’t like it, oh well, you wasted a day instead of your whole life in a job. You can try so many things. It just opens so many doors for you.”

While those connection and career prospects became a perk of SkillsUSA, they’re not what initially drew Strupp to the association.

“The part that kept me in Skills was just how much fun we had at competitions,” he says. “I’ve made quite a few friends through Skills. We get to go hang out and learn. I didn’t see it in high school, but I see it now as an actual adult, I learned a lot at these competitions. So you get to leave school, hang out with friends, learn a lot, compete in what you love, and win prizes and scholarships.”

For now, Strupp will be working, training and preparing to fly to China in September.

“I just got back from a week and a half of training,” he says. “I was at John Deere for half a week and then I was at Caterpillar for a week. I was also in Canada in January training with the Canadian competitor. There’s a lot more of that to come. And then once September comes, we’ll be flying over as a whole team, all nine competitors.”

It’s not just one more Skills competition for Strupp. He plans to be around long-term.

“I don’t plan to ever stop being a part of this association,” he says, noting it’s a family affair, as his dad runs an excavating, trucking and contracting business in La Crosse. “I got my dad involved, he’s running a station this year at state, and I’m trying to get him to be part of nationals too. He sees the value in it, I see the value in it and we both just want to help students.” ■

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

SPEAKING THE Construction Language

How do school leaders navigate design and construction conversations?

By Matt McGregor and Nichole Schweitzer

For many district administrators and school board members, dialogues about school facility projects can feel burdensome. Technical terms accumulate. Acronyms are prevalent. Timelines, design jargon, contracts and cost estimates blur together. It can seem as though architects and construction professionals are speaking a foreign language — one that education leaders were rarely taught.

That perception isn't incorrect. We've never heard of a course for administrators dedicated to capital project planning. Nevertheless, district leaders are regularly expected to make high-impact decisions involving millions of dollars, long-term debt, community trust, and the safety and functionality of learning environments. Exploring ways to bridge this language gap is vital.

■ Overcoming the language barrier

Misunderstandings during projects rarely stem from bad intentions. It is far more likely they arise when education professionals and design or building experts interpret the same words differently. Terms like budget,



Matt McGregor



Nichole Schweitzer

estimate, contingency or change order carry specific technical meanings, and misalignment surrounding those meanings can lead to mistrust, frustration and unexpected costs.

When district leaders grasp the language of design and construction, they are better equipped to evaluate professional recommendations, ask the right questions, and protect their district's financial and operational interests.

■ Comprehending the financial landscape

Capital initiatives start well before renderings are created and construction documents are drawn. Early preparation starts with understanding how the initiative will be funded. In many states, districts rely

on mixtures of operational funds, capital projects funds, debt-levied funds and voter-approved referendums.

Each funding source involves different requirements and timelines. Establishing a capital projects fund, for instance, requires board approval, a defined list of eligible projects and disciplined long-term planning. This often includes allocating funds years in advance of use. Engaging financial advisors at the beginning allows districts to assess affordability, anticipate the impact of tax rates and plan bond issuances strategically.

Financial vocabulary also counts. A sound budget should incorporate a financial plan with assumptions and safeguards. For example, an estimate is a projection that becomes more precise as design decisions are refined. This contrasts with a bid, which is a contractor's firm price based on construction documents. Confusing vocabulary can create unrealistic expectations and unnecessary tension, so asking for definitions from the contractor team is a valuable and logical source of knowledge for any administrator.



When they speak the same language as their design and construction partners, district leaders are better prepared to evaluate professional recommendations, ask the appropriate questions and protect their district's financial and operational interests.

■ The vitality of studies

Before facility solutions are proposed, districts must collect and understand data. A number of studies help frame responsible decision making, each performing a distinct purpose.

A facility study explores the physical condition of existing buildings and infrastructure. From roofs and boilers to kitchens, pavement and classrooms, it assesses present conditions and

forecasts remaining life expectancy while describing professional recommendations for future action.

Often completed alongside the facility study, an educational adequacy analysis assesses how well existing spaces support instruction. It considers student capacity, instructional strategies, technology, safety, security and how spaces are realistically used — highlighting gaps or inefficiencies.

Once condition and adequacy

data are collected, a needs prioritization transforms information into actionable sequencing. Identified needs are grouped by necessity so districts can plan responsibly rather than reactively.

A feasibility study brings all this material together to explore possible solutions. It considers financial capacity, legal requirements, operational impacts, timelines and community context to determine what options are convincing and feasible.

■ Design phases

Architects commonly guide school districts through three primary design phases, each with increasing stages of detail and commitment.

Schematic design is where big concepts take shape. Educational goals and facility needs are transformed into preliminary layouts; adjacencies, circulation and overall scale are defined; and preliminary cost estimates are developed.

