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Neenah High School Recognized for Inclusive Athletics

Neenah High School has been named a Special Olympics Unified Champion School on the 2020 ESPN Honor Roll, one of 36 schools across the nation (and the only one in Wisconsin) to be given the honor.

The program's three main components, according to a press release, are inclusive youth leadership, whole-school engagement and inclusive sports among students with and without disabilities.

One highlight of its athletic program is an annual unified basketball game between faculty and Neenah High School's Special Olympics team. The high school is one of only a handful in Wisconsin with a Special Olympics program.

The district's efforts start early, including a youth athletes' program where children with and without disabilities participate together. □

Hackers Increasingly Targeting School Districts

Criminal groups are ramping up attacks on local school districts, according to cybersecurity experts quoted in a recent Detroit Free Press story.

Doug Levin, founder of the K-12 Cybersecurity Resource Center, told the newspaper that districts tend to use older equipment and software. They may also not devote as many resources to cyber defenses as private companies do.

Student personal information can be valuable, he says, because criminals can open credit using the records of students, who may not monitor their credit. Alternatively, criminals may hack into a school system and demand ransom to regain access.

More than 1,000 cyber attacks on K-12 school systems have been reported since 2016. □

REPORT: Black Students Miss 5 Times More Class Time Due to Suspensions

Black students nationwide lost nearly five times as many days to suspension as white students in 2015-16, according to an October 2020 report from the UCLA Civil Rights Project.

Wisconsin had the sixth-highest gap in days of instruction lost between Black and white students in middle and high school. The state's Black students lost 134 days of instruction per 100 students, compared to 10 days for white students, for a gap of 124

days per 100 students.

Minnesota's gap was just over half of Wisconsin's. The report includes some good news for Wisconsin. The state's Black suspension rates dropped by 27% from 2011-12 to 2015-16.

The report, which is available online, suggests educators pursue "nonpunitive strategies — alternatives that teach responsibility, enhance social and emotional learning, and help students improve their conduct." □

STAT OF THE MONTH

124

Number of lost days of instruction that Wisconsin middle and high school Black students lost due to suspensions in excess of what white students lost in 2015-16. *Source: UCLA Civil Rights Project*

McFarland District Receives Million-Dollar Racial Equity Grant

The McFarland School District has received a \$1 million grant to support the social and emotional health of its Black students. The grant, awarded by the University of Wisconsin's Wisconsin Partnership Program, will be used to help close the achievement gap in part by funding an expansion of a mentoring program, Natural Circles of Support.

The program began in 2017 with mentoring circles that allowed students of color to share their experiences. It has grown into a collaboration between students and staff with the goal of improving the school's racial climate.

Amy Kind, chair of the Wisconsin

Partnership Program's oversight committee, told the McFarland Thistle that the award recipients "were chosen based on their intent to address and acknowledge the correlation between societal/mental well-being and racial equality."

"The award recipients address issues that are key to our societal well-being: health disparities, including those directly worsened by COVID-19, and the impact of racism on health," Kind said. "By addressing the building blocks of health, including social connection, employment, economic stability and access to care, these initiatives have the potential to forge new and innovative paths that dismantle barriers to achieving health." □



Using Evaluations to Build Strong Relationships

As we approach the end of 2020, I'm proud to announce the culmination of two major projects WASB staff and consultants have been working on this year. But before we get to that, I would be remiss in not acknowledging the potential for substantial changes coming our way in 2021 with the transition to the new federal administration, Congress and state Legislature in January and a new state superintendent in April.

I encourage you to read the Capitol Watch column on page 28 for an insightful look at how state and federal changes may impact your local district. Watch for more information from the WASB in the coming months as our federal and state elected officials begin new terms.

Now for the announcements — during this challenging time, it's even more important for boards to take a step back and assess their effectiveness. Strong relationships — among board members and between the board and superintendent — are at the heart of effective school governance. Having a greater understanding of which areas you and your colleagues agree on and which you do not allows you to focus your time and attention strategically.

So, I'm excited to announce the introduction of the WASB Superintendent Evaluation Framework and an updated Annual Board Development Tool for Wisconsin school boards.

The Superintendent Evaluation Framework recognizes the need for continuous growth. Designed by

WASB consultants, most of whom are former superintendents, it is intended to help boards strengthen the pivotal relationship with their superintendent and improve the overall leadership of the district based on mutual respect and understanding.

The Framework includes evaluation requirements, key considerations, prompts, questions, self-assessment tools, goals, a job description audit tool, sample artifacts and more. It is aligned to state and national leadership standards and the district's job description.

In recognition that boards often evaluate their superintendents on a series of goals over a multi-year cycle, the Framework is being offered as a three-year subscription. For one low fee, the district receives access to the Framework for three years as well as two hours of WASB consultation time to begin the implementation process. And of course, the WASB can provide more assistance if requested. Visit WASB.org to learn more and subscribe.

The second major project we have been working on is the Annual Board Development Tool. It was created several years ago by School Perceptions and the WASB to help boards identify their areas of strength as well as where further discussion is needed.

Aligned to the Key Work of School Boards, the popular survey tool allows boards to rate their work along nine dimensions, including board operations, vision, community engagement, budgeting and data-

driven decision making.

This year, we added new questions about a board's role in meeting the needs of all students to foster conversations about how resources are allocated and decisions are made to ensure positive outcomes for all students. For those who have been using the survey tool annually, we kept the existing questions so you can continue comparing each year's results.

In addition, we're excited to announce that School Perceptions added an administrator dashboard to allow districts to more easily administer the survey tool. Districts now have a single web page to send the survey to its members, monitor responses, send reminders and access real-time results. You can also now preview the survey in its entirety by using the link on the WASB website.

The Annual Board Development Tool remains free to members. Information was sent to districts in November on how to access the updated survey for 2020-21. Learn more at WASB.org.

If you'd like to delve deeper — into board improvement, superintendent evaluation or other governance topics — WASB consultants are ready to put their decades of experience to work for you. Building a stronger foundation today gives you the ability to more effectively tackle whatever comes your way tomorrow. ■

During this challenging time, it's even more important for boards to take a step back and assess their effectiveness.



SHREYA GODISHALA,
then a Middleton-Cross Plains Area
School District student, works
in a UW-Madison botany lab.

Business HONOR ROLL 2020

School districts and businesses partner up to lend support and create opportunities for students

Waterford Union High School

AVIDITY SCIENCE

For some special education students, finding a summer job in high school isn't the relatively smooth experience it can be for their classmates.

That's why Nick Roeglin, a special education teacher at the Waterford Union High School District, reached out to companies to find employers willing to work with his students. He believes his teens benefit from acquiring employable skills and an experience they could put on a resume.

A handful of companies agreed to help. One of them was Avidity Sciences, which makes a variety of products in animal and life sciences, such as automated animal watering systems and water purification systems.

Roeglin's students, among those with the most significant learning needs, were treated like other company employees. They were taken through onboarding, given a name badge and assigned to a trainer.

The students were assigned to entry-level positions, including packaging and assembly. At first, Roeglin stayed with the students to support them, but he eventually became hands-off as the Avidity trainer took over.

"The whole key to why this worked is that everybody at Avidity was invested," Roeglin says of the company-wide commitment.

"Everyone with direct student contact took ownership and wanted it to succeed."

Katy Smith, human resources director at Avidity, said the 50-year-old company has long partnered with community organizations and agencies that help people with disabilities. At the same time, these partnerships address a talent shortage in manufacturing.

"It's not only on-the-job experience and exploration, it's a benefit to Avidity to develop our own talent pipeline," she says.

The partnership, which had two long-term participants before it was put on hold by the pandemic last spring, was also rewarding for employees.

"One in particular took the students under her wing and found it rewarding to be able to give them that real-world work experience," Smith says, noting that the jobs were broken down into discrete tasks that wouldn't overwhelm the students, who worked for two hours at a time.

The students appreciated performing a real job within a company.

"They went to work and it was work; it wasn't a created job within the school," Roeglin says.

For districts considering a partnership like this, Roeglin's advice is to do the homework about what job types would be a good fit. District officials should also trust their instincts about whether the partnership can work.

"You're going to know right away

if this is something everyone has bought into or if it has been thrown onto employees' plates," Roeglin says.

The goal is to have the company take the lead, which can't happen without the partner's commitment.

"Approach businesses who are of the mindset to create meaningful experiences and offer on-the-job training to expose students to various career opportunities," Smith says. "Some businesses may be surprised to find it's not just rewarding for students but for businesses and employees who serve as a mentor or coach."

New London School District

NORTHLAND ELECTRICAL SERVICES

Ben Grumann had chosen an Eagle Scout Service Project that would help his school — building an archway to direct visitors to the New London High School football and track stadium.

But he soon hit the first of several roadblocks when the project budget came in at \$88,000 — more than four times the original estimate of \$20,000.

Grumann went to Northland Electrical Services owner Robert Corey Defferding, who donated about \$20,000 and helped him manage the contractors who would build the archway.

Then COVID-19 hit, and scheduling became more difficult. Grumann kept moving forward and



BEN GRUMANN, a recent graduate from New London High School, spearheaded the construction of this archway as his Eagle Scout project. He received significant help, both financial and in project management, from Northland Electrical Services, which has helped the School District of New London in numerous ways.

completed the project by July.

“I learned a lot of communications skills,” he says. “All of my contacts would communicate in different ways.”

The company’s support of Grumann’s project is just one of the many ways Northland Electrical Services has helped New London, as the district explained in its nomination letter.

Defferding’s interest in helping students comes from his own background. As he started his career as an electrician, Defferding said he felt looked down on because he didn’t go to college. He sees some of himself in today’s students who want a different path.

“I want to help those kids who kind of get missed,” he says.

That includes bringing on youth apprentices, which Defferding has been doing for a few years, according to Joel Kamba, the company’s human resources and safety manager.

“It’s a pretty good benefit to have a good grasp before you are dedicated to the field,” Kamba says.

New London School District Superintendent Scott Bleck has seen

how apprenticeships help students.

“Northland Electrical Services has fast-tracked that pathway for many students to help them understand and become familiar with what their future might look like,” Bleck says.

Northland Electrical Services also donates parts and funding to create makerspaces in elementary classrooms.

Paula Titterton, who teaches first grade at Lincoln Elementary School, says a donation helped purchase technology kits that “help the kids be creative, show higher-level thinking and problem-solving.”

She says the company also purchased flexible seating that allows students to decide where they can learn best and be “the boss of their own learning.”

One student might sidle up next to her in a rocker chair and lap desk during a math lesson while another child might choose a wobble seat farther back.

“It’s not, ‘the teacher puts me here,’” Titterton says. “It’s more like, ‘I choose to sit here. I have to be responsible for where I learn best.’”

New Berlin School District

THE MAD CETE

Last fall, Steve Chepp worked with a group of New Berlin High School students to design a video game from top to bottom.

Chepp, who runs The Mad Cete, a software, web development and cybersecurity firm, tells a counterintuitive story when asked what the students got out of the experience.