Design development refines the chosen concept. Floor plans become more detailed, systems are defined and materials choices become clear. Cost estimates are revised to confirm alignment with the approved budget.

The construction documents phase produces detailed drawings and specifications contractors depend on to price and build the work. Once these documents are

complete and bidding starts, flexibility narrows substantially. This is the point where “I changed my mind” develops into “I need a change order.”

■ Change orders, contingency and scope of work

Few construction terms produce more anxiety than change orders. A change order is a formal alteration to a signed contract that adjusts the scope of work, schedule and/or cost. Since contractor pricing is based on the bid documents, any modification must be formally documented and priced.

This is why project budgets contain a contingency. Contingency funds exist to manage uncertainty, not to absorb preventable hesitancy. Numerous change orders can swiftly erode these reserves, underscoring

the importance of clarity early in the process.

■ Knowing roles and responsibilities

Another universal area of confusion involves who does what. Districts usually choose between a construction manager or a general contractor. A construction manager is commonly hired early in the design phase (or even during planning) to function as the district’s advisor, focusing on planning, budgeting, scheduling and coordinating the project on the district’s behalf. A general contractor, conversely, is responsible for executing the physical construction work itself, managing subcontractors, materials and day-to-day site operations when the project is ready to be built. Both methods deliver facility work, but their structures differ.

By considering numerous aspects, including financial capacity, operational impacts and timelines, a feasibility study decides which options are reasonable and can be achieved.





Although there are no courses on capital project planning for district leaders, they are regularly expected to render critical decisions involving millions of dollars, long-term debt, community trust, and the safety and performance of learning environments.

Construction managers typically organize projects into work divisions, which are competitively bid and coordinated. Districts should also recognize the distinction between construction management at-risk and construction management agency as responsibilities for contracts, insurance and payment vary substantially.

■ Defining project completion

Facility work does not end the day school starts. As the end of construction approaches, teams develop a punch list, identifying minor items that must be corrected before final acceptance. Many districts also avail themselves of an 11-month walk-through, identifying warranty issues before coverage expires.

Legally, a project is finished only after substantial completion, resolution of punch list items, final inspections and submission of required closeout documentation.

■ Better outcomes

Understanding design and construction terminology emboldens educational district leaders to collaborate confidently, make informed decisions and communicate transparently with their communities and other constituencies. When educators and construction industry professionals speak the same language, capital investments are more prone to deliver safe, efficient, long-lasting learning environments that fully benefit students, staff and the community. ■

Matt McGregor is the director of project management with Hoffman Planning, Design & Construction, Inc. A graduate of the University of Wisconsin-Stout with a Bachelor of Science in Construction, Matt has nearly 20 years of experience in the construction profession, which includes project collaborations with 12 different Wisconsin school districts. Matt can be reached at mamcgregor@hoffman.net.

Nichole Schwietzer serves as Hoffman's education specialist for Wisconsin. In her role, Nichole uses her expertise to guide school districts through the entire referendum process. Nichole most recently served as the superintendent for the Shiocton School District for 12 years following time at the Argyle School District as the PK-12 principal, assistant superintendent and special education director. Nichole received her Bachelor of Science and Masters of Secondary Education from the University of Wisconsin-Platteville. Nichole can be reached at nschwietzer@hoffman.net.

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COMPLIMENTARY MEMBER BENEFITS

The following resources and services are available exclusively to members of the Wisconsin Association of School Boards, at no additional cost. Take full advantage of these valuable benefits and share this information with others in your district.

Visit WASB.org to access each benefit. To help ensure these resources remain available exclusively to members, some pages require you to log in before accessing the content. Once you are logged in, you will have access to all complimentary member benefits. Contact info@wasb.org for assistance in accessing any of the resources.

TRAININGS AND EVENTS

The WASB hosts a series of workshops, conferences and webinars throughout the year to provide members with professional development and the latest information. Complimentary events include:

- Online Learning Platform
- School Finance 101
- Monthly Legal and Legislative Video Updates
- Weekly Capitol Chat webinars (during the state budget process)
- Timely webinars on legal updates and emerging topics
- New School Board Member Gatherings
- Past Event Recaps and presentations
- Calendar of Events and Notices

SERVICES AND RESOURCES

WASB provides a wide range of services and resources to support board members and district administrators in governance, advocacy, legal compliance, policy development, communications and effective district leadership.