During the second-to-last session, a student became frustrated with a decision made by his fellow game designers. The other students stood their ground and the upset student left.

It sounds like a low point in the effort, but Chepp viewed it as a learning opportunity. Disagreement is inevitable in professional life, and navigating it is just as important as learning to code.

The student eventually apologized and the students voted to allow him back into their group.

“One of the big things is empowering them to find their own answers,” says Chepp.

He came to lead the game design mini-course as a result of his speeches to students with Junior Achievement. After nearly all his talks, the same question would come up again and again.

“Do you do internships?”

It’s a good question, and a hard one to answer. Internships are critical, but meaningful ones are hard to come by in video game design.

Chepp says it’s a “show-me” industry, meaning that employers care more about what you can do than your credentials. This can make it more difficult to find experience.

“At the end of the day, you need a portfolio,” he says. So, he decided to help students make one.

In the summer of 2019, he approached the New Berlin School District. By that fall, the game design team was assembled with plans made to pull students out of their classes to focus on their shared project.

Video game development calls on a diversity of technical skills, including

...knowing how to face a challenge — what resources or people to query — is more valuable than being given the answers.

graphics and programming.

“The first time we ran this, the students were all programmers, so we had to leverage free art assets or bring in creative design students,” Chepp says.

The students ended up making a “procedurally generated” game, meaning they program the game to create levels — dungeons, in this case — randomly.

Chepp spent the first class going through the program used to create the game. But, as much as possible, he wanted the students to arrive at their own answers. He believes knowing how to face a challenge — what resources or people to query — is more valuable than being given the answers.

The pandemic interrupted the project, so the students haven’t yet finished the game. But Chepp says reaching students “fulfills such a systemic need that I have to make a difference on so many levels.”

Middleton-Cross Plains Area School District

BIOPHARMACEUTICAL TECHNOLOGY CENTER INSTITUTE

As a senior at Middleton High School, Thomas Silver found himself in a UW-Madison lab on a team genetically engineering a yeast genome.

To Silver, it was the best kind of work placement — one that didn’t feel like work.

“It was actually pretty fun,” says Silver, now a freshman at the University of Minnesota, Twin Cities.

The time passed quickly, and the work of sequencing and rearranging the amino acids that form genes — though different from a school lab — wasn’t all that hard, he says.

Silver was in the lab through a partnership between the school district, the Dane County Schools Consortium and the BioPharmaceutical Technology Center Institute, whose primary sponsor is Promega Corporation.

The Institute’s K-12 program director, Barbara Bielec, said the Institute has worked with the Middleton-Cross Plains Area School District since shortly after the partnership began in 1993. Each year, 24 Dane County students participate. Of those, four are typically from Middleton.

A student’s application for this program, which serves as a link between schools and laboratories, first goes to the Dane County Schools Consortium. In consultation



THOMAS SILVER, a graduate of the Middleton-Cross Plains Area School District, worked in a UW-Madison genetics lab during his senior year. It was thanks to a partnership between the BioPharmaceutical Technology Center Institute and his district, among others.

with the Institute, the consortium decides which students are accepted into the program.

Students begin with an introductory course to teach them about working in a lab environment. Students then apply to join a working laboratory. Most join a university lab, as private companies are sometimes hesitant to hire people under the age of 18, according to Bielec.

“Because we’ve been in existence so long, we’ve built relationships with different mentors on campus,” she says. “We get a student in the door, and the mentor will continue to hire students if they do a good job.”

A student who starts the program as a junior in high school and works a total of 900 hours through the August after they graduate is eligible for a STEM-skills certificate from the state of Wisconsin. Students who start the program as seniors must complete 450 work hours to earn the certificate.

When starting to look for a lab placement in December of his junior year of high school, Silver emailed many labs until he was accepted into the genetics lab of UW associate pro-

fessor Chris Todd Hittinger. It was an exciting prospect for a student already interested in DNA.

Silver started working at the lab as his senior year began, working 9 a.m. until 5 p.m. every other day under the guidance of his mentor Assistant Scientist Russell Wrobel.

At first, Silver thought, “everyone just seemed to know what they were doing and I was kind of clueless.”

But he soon became accustomed to

how the work was different from a high school lab.

In high school, he’d do a lab once and move on, regardless of whether the results were usable. In the UW lab, the team repeated step-by-step experiments until they found results. A mistake in one step might mean redoing the entire process.

Silver said the experience solidified his desire to work in genetic engineering.

“After working in the lab, I noticed it (the process of genetic engineering) was actually a lot easier than I thought,” he said. ■

Thank you to the school districts that nominated businesses to the 2020 WASB Business Honor Roll. The full list is available at WASB.org.



If your district is interested in reviewing sample policies on encouraging school-business partnerships, contact the WASB.

THE VOICE OF



Returning to school in a COVID-19 environment

Sharon Belton, Ph.D.

A community's conversations around returning students to school often includes school boards, public health experts, educators and parents. But there may be little feedback from those affected most — the students themselves.

This summer, the University of Wisconsin's Wisconsin Institute for Public Policy and Research set out to fill that information void. They wanted to give students a voice about the return to school process, and they believe what they've learned can inform larger policy discussions and decisions.

In August, the researchers held five virtual focus groups with middle and high school students in Marathon County. The participating students attended schools in seven

districts — Athens, Colby, D.C. Everest, Edgar, Mosinee, Wausau and Wittenberg-Birnamwood — and one private school system. They asked the students about their concerns returning to school, what kind of support they need and what they want adults to know regarding their thoughts and feelings about school reopening.

It's the kind of vital work that districts wanted to find time for, said Casey Nye, assistant superintendent in the D.C. Everest Area School District.

"Especially at the high school level, you want to engage students in that conversation, but like every other school we were working hard to be prepared to open the doors," he says.

Researchers compiled the students' responses, grouping them

under five themes and selecting anonymous quotes to summarize their sentiments. The first theme will be relatable to adults, too.

■ They're worried

"Anxiety," the report says, "is a compelling underlying theme of student focus groups."

Most prominent were students' worries about how and where they'll learn this fall as well as how they'll meaningfully connect with teachers and peers. Concerns related to COVID-19 were significant, but secondary to anxieties around learning and social interaction.

"On a scale of 1 to 10, I am a 4 for my safety but a 7 for my future," one student said.

Anxiety is a compelling underlying theme of student focus groups.

STUDENTS



The uncertainty around reopening — what school will look like, what their schedule will be, what the expectations are and more — exacerbates these anxieties. The researchers said specific information about plans for how students will learn may clear up some of this uncertainty. Sudden changes back and forth between physical and virtual settings, without explanations of why they were happening, also caused worries.

The report helped D.C. Everest prioritize student orientation at a time when every day was precious, Nye said. It was a critical opportunity to set expectations.

“They just wanted to know, ‘What are the rules going to be?’” he said.

The second theme belies the stereotype that teens are disinterested in their own education.

■ They want learning support

The students stressed the importance of options and choices with respect to school reopening, the researchers said.

“Give us the option of in person

or virtual,” one high schooler said. A significant number of students felt strongly about the need to be on site, or at least wanted the ability to choose to be learning on site.

Moreover, students hoped school would retain some of the positives of virtual education, such as extra sleep, flexibility, independence and working at their own pace. “I liked the choice

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to do my work on my own schedule,” a middle schooler said.

High school students, the researchers said, connect their academic experience with their future generally. And they’re worried that learning gaps this past spring may get worse this fall.

Students also had plenty of thoughts about improving learning, especially by interacting with fellow students. “Get creative,” one high schooler said, so “we are not sitting in front of a computer all day.”

Students also had recommendations for virtual learning. They want a way to access teachers in a timely way for live help, and they want teachers to use a common platform for information and meetings rather than multiple sources, like Zoom, email, Canvas and others.

Few educators would be surprised that social connections were also a critical theme of these focus groups.

■ They crave connection

When students were asked to identify the one thing they were looking forward to most this fall, being with friends topped the list. And missing out on friends is “deeply concerning” to students, the researchers said. When asked if he or she was looking forward to school this fall, one high

school student said, “We are staying online, so not really.”

Students want their schools to find ways to offer extra- and co-curricular activities like band, sports and clubs. Students would prefer to have these activities in a virtual format if the alternative is canceling them outright.

Most students, even non-athletes, said they hoped student-athletes can participate in sports, with some citing mental health reasons. Still, some students said offering sports safely is a priority, and high-contact sports are not as necessary.

Though students’ anxieties around COVID-19 itself were often secondary to learning and social connection, they value the health of themselves and their families.

■ They want to know COVID precautions

The elements of COVID safety that are now so familiar — effective cleaning, physical distancing, crowd reduction and more — are important to students. They generally said they were more concerned for the safety of friends, family and teachers than for themselves.

That empathy impressed Nye, who said it was a moment of pride.

“They were saying all the things

that you’d hope kids would say,” he says.

They said having a mask policy would be essential and sends the message that schools care about the safety of both students and staff. “Masks would provide peace of mind,” a high schooler said.

Not all students agreed with requiring masks, the researchers said. Some said students might fidget, remove their masks or otherwise render them ineffective, and that the preferences of some should not be forced on all. Several of those who did not agree with requiring masks said they’d be willing to wear one if they could attend school in person.

Nye said students in their politically purple area modeled what they wanted to see in these conversations.

“There were some interesting differences of opinion, but they were expressed in such a respectful way,” he says.

The researchers had an interesting discussion about enforcing the use of masks and what steps schools should take if a student refused to wear a mask. Students shared ideas, including suspension or enforcement of civil fines. One takeaway on COVID-19 safety is that students want schools to clearly communicate

About the WIPPS Research Partners ...

WIPPS Research Partners is a unit of the Wisconsin Institute for Public Policy and Service located at the UW-Stevens Point at Wausau campus. Part of the mission of WIPPS and, by extension, WIPPS Research Partners, is to respond to community needs by providing information and to help citizens and communities make decisions about issues that matter to them. In this particular case, WIPPS Research

Partners’ goal was to provide information from the perspective of students on the important topic of school reopening.

Objectivity and non-partisanship are core values of WIPPS Research Partners; they had no policy “agenda” in conducting this work. WIPPS Research Partners does not make recommendations or take positions on public policy issues. Support for this project has

WIPPS WISCONSIN INSTITUTE for PUBLIC POLICY and SERVICE

been provided by WIPPS Research Partners and the COVID-19 Community Response Fund of the Community Foundation of North Central Wisconsin and the United Way of Marathon County. □

For more information about WIPPS Research Partners, visit wipps.org/research-partners/.

STUDENTS SAID THEY BELIEVE DECISIONS ARE BEING MADE FOR THEM BUT WITHOUT THEIR INPUT.

“We should have a say.”



the rationale behind mask policies with clear enforcement.

The final theme revolved around communication and engagement.

■ They want to be involved

Students, the researchers found, are frustrated by a lack of direct communication from their school leaders. Many of the students, especially those in middle school, were not aware in August of their school's reopening plans. And even those who knew in broad strokes — such as “staying virtual,” “going back in person” or “hybrid” — were unaware of specifics.