- **Advocacy and Government Relations** – Professional representation for Wisconsin school boards at the state Capitol, with state agencies and with Wisconsin's federal representatives.
 - Advocacy Resources
 - Legislative Agenda
 - Legislative Update Blog
 - State Budget
 - State Bill Tracking Chart
 - Legislative Advocacy Toolkit
- **Policy Services** – The most comprehensive source of information on policy issues facing Wisconsin school districts, including the following member benefits:
 - Hot Policy Topics
 - Policy Developmental Materials
- **Legal Services** – Members may contact the WASB with general questions related to employment, labor and school law, collective bargaining, employee compensation and benefits. WASB.org is also a source of legal information, including:
 - Wisconsin School Law Resources
 - Legal Comments

- School Board Elections Resources
- Referendum Resources
- CPI Index
- Basic Legal and Governance Resources

- **Governance Services** – WASB governance services address a wide range of governance issues and/or help districts confront specific challenges and circumstances.

- Annual Board Development Tool
- Basic Legal and Governance Resources

- **Communication Services** – Resources for connecting with the community, highlighting district accomplishments and recognizing school board members for their service and commitment.

- Member Recognition Program
- Business Honor Roll
- Wisconsin School Board Week Planning Kit
- Media Resources

- **WASB Insurance Plan** – The Endorsed Insurance Agency program was developed to inform WASB members about insurance agencies that have a proven track record of knowledge about and experience with school districts' and CESAs' property and casualty and/or employee benefits insurance portfolios

- Employee Benefits Library
- Human Resources Library
- Property and Casualty/Risk Management
- Insurance Plan Resources

PUBLICATIONS AND PRODUCTS

- Wisconsin School News Magazine
- eConnection Newsletter
- Policy Perspectives Newsletter
- Legal and Policy Services Newsletter
- New Laws Bulletins
- New School Board Member Handbook
- Guide for Candidates
- The Nonrenewal Bulletin
- The School District Election Schedule
- School Board Self-Evaluation Tool
- Legislative Update Blog
- School Board Member Awards
- The Annual School District Meeting Booklet

The WASB is here to serve you. To take full advantage of your membership, visit WASB.org, explore the additional products and events available for members to purchase, contact the association at 833-320-5333 or email WASB Director of Member Services Ben Niehaus.

FALL REGIONAL MEETINGS

All meetings will begin at 6 p.m., with registration and networking followed by a 6:15 dinner and 7 p.m. programming. Each pre-meeting workshop will begin at 4:30 p.m. The member fee is \$43 for the meeting (\$42 in regions 6 and 9), which includes dinner, and \$79 for the pre-meeting workshop. Register for both and receive a \$10 discount. Visit WASB.org for more details and to register.

● Times and Locations

***Region 1:** Oct. 6 | Hayward, The Steakhouse & Lodge

***Region 2:** Oct. 7 | Minocqua, Norwood Pines Supper Club

***Region 3:** Oct. 22 | Green Bay, Rock Garden / Comfort Suites

Region 4: Sept. 30 | Eau Claire, The Florian Gardens

Region 5: Sept. 29 | Rothschild, Holiday Inn Wausau-Rothschild

***Region 6:** Oct. 1 | West Salem, West Salem High School

Region 7: Oct. 21 | Neenah, Bridgwood Resort & Hotel

***Region 8:** Oct. 20 | New Holstein, Altona Supper Club

Region 9: Oct. 14 | Fennimore, Southwest Tech

Region 10: Oct. 13 | Baraboo, The Wisconsin Hotel & Conference Center

Regions 11 & 15: Oct. 8 | Brookfield, Sheraton Milwaukee Brookfield Hotel

***Region 12:** Oct. 28 | Sun Prairie, Hilton Sun Prairie

Region 13: Oct. 27 | Burlington, Veterans Terrace

***Region 14:** TBD | Milwaukee, MPS Administration Building

Online Virtual Meeting: Nov. 5 at 12 p.m.

(No registration fee. Zoom link to come via email.)

*Denotes regions with elections for WASB Board of Directors

Prior to each Fall Regional Meeting, WASB staff counsel will host a 4:30 p.m. workshop in the same facility in which the meeting will be held. This year's workshop covers Wisconsin's open meetings law:

● WISCONSIN'S OPEN MEETINGS LAW — Understanding and Navigating Closed Sessions

This session provides a practical, in-depth look at Wisconsin's Open Meetings Law with a special emphasis on the rules, requirements and common pitfalls surrounding closed sessions. This workshop also includes governance advice on how school boards should approach sensitive discussions and maintain confidentiality. Whether you are a school board member, district administrator or executive assistant to the district administrator, this session provides the tools to conduct closed sessions lawfully and effectively. *Learn more at WASB.org.*

Register now — and secure your spot.

An online workshop for all members will be held at 12 p.m. on Tuesday, Nov. 3, on Zoom.