“No matter what,” one high schooler said, “we need better communication. So I know what is happening. So I can have a better say.”

Finally, students said they believe decisions are being made for them but without their input. “We should have a say,” one said.

Students suggested that school leaders talk about their plans via email, learning platforms or live-streamed Q&A sessions.

Nye says the D.C. Everest district traditionally writes a letter to parents. This year they made a small but important change — they made it a letter to students that was also shared

with families.

Making communication a priority can help students both feel included and reduce their anxiety.

“As soon as we did that, some of the anxiety went away,” Nye says. “Obviously not all of it. It's been a really challenging experience.”

Students don't speak with a single voice on any topic, but the focus group made it clear that students want their teachers and schools to ask them what they think and feel about returning to school. ■

Sharon Belton, Ph.D. is the director of WIPPS Research Partners

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Exit Interviews DONE RIGHT

School Perceptions' survey helps districts reveal why employees are leaving, and how best to retain them in the future

Every school district is interested in attracting and retaining top-tier talent, regardless of position. To help achieve this goal, the School Perceptions team designed a powerful tool to examine the reasons employees are departing districts. Built upon a foundation of up-to-date education labor market scholarship, Wisconsin-based media reports and expert opinions, this survey helps districts collect actionable data that answers the questions, “Why are our employees

leaving?” and, even more importantly, “Where should we focus our efforts to keep our most talented employees?”

The Employee Exit Survey steps beyond simply asking a departing employee why they are leaving. School Perceptions, an experienced, Wisconsin-based educational research firm, provides third-party credibility and a deep reservoir of knowledge about education in the state. This tool quantifies reasons for employee departures over time to

produce trend analyses and helps remove uncomfortable power dynamics present in traditional employee exit protocols — if the protocols occur at all.

In addition, School Perceptions can produce helpful reports that allow school districts to compare their data with that of similar districts. For instance, these comparisons can help reveal if compensation-related factors are a more substantial concern for your district's departing employees than employees leaving similar districts.



In recent years, the Wisconsin Center for Education Research has shown that over 3,000 teachers — close to 8% of the state's entire teaching workforce — left their jobs for reasons other than retirement.

■ **The effects of turnover**

School districts allocate about 80% of their budgets for staff and personnel, but keeping the best and the brightest is an all-too-familiar struggle for many Wisconsin districts.

This is especially true for classroom teachers, the most crucial school-related factor for achievement. In recent years, the Wisconsin Center for Education Research has shown that over 3,000 teachers — close to 8% of the state's entire teaching workforce — left their jobs for reasons other than retirement.

Hiring is expensive. Education finance researchers found that it costs over \$14,000 to replace just one exiting teacher, but this can reach up to \$50,000 for the most talented and impactful staff. Of this cost, about \$8,200 is spent on the time and resources it takes for principals and peer teachers to sift through applications, schedule interviews and bring new staff on board.

Turnover damages achievement scores in math and English language arts. Meanwhile, challenges are on the horizon regarding the pool of future teachers. The Milwaukee



Annual Board Development Tool

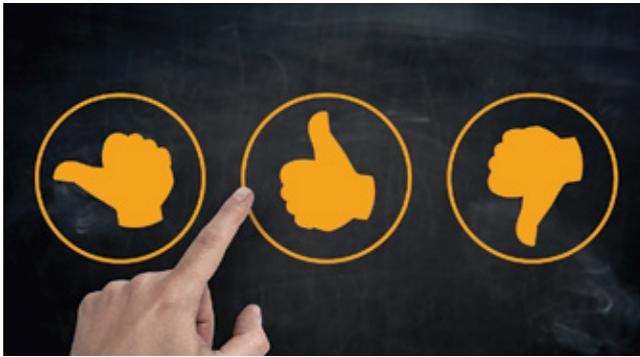
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“We’re confident that this survey will be invaluable as districts work to improve and enhance their schools.”

Journal Sentinel tracked enrollment in teacher education programs and found that enrollment is dropping, fewer high school students express an interest in the teaching profession, and the largest share of teacher turnover is among early- and mid-career professionals.

Beyond the classroom

Research mainly focuses on teacher retention, but there are substantial job pressures across districts. This is worrisome because the pool of replacement candidates is shallow, making competition fierce.

- A Wisconsin Center for Education Research publication noted that some principals report feeling that they are never “off duty,” lack

privacy and feel obligated to respond to out-of-school needs.

- Fewer than 40% of schools nationwide have a full-time nurse. According to National Public Radio, over 25% of schools have no nurse at all, despite a global pandemic.
- The Hechinger Report, an education journalism nonprofit, found that student-to-guidance counselor ratios are at their highest since 1986, even though they are a critical part of schools’ college and career planning, testing, anti-bullying efforts and course registration.
- A San Francisco State University professor determined that student-to-school psychologist ratios

have reached nearly double the recommendations while, in the meantime, adolescent suicide rates, anxiety and stress mount.

- School social workers serve on the frontlines to provide mental health needs and maintain school safety. However, Wisconsin Public Radio used data from the Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction to reveal that there are only 619 licensed social workers across more than 2,200 Wisconsin public schools.
- School bus drivers can be eligible for signing bonuses, guaranteed minimum hours and paid training. Yet, according to multiple Wisconsin media outlets, a shortage of drivers results in more children spending additional time on longer, consolidated routes.

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What can be done?

The good news is that turnover is manageable. Research published by the Institute for Wisconsin’s Future highlighted that more than half of teachers leave their classrooms for non-financial reasons, and 57% of exiting staff said something could have been done to change their minds about leaving. If your employees consistently report that student discipline was a major factor in their reason to leave, the district may choose to allocate more focused training, research, professional development and peer mentoring to help alleviate these concerns.

“An employee exit survey is a tool districts have asked about, and we’re excited to be able to provide it. We’re confident that this survey



“Not only will school officials be able to analyze their own data, they will also be able to compare their own data to similar schools, which helps create context.”

will be invaluable as districts work to improve and enhance their schools,” says Bill Foster, School Perceptions founder and president. “Not only will school officials be able to analyze their own data, they will also be able to compare their

own data to similar schools, which helps create context.”

Want to know more about this survey tool and others in use by school districts across the state? Call School Perceptions at 262-644-4300, or email them at info@schoolperceptions.com. ■



Sample Wisconsin school board policies addressing employee exit interviews and surveys are available upon request by contacting the WASB.

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WE ARE LISTENING!

RERIC partners with rural Wisconsin

Lynn Armitage

A few years back, Jack Jorgensen and his colleagues were driving back to Madison from the Wisconsin Rural Schools Alliance Conference in Stevens Point when they had an epiphany.

“We realized we were the only individuals representing UW-Madison,” recalls Jorgensen, co-director of the Wisconsin Collaborative Education Research Network at the time. “It was suddenly so apparent that the School of Education should play a more prominent role in rural Wisconsin schools and communities through research and outreach.”

Since that “aha!” moment in the car, it has been full speed ahead. In the fall of 2018, the Wisconsin Center for Education Research launched the Rural Education Research & Implementation Center. The first-of-its-kind center in Wisconsin is dedicated to improving educational outcomes for rural students, families and schools through rigorous, partnership-based research.

ERIC is led by co-directors Craig Albers and Andy Garbacz, who are both associate professors of educational psychology at UW-Madison. It is a full-circle moment for Albers, whose parents still live on 80 acres of land near Medford, Wis., where he grew up.

“It’s given me an extra hop in my step because now I have this personal connection to my work,” Albers says.

Garbacz also has a rural background and worked at the National Center for Research on Rural Education while he was a postdoctoral fellow. In building capacity for ERIC, the co-directors have operated on two guiding principles — to listen and to establish trust with rural residents and education leaders.

“We know from Katherine Cramer’s book, ‘The Politics of Resentment,’ how crucial it is to establish trust with rural communities,” Albers says. “We’ve made it a priority to talk to people in rural Wisconsin, get to know them and hear their challenges. People tell us, ‘Thanks for recognizing that we’re here.’”



Dr. Andy Garbacz (left) and Dr. Craig Albers

“We’ve made it a priority to talk to people in rural Wisconsin, get to know them and hear their challenges.

People tell us, ‘Thanks for recognizing that we’re here.’”

■ Collaboration is the cornerstone

Rural Wisconsin faces many educational challenges. How does ERIC determine which of those need immediate attention? Through numerous focus groups and conversations with stakeholders across the state, the ERIC team identified five urgent research strands to ground the center: mental and behavioral health; teacher preparation, recruitment and retention; STEM education; equity and diversity; and research preparation and training.

It appears to be a heavy job for one research center. However, ERIC’s core team of Albers, Garbacz, Jorgensen and project manager Jackie Roessler quickly discovered that collaborations and partnerships are the keys to success.

Garbacz is especially grateful for a strong contingent of hard-working graduate and undergraduate students enthusiastic about rural education.

“It’s so fun to see the progress we’ve made in expanding the reach to students on campus,” he explains. “They are the future, the directors and individuals who will one day make decisions about what gets funded.”

According to Albers, the concept of ERIC is to bring people together from different areas. To do that successfully requires a skilled match-maker like Jorgensen, who is ERIC’s associate director for outreach and networking. “My role has been to make new connections and leverage relationships I have already established,” says Jorgensen, who facilitated key relationships on campus and with external partners while at the Wisconsin Collaborative Education Research Network.

One longstanding relationship Jorgensen developed is with Wisconsin Rural Schools Alliance Executive Director Kim Kaukl, who says, “Jack and I have been talking for many years about how to get better research in rural Wisconsin.” Kaukl is especially concerned about the flight of families out of rural Wisconsin due to a lack of employment opportunities.

“If we can work with legislators on rural economic development, it will help people stay in rural Wisconsin and stem the tide of declining enrollment, one of the biggest problems facing rural schools,” Kaukl says.

“We are so appreciative of ERIC advocating for us at a higher level,” says Ben Niehaus, superintendent of the School District of Florence County and president of the executive board for the rural schools’ alliance. “We cover large areas up here, but our voice is small.”

The annual Teacher Speakout! is ERIC’s signature listening and learning event. The multi-day symposium on the UW-Madison campus offers a collaborative environment for the state’s rural K-12 teachers, education researchers and state policymakers

Albers and Garbacz report that mental and behavioral health in rural Wisconsin is a “public health crisis,” and RERIC is leading the charge to make mental health support accessible for students and families in rural areas.



to discuss the most pressing education issues facing Wisconsin’s rural classrooms. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, Teacher Speakout! did not take place this fall.

■ A focus on mental and behavioral health issues

Albers and Garbacz report that mental and behavioral health in rural Wisconsin is a “public health crisis,” and RERIC is leading the charge to make mental health support accessible for students and families in rural areas. Most mental health programs are developed for larger communities that have the bandwidth to offer backup support from school psychologists, social workers or counselors.

“In small, rural communities and schools, these mental health professionals are not available,” says Albers. “We hear stories about families in rural school districts that have to drive two hours each way to take their children to a mental health professional. When you do the math, it’s

an all-day affair to get there, sit through the appointment and drive back home.”