WASB Welcomes Interim Board Members

On Aug. 20, the WASB Board of Directors held a special meeting and appointed Keven Jensen, Rice Lake School Board President, as the new interim director in Region 1 and Nick Adams, Prentice School Board President, as the new interim director in Region 2. Each will serve in that role through their respective regional meetings. The people elected at those meetings will serve the unexpired terms of Linda Flottum (Region 1) and Randy Erickson (Region 2) and begin their term as director at the close of the regional meeting. In the case of Region 1, the term will last until January 2028. In the case of Region 2, the term will last until January 2029.

Sophie Lepien Joins the WASB Legal Team

The WASB is pleased to announce that Sophie Lepien has joined the legal team as of Tuesday, Sept. 15, as full-time staff counsel. A Verona native, Sophie is a graduate of UW-Madison and the UW Law School, where she served as managing editor of the Wisconsin International Law Journal. She joins the WASB from Stafford Rosenbaum law firm in Madison, where she represented clients in family law matters. While in law school, she was a law clerk in the Governor's office.

Sophie can be reached at slepien@wasb.org.



Leslie Bergstrom Joins the WASB as a Search and Governance Consultant

Leslie specializes in school board governance and superintendent searches. She also has significant experience with strategic planning, student achievement, instructional leadership and school district operations. Leslie served 11 years as an educator in the Madison Metropolitan School District before joining the Oregon School District, where she served 23 years in a variety of roles, including six years as superintendent. She also served as deputy superintendent, director of learning and student achievement, principal and associate principal.

In addition to serving as a consultant with the WASB, Leslie teaches courses at Edgewood University. She holds a doctorate from Edgewood University, as well as a bachelor's degree in secondary education—broad field social studies and a master's degree in educational leadership from the University of Wisconsin-Madison.

Leslie can be reached at lbergstrom@wasb.org.



Upcoming Webinars

■ GENERAL ELECTION PREVIEW

OCT. 23 | 12 p.m.

The WASB government relations team will be taking a look at the upcoming Nov. 3 general election, including the race for governor and the state legislature. Join us and explore the education platforms of the candidates, recent polling and how the parties are preparing for the next legislative session.

This webinar is a member benefit, and no registration is required.

- Visit [WASB.org](https://wasb.org) to find the date and time for the upcoming Administrator Contracts and Elections webinars in October and November, respectively.

RECURRING WEBINAR

■ WASB LEGAL AND LEGISLATIVE VIDEO UPDATE

OCT. 21, NOV. 18, DEC. 16 | 12 p.m.

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

This webinar is complimentary, and no registration is required. Visit [WASB.org](https://wasb.org) for more information. The Zoom link will be sent via email in the days leading up to each webinar.

RECORDED WEBINARS

■ LEGAL WEBINAR: PUPIL EXPULSIONS (Two Parts)

Part 1: Expulsion Overview | Part 2: The Hearing Process

This two-part webinar presentation covers state and federal laws relating to pupil expulsions. The first part of the presentation provides a roadmap for considering the expulsion of pupils and how to avoid common pitfalls when doing so. The second presentation focuses on procedures for administrators as well as for boards that conduct their own expulsion hearings by running a mock expulsion hearing. In addition, the presentation also includes an Expulsion Overview Guide with sample notifications and hearing procedures.

This webinar has been recorded and is available for a \$75 fee in the WASB Portal.

■ LEGAL WEBINAR: STUDENT FREE SPEECH

The WASB recently hosted a webinar designed to help school board members and administrators better understand student free speech rights and navigate challenging situations with confidence. In this presentation, WASB Associate Executive Director Bob Butler and WASB Staff Counsel Kara Conley provide key legal considerations, real-world examples and best practices for handling student expression issues while maintaining a positive school environment. Viewers of the recording will leave with practical insights to help them make informed decisions that support both constitutional protections and educational goals.

This series is a member benefit, and no registration is required. Find this webinar in the Complimentary Events Video Library (log in required).

2027 State Education Convention SAVE THE DATE

January 20-22 | Baird Center, Milwaukee, WI

More than 3,000 public school leaders, educators, exhibitors and advocates will gather in Milwaukee Jan. 20-22 to network, learn, grow and shape student achievement and public education throughout Wisconsin. The theme for 2027 is Leading Today, Shaping Tomorrow.

The event is co-sponsored by the Wisconsin Association of School Boards, the Wisconsin Association of School Business Officials and the Wisconsin Association of School District Administrators.

2027 EDUCATION TOUR

Fairview School | Thursday, Jan. 21

For \$10, ride a shuttle and step inside a K4-8 school leading the way in STEM, with a comprehensive Project Lead the Way program, hands-on learning in robotics and coding, and a strong focus on arts and whole-child development.

**The Education Tour location is subject to change. Please check with WASB Director of Events Amy Qualmann at aqualmann@wasb.org to confirm the time and location.*

CALL FOR PROPOSALS

Highlight your innovative programs and talented students at the 2027 State Education Convention! The WASB is now accepting proposals for the Student Art Exhibit (due by Nov. 15) and the Student Video Team (due by Nov. 20). Submit your proposal at [WASB.org/convention](https://wasb.org/convention).

WASB Breakfast Keynote

Scott Levy | Thursday, Jan. 21

Join Scott Levy, author of "Why School Boards Matter" and a member of a public school board in New York, for a sit-down breakfast before listening in on his keynote exploring how boards are in a unique position to solve pressing educational challenges. He'll discuss avoiding initiative fatigue, fostering a positive district climate, engaging productively with the community and driving local accountability. He will also remind attendees of the essential role school boards play, empower them to tackle challenges together, and share why very K-12 stakeholder has a vested interest in understanding how school boards shape education. Along with his local school board service, Levy has served as president of a regional school boards association, chairman of a children's hospital, investment banker, adjunct lecturer at the Harvard Graduate School of Education, and executive director of the Yale Center for Emotional Intelligence.

Immediately following his keynote, Levy will hold a book signing outside the Crystal Ballroom at the Hilton Milwaukee City Center.

SCHOOL SAFETY TRAINING *Discounted for WASB Members Only*

Thanks to funding from the WASB Insurance Plan, WASB members can now send up to 12 people per district — including one spot reserved for a board member — to receive hands-on safety training at Northcentral Technical College's Community Safety Simulation Center in Merrill at a substantial discount.

Using state-of-the-art 360° surround-sound screens and a real-time interactive response approach, individual participants are placed into hyper-realistic, immersive scenarios. From a disgruntled parent in the district office to a fight on a school bus or a student in mental health crisis, each situation unfolds while colleagues watch from an adjacent room.

Debriefing as a group immediately after each scenario brings an appreciation for how a variety of different tactics might have been employed to de-escalate challenging situations.

The cost of this training is normally \$1,500 through the end of calendar year 2026 and will rise to \$2,000 on Jan. 1, 2027. However, through an agreement with Northcentral Technical

College, the WASB is able to offer this training opportunity to WASB member districts at the reduced price of \$625 per six-hour session.

This discount will be available to districts who are WASB members at the time they complete the training from June 1, 2026 through Aug. 31, 2027. Up to 12 individuals from a WASB

member district can receive this subsidized six-hour long training. A space will be reserved in the training session to allow a school board member to participate if they wish to be part of that group.

While we are only able to provide one subsidized session per district, if a WASB member district wishes to send a second group of administrators, staff or board members to experience this training, they will receive the discounted price of \$1,250 during the period from

June 1, 2026, through Aug. 31, 2027.

For more information, contact WASB Director of Member Services Ben Niehaus at bniehaus@wasb.org or 608-512-1706.



**SCAN TO
LEARN MORE**

WASB/WSAA School Law Conference

SAVE THE DATE! Feb. 24–25, 2027
Hilton Appleton Paper Valley, Appleton



Day at the Capitol
SAVE THE DATE! March 17, 2027
Monona Terrace, Madison

Follow the WASB on YouTube

Subscribe to the Wisconsin Association of School Boards on YouTube @TheWASB to stay up to date on the latest with the convention and other happenings in Wisconsin public education.

SETTING THE RECORD STRAIGHT

Public schools have always inspired strong feelings, but today's polarized climate has intensified the discussion to new extremes. As community institutions, public schools should absolutely be held accountable. Yet too often, genuine conversation is drowned out by misleading narratives and decontextualized statistics that spread quickly through social media, news coverage, and even local board and referendum meetings.

That's why public education advocates must be prepared to respond clearly and confidently. Visit WASB.org to view our myth-busting guide intended to equip board members, administrators and community supporters with accurate information and effective talking points in an effort to help set the record straight. Think of these as a foundation — they become most powerful when paired with your district's own data, experiences, and stories. We encourage you to adapt them, expand on them, and use them to strengthen trust in Wisconsin's public schools.

To stay up to date with the campaign, subscribe to the Legislative Update Blog, follow the WASB's social media pages and help us amplify accurate information statewide.

TEN-YEAR LOOK BACK

“ **Teacher pay is an issue — particularly in attracting highly qualified individuals to the profession — but equally important is providing professional development and support to educators and emphasizing their value and importance in our education system.** ”

— **Former WASB Executive Director John Ashley** on what districts need to do to ensure their educators feel appreciated and respected.



▶ **The October 2016 issue of Wisconsin School News** highlights the 2016 WASB Business Honor Roll and the powerful partnerships connecting schools with local businesses. It also explores lessons from high-performing education systems around the world, examines the benefits of solar energy for schools, shares statewide school board survey results and features the inspiring story of Liz Murray's journey from homelessness to Harvard.