To help resolve the dire need for more customized mental health programs in rural communities, RERIC launched FOCUS Partnerships — one of its largest projects to date. The project, which stands for families, organizations, community, university and schools, is made possible by a grant from Grand Challenges, a special initiative through UW-Madison’s School of Education that is intended “to identify and address critical problems in education, health and the arts.”

After three years of collaboration with rural parents, teachers and community stakeholders through FOCUS Partnerships, RERIC is ready to implement mental health programs centered on prevention, promotion and early intervention within rural schools this fall.

“Of course, everything is up in the air with the pandemic,” says Albers. “But we hope to evaluate the

effectiveness of our approaches to rural mental health issues and get feedback from families, educators and students to see if we can customize our programs even further according to the unique characteristics of each individual school district. It really is an iterative process.”

An important component of RERIC’s FOCUS project is the development of mental and behavioral health literacy materials with a twist.

“We want to be a clearinghouse for people, to connect them with our partners and the vast resources we have available to us through UW-Madison.”



Albers asserts that most literacy programs focus on kids in crisis. RERIC aims to focus on kids before they get to the crisis stage.

“We often hear from educators and parents, ‘I am not a mental health professional. I don’t know what to do,’” Albers says. “So we have designed our mental health literacy piece to give them the knowledge and skills to be involved early on with their students’ and children’s mental and behavioral health, and well-being issues, before they may have to seek out a psychologist.”

■ **RERIC’s long-term vision**

RERIC has made strides in the two years since the center was launched at WCER. Important collaborations are underway with other stakeholders in rural education, such as the Department of Public Instruction, the Wisconsin Response to Intervention Center and the University Alliance at UW-Madison.

“If the Department of Public Instruction or a district in northwestern Wisconsin, for example, are facing some challenges, we would love for them to think of RERIC first when they are looking for answers,” says Albers, adding that if RERIC cannot provide the solution, they will find someone who can. “We want to be a clearinghouse for people, to connect them with our partners and the vast resources we have available to us through UW-Madison.”

Most importantly, Albers and Garbacz want educators and parents in rural communities to know that the RERIC team is always available to listen.

“Tell us what your issues and strengths are. We will work with you and give you some ideas,” says Albers. “Let’s partner to figure this out.” ■

Lynn Armitage is a senior university relations specialist with the Wisconsin Center for Education Research at UW-Madison.

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YOUR SUPERINTENDENT MATCHMAKER

How the WASB Superintendent Search Services helps boards find the right fit

The selection of a new superintendent is among the most critical tasks a school board can face.

When confronting this decision, board members have plenty of questions. The first is whether to hire a firm to assist with the search for a new chief educational leader.

No matter what it decides, a board should enter the process with its eyes open. Hiring a new superintendent is complicated, time consuming and calls on a wide variety of skill sets.

■ Go it alone?

Hiring a superintendent involves much more than simply posting the vacancy and interviewing candidates, says Louise Blankenheim, a WASB Search Services consultant who was a superintendent.

“Posting the position is just the first of many steps,” she says. “We screen applicants and work with boards to find the right questions to build a profile of your ideal superintendent.”

A superintendent search requires significant time and effort, causing

board members to commit many hours over the course of several months. Use of the WASB Search Services can reduce stress on board members, freeing them to conduct their normal board business and personal lives.

Even if they believe they have the skills to conduct a search themselves, boards should consider the burden such a search will place on their staff.

Finally, a consultant can ensure that each candidate is on a level playing field, which may not happen if some board members have significant com-

Even if they believe they have the skills to conduct a search themselves, boards should consider the burden such a search will place on their staff.

munication with a particular candidate.

Ultimately, many boards decide their schools — and, taking a long-term view, their taxpayers — are better served by hiring a search firm. Why should you choose the WASB?

■ What can the WASB do for you?

To take a big-picture approach, the WASB can give your board confidence in a time-tested process that includes a series of deadlines so you know you're on the right track. It helped put an otherwise daunting task into perspective for Cindy Milgram. She's the board president in the Richmond School District, which worked with the WASB in 2019 to find a new superintendent.

"What was critical was the WASB providing a schedule of activities with dates attached to them," she says. "It set the pace and expectation for how the process would unfold."

At the same time it gave the process structure, the WASB made sure Richmond's board was involved at each step.

"The board really was hands on through the WASB experience," Milgram says. "They helped us write a job description and very much took in Richmond's expectations for every stakeholder."

■ The search process

First, consider the team that leads your superintendent search. In addition to their years of experience in Wisconsin, our consultants can give their full focus to your district.

"This is our full-time job," as consultant and former superintendent George Steffen puts it. "The WASB doesn't go away."

A critical first step in this process involves the WASB reaching out to individuals who have expressed interest in a superintendency. Each new WASB search is put in front of this cohort of more than 200 administrators, inside and outside Wisconsin.

The WASB also reaches outside the state through its membership in the National Affiliation of Superintendent Searchers and works with

other state associations to find candidates. All told, Wisconsin vacancies are seen by candidates around the region and country.

And by putting its focus on the needs of a district, instead of a job candidate, the WASB can help boards find the right candidates for them. "We work for school boards, not candidates," Steffen says. "We don't owe anything to any candidate."

Another important part of any search is the receipt of applications and the subsequent review of the candidates. The WASB consultants are in the field every day and know many of the candidates seeking a position. This insight is helpful as board members read application materials, many of which look very similar in content.

In its drive to help boards find the best fit for their unique district, the WASB uses input from the board and community to develop a candidate profile.