LOOK AHEAD TO 2027

Wisconsin State Education Convention

JAN. 20–22, 2027
BAIRD CENTER, MILWAUKEE



The Next Legislative Session Draws Near; Help Determine the Top Priorities of YOUR Association



2027 Draft Legislative Agenda is ready for review.

Each year, the WASB Board of Directors adopts a Legislative Agenda outlining the top priorities for the government relations team to focus on. Every other year, the agenda focuses on either budgetary/fiscal issues (in odd-numbered years) or policy-centered issues (in even-numbered years) to reflect the nature of the state budget process and legislative calendar.

The agenda is developed with input from the WASB staff, considering factors such as feedback from member school districts about the most important issues you are facing in the field, the makeup of the legislature and governor's office and their stated priorities, and the likelihood that the WASB can partner with other organizations to form a coalition to advocate for certain items.

The WASB's Legislative Agenda changes somewhat from legislative session to legislative session. What remains constant, however, is that the Legislative Agenda is guided and informed by the resolutions adopted by the WASB Delegate Assembly (the WASB Resolutions Book can be found on our website). The book is comprised of hundreds of resolutions.

The Legislative Agenda helps illustrate to members what issues will be prioritized in a given year.

The draft agenda is presented to the WASB Board of Directors for consideration at their September meeting. All members should receive an email from their regional director with the draft Legislative Agenda and an invitation to provide feedback. Furthermore, the draft Legislative Agenda is also shared at each Fall Regional Meeting and posted at WASB.org/advocacy-government-relations/legislative-agenda. We always strive to ensure our priorities are reflective of our membership. As such, we ask that you please take this opportunity to let WASB know if we are focusing on the issues that matter to you.

While the full draft is too long to publish within this article (see the URL above to view the draft), some of the main themes of this year's state budget focused draft agenda are:

- Special Education Reimbursement
- Inflationary Increases in Spendable Resources
- Adjustments to the Low

Revenue Ceiling

- Mitigating the Impact of Declining Enrollment
- Preserving Local Control of Education
- Staff Recruitment and Retention
- Voucher Transparency and Accountability
- Assistance to comply with Public Records Law
- Adjustments to Transportation Aid

After considering feedback, the Board of Directors approves the final Legislative Agenda in November. This finalized agenda sets the policy direction and broad priorities for the upcoming year.

■ Meetings in the Capitol have already started

Throughout the summer, we have been meeting with legislators in the Capitol to start discussing the upcoming legislative session and state budget. No matter the outcome of the election, the next legislature will have to quickly build a budget

The WASB's Legislative Agenda changes somewhat from legislative session to legislative session. What remains constant, however, is that the Legislative Agenda is guided and informed by the resolutions adopted by the WASB Delegate Assembly.

without many of the seasoned leaders that are typically involved in building that budget.

What has become clear to us through these meetings is that some legislators are looking to make changes to Wisconsin's school funding formula. Declining enrollment, high inflation and increasing property taxes mean the calls for change are louder than ever.

Our positions remain clear; school boards need to have the highest level of local control possible with flexibility in the state funding they receive to best provide high levels of student achievement in the context of local challenges and community expectations. Blanket state policy and funding with stringent requirements for allocation do not allow schools to respond to their needs efficiently.

■ **Referenda still a defining feature of the school finance landscape**

One phenomenon that continues to shape our meetings in the Capitol and the priorities that shape our Legislative Agenda is the continuation of school referenda as a defining feature of the school finance landscape. In all corners of the state and in districts of all sizes, referenda have become almost routine. As property

taxes rise and taxpayers shoulder more of the cost of education, the stakes have only grown higher.

This November, along with the high-profile races for governor and control of the state legislature, 71 school districts will pose 78 referenda questions to their voters. Combined with the referenda held in April and August, this marks 154 total referenda across 145 school districts in Wisconsin this year. That marks a significant decline from 2024, a record-breaking year with 241 referenda held, but is around the average number of referenda held in even years since 2016. It is also worth noting that many of the referenda passed in 2024 are still ongoing and thus contributing to the decline seen this year.

As is increasingly typical, this year will be dominated by operational referenda. This November will see 61 operational referenda (53 non-recurring and eight recurring). Combined with the 63 operational referenda from April, this means 124 out of 154 (81%) of all referenda this year are operational. The November ballot will also see 17 capital referenda. Combined with the 12 capital referenda in April and one in August, about 19.4% of referenda this year are capital.

Referenda passage rates have been slowly trending downward since reaching a peak in 2018. This can, at least in part, be attributed to growing financial burdens on families, increasing reliance on referenda statewide, and state budgetary decisions that have left property taxpayers on the hook for a larger share of school funding. This spring saw an overall passage rate of 61.3%. Fall passage rates have historically been slightly higher than spring elections, as voter participation tends to rise during midterm or presidential elections. Even so, if the spring's passage rate largely holds through this fall, it would be the lowest school referenda passage rate for an even year since 2010.

■ **General Election Preview webinar with Chris and David**

As you prepare for election day, the WASB government relations team will host a special webinar at 12 p.m. on Oct. 23. Chris Kulow and David Martin will preview the election by exploring the education platforms of the candidates, reviewing recent polling and other developments. Look for more information on this webinar in the coming weeks! ■

WASB ADVOCACY TOOLKIT

The state and federal government have a significant impact on your local schools. It is important to ensure that policymakers appreciate the effect their decisions have on the local level. School board members are ideally positioned to foster an understanding of their district's needs and build support for public schools. The WASB can help, providing high-quality professional representation in Madison and Washington, D.C., while aiming to keep you up to date on the latest political news to inform your own advocacy. To stay informed:

- Subscribe to our Legislative Update Blog to get direct emails whenever there is critical news in Madison and Washington.
- Utilize WASB Action Alert emails to contact your lawmakers with customizable sample messages.
- View the WASB's Legal and Legislative Video Updates at 12 p.m. on the third Wednesday of every month.
- Access the WASB Advocacy Toolkit at [WASB.org/advocacy-government-relations/wasb-advocacy-toolkit](https://wasb.org/advocacy-government-relations/wasb-advocacy-toolkit). □

For more advocacy information, contact WASB Director of Government Relations Chris Kulow at ckulow@wasb.org or Government Relations Specialist David Martin at dmartin@wasb.org.



New Legislation Addresses Grooming

The Wisconsin Legislature recently enacted a series of laws related to sexual misconduct and grooming by educators. It is important for board members to be aware of these new legal tools and requirements. This Legal Comment is designed as an easy reference tool for board members and will describe several Wisconsin laws enacted in the last year and the requirements that the laws impose on school districts.

■ Parental notification of sexual misconduct by staff against a student

2025 Wisconsin Act 57 requires each school board to notify the parent or guardian of a student when certain administrators receive allegations of sexual misconduct by a staff member against a student.¹ “Sexual misconduct” means “verbal conduct of a sexual nature or physical contact of a sexual nature.”² “Verbal conduct of a sexual nature” is further defined to mean communications made intentionally to sexually degrade or humiliate the student or the staff member or to sexually arouse or gratify the student or the staff member. “Physical contact of a sexual nature” includes intentional touching by the staff member or the student if the purpose of the intentional touching is any of the same reasons. Act 57 also requires parental notice in two other

situations: if a sex offender has taken a picture of a pupil or if an individual who has been convicted of a serious child sex offense works with children. Parental notification is required if the report is received by a Title IX coordinator, principal, assistant principal, district administrator (superintendent) or assistant superintendent and that individual determines that there is reasonable cause to suspect that the alleged conduct occurred. Act 57 also requires school boards to annually notify parents and guardians of their rights under the Wisconsin Public Records Law to access records about school employee discipline. This notification can be provided in conjunction with other annual notices provided by the school board.

■ Criminalization of grooming

2025 Wisconsin Act 88 created a new felony, “Grooming of a child for sexual activity.”³ The new law describes the prohibited conduct broadly:

(2) No person may engage in a course of conduct, pattern of behavior or series of acts with the intention to condition, seduce, solicit, lure or entice a child for the purpose of engaging in sexual intercourse or sexual contact, or for the purpose of producing, distributing or possessing depictions of the child

engaged in sexually explicit conduct. For purposes of this section, a course of conduct, pattern of behavior or series of acts may include, among other activities, any of the following:

- (a) *Verbal comments, suggestions or conversations of a sexual nature directed toward a child.*
- (b) *Inappropriate or sexualized physical contact or attempts to initiate such contact.*
- (c) *Written, electronic or digital communications, including using text messages, emails, social media or online platforms, to seduce, solicit, lure or entice a child.*
- (d) *Provision or promise of gifts, favors, privileges, attention or other items of value with the intent to lower a child’s inhibitions, gain trust or create emotional dependence.*
- (e) *An act intending to isolate a child, or to encourage a child to separate, from family, peers or guardians.*
- (f) *Use of a computer, online service, internet service, local bulletin board service, or any device capable of electronic data storage or transmission to contact a child, a child’s guardian, or any person believed by the actor to be a child or a child’s guardian.*

2025 Wisconsin Act 57 requires each school board to notify the parent or guardian of a student when certain administrators receive allegations of sexual misconduct by a staff member against a student.

Act 89 creates a requirement, beginning in the 2026-27 school year, that all district employees receive training in identifying, preventing, and reporting grooming and professional boundary violations.

Because grooming is classified as a crime against children, a district administrator must report to the Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction if a licensed employee is charged with or convicted under the new law. In addition, even in the absence of criminal charges, if a licensed employee is non-renewed, dismissed or resigns in part because of evidence or a reasonable suspicion that the employee engaged in grooming, the district administrator should report this as immoral conduct to DPI under Wis. Stat. § 115.31(3)(a)3. and 4. Additional reporting requirements may also be triggered by grooming conduct, including employees' obligation to report to social services or law enforcement when they have reasonable cause to suspect child abuse of a student seen in the course of their professional duties, and the reporting to parents required by Act 57.⁴

■ Required communications policy and boundaries training

2025 Wisconsin Act 89 requires school boards to put in place by Sept. 1, 2026, a policy on appropriate communications between an employee or volunteer and students.⁵ The policy must include a range of consequences, including termination, for employees and volunteers who violate the policy. The policy must apply to communications that occur during and outside of school hours and must include standards for appropriate content and appropriate methods of communication.

In addition, Act 89 creates a

requirement, beginning in the 2026-27 school year, that all district employees receive training in identifying, preventing, and reporting grooming and professional boundary violations.⁶ Districts may conduct their own training sufficient to ensure compliance with their board policy adopted under Act 89, or districts may use a DPI training module. The DPI module defines grooming and provides scenarios to help educators recognize grooming behavior and understand who they should report to when they witness various types of behaviors by other school staff.⁷

■ DPI licensure portal updates

For many years, DPI's Educator Licensing Online webpage has provided free public access to educator license information. 2025 Wisconsin Act 185 makes DPI's maintenance of public access to a free online licensing portal a statutory requirement. Act 185 requires the portal to include information saying whether a license holder has been investigated for immoral conduct or for conviction of a crime and to include the outcome of the investigation, including if an investigation was terminated because the license holder voluntarily surrendered the license during the investigation.⁸

The biggest change from DPI's previous practice is that educators who were investigated and not found to have engaged in immoral conduct might now be listed in the public portal even if DPI closed the investigation without finding immoral conduct.

■ Prohibited agreements and references regarding immoral conduct

2025 Wisconsin Act 186 prohibits school boards from entering into an agreement after April 5, 2026, including a separation or severance agreement, that:

- a. Has the effect of suppressing or destroying information relating to an investigation of alleged immoral conduct by a current or former employee.
- b. Affects the ability of the employer or its employees to report suspected immoral conduct.
- c. Requires the employer to expunge information about allegations or findings of immoral conduct from any documents maintained by the employer, unless after investigation the allegations are found to be false or not substantiated.⁹

District [sic] should work with legal counsel to ensure that separation agreements are compliant with Act 186.

Act 186 provides immunity to a school board that provides information about the conduct of a current or former employee in response to a request for information from a prospective employer. The immunity provision largely overlaps with existing immunity for responding to reference checks.

■ Code of ethics for educators

Effective July 1, 2026, DPI's administrative rules were updated to include a Code of Ethics for Educators.¹⁰

Among other things, the code of ethics states that an educator “has a primary obligation to promote the health, safety and well-being of all students;” “treats students with dignity and respect and establishes and maintains appropriate verbal, physical, emotional and social boundaries;” and “maintains appropriate boundaries, in accordance with the educator’s role, when using electronic communication.” During the process of establishing the code of ethics, DPI stated, “This rule does not apply to educator misconduct provisions in ch. PI 34, Wis. Admin. Code.” In addition, the new code does not contain its own express enforcement procedures. Nonethe-

less, going forward, DPI may at least cite this code of ethics, in addition to the new statutes discussed above, when pursuing discipline and license revocation against educators for immoral conduct such as boundary violations and grooming.

■ Conclusion

School boards and administrators should be aware of the new laws and the reporting, annual notice and training responsibilities they impose upon districts. These new laws are designed to provide additional tools for addressing boundary violations and potential grooming behavior by educators and others who work with children. ■

This Legal Comment was written by Heather Curnutt & Brian P. Goodman of Boardman & Clark LLP, WASB Legal Counsel.

1. Wis. Stat. § 118.07(6)(a)1.
2. Wis. Stat. § 948.098(1)(d).
3. Wis. Stat. § 948.072(1)
4. Wis. Stat. § 48.981(2)(a)14-16m.
5. Wis. Stat. § 118.07(7)(a).
6. Wis. Stat. § 118.07(7)(b).
7. learnprofessional.dpi.wi.gov/learn/courses/60/grooming-and-personal-boundaries-training-for-school-staff-act-89
8. Wis. Stat. § 115.28(7)(i).
9. Wis. Stat. § 118.227
10. Wis. Admin. Code ch. PI 34 subch. XIII.

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

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