In addition, the WASB consultants can answer questions about candidates and react to responses provided by the applicants to the required written essay questions. This service is invaluable and can protect the board from a questionable hire.

Once the pool of candidates is

narrowed, the consultant will assist the school board in developing interview questions and completing at least two rounds of interviews.

Finding the questions that elicit meaningful answers are important, says Blankenheim. "If you ask questions right out of leadership 101, you're going to get leadership 101 answers," she says.

Interviews are also a good time to impress candidates, and knowing what to ask — and, sometimes more importantly, what not to ask — can help attract a candidate. "You want to paint the picture of a district with a board who will support the candidate," Blankenheim says.

The consultant will schedule all interviews, make interview arrangements with the applicants and prepare the school board for the interviews.

Between the initial and final interviews, the consultants will conduct criminal, financial and educational background checks. These background checks protect the district from an applicant with a less than stellar background. In addition, the



By putting its focus on the needs of a district, instead of a job candidate, the WASB can help boards find the right candidate for them.

WASB consultant will assist the board in making telephone reference checks on each of the finalists.

After the final interviews, the consultant can assist the board in assessing the candidates and offer input into the final selection. It is

important to stress that the WASB consultant does not select the new superintendent; this is clearly the school board's responsibility and decision.

Finally, if requested, the WASB will assist the board in arranging a

site visit to the finalist's current district before offering an employment contract.

The WASB also offers a guarantee to help boards feel confident in their choice. If the superintendent hired as a result of a WASB search leaves in

THE SEARCH PROCESS

How the WASB Superintendent Search Services team guides districts through the search process

PLANNING:

The first planning meeting involves determining the extent and the type of community and student involvement in the process, budgeting and scheduling activities, reviewing existing board policy, and examining commitments of individual board members. A subsequent planning meeting entails choosing five or six candidates for the first interview round and reviewing interview questions and procedures.

PROFILE:

The consultant assists the board in arriving at the profile of the desired person based on information from focus groups and the school board.

ADVERTISING:

Advertising is usually done on the WASB, Wisconsin Association of School District Administrators, and other websites. Print advertising is optional.

INTERNAL REVIEW:

An internal review can be done by a district committee as approved by the board. The WASB search staff provides a rating form.

FIRST INTERVIEWS:

The WASB schedules interviews, provides an interview script and an orientation for conducting a productive interview. This orientation includes tips on the traps to avoid and what to listen for in the interview. One or two finalists and an alternate are chosen.

FURTHER SAFEGUARDS:

The consultant coaches board members on effective reference checking techniques. The WASB conducts an extensive criminal and credit background check. If the finalists pass these steps, they move to the second interview.

SECOND INTERVIEWS:

The school board and the consultant

plan the second round of interviews, including who will be involved and the day's schedule. There may be feedback to the board from those participating in the process. The board prioritizes their choices.

BOARD VISIT TO THE FINALIST'S DISTRICT (OPTIONAL):

Board members decide who will visit the district of their first-choice finalist.

CONTRACT:

The school board or its designee negotiates a contract with the final candidate.

THE NEW SUPERINTENDENT:

The WASB may assist the district with announcing the new superintendent to the public and the media. Transition services are available during and after the search process is completed. Some transition services may be team building between the board and the new superintendent and a review of the focus group data to help establish the district's future direction. □



A comprehensive reference guide is provided early in the process.

less than two years, the WASB will perform another search. It will be complimentary, except for direct expenses such as advertising, travel and background checks.

■ **Comprehensive service**

The WASB provides additional assistance throughout the search process. For example, a comprehensive reference guide is provided early in the process. The guide includes information on how to conduct interviews, tips for conducting reference checks, legal advice concerning search activities, a list of sample interview questions, copies of all documents used in the search, and a comprehensive list of salary and fringe benefit comparables that can be used to develop a contract with the new superintendent.

The WASB Search Services team is comprised of experienced superintendents who possess extensive knowledge about the position and understand the skill set needed to be successful. Their day-to-day interaction with applicants and school boards across the state provide insight that is hard to match and cannot be duplicated using an internal search process.

A quality search does not end with the selection of a new superintendent. School boards must strive to create the atmosphere and opportunities to facilitate a smooth transition from the outgoing to the incoming superintendent. The WASB consultants can play an important role in this transition by providing a goal-setting meeting with the board and the new superintendent.

Finally, the WASB services do not end with the search. As the school board's membership organization, the new superintendent and the board will have regular interactions with the association. The WASB does not conduct the search and walk away — but rather strives to make the new relationship successful.

Yes, a superintendent search is time consuming and may be stressful. However, the WASB Search Services are structured to provide professional guidance to the search while leaving the key decisions in the hands of the school board. A quality superintendent search can ensure a successful outcome for the school board and the students, staff and community.

For more information about WASB Search Services, visit WASB.org. ■



Find the right match.

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WASB Webinars and Online Workshops

The complete WASB webinar and online workshop schedule is available at WASB.org.

DEALING WITH CONFLICT ONLINE WORKSHOP

Wednesday, Dec. 2, 7 pm (*Registration is required*)

Effectively dealing with conflict helps school boards stay focused on the core goals they are tasked with achieving. Louise Blankenheim and Cheryl Stinski, WASB consultants, will discuss what causes differences to escalate into destructive conflict and share good practices to help you manage conflict in ways that keep people working together productively.

SCHOOL FINANCE 101 ONLINE WORKSHOP: 10 Things Every Board Member Should Know

Wednesday, Dec. 9, 7 pm (*Registration is required*)

New board members are asked to learn new jargon while making million-dollar decisions that impact school children, buildings and infrastructure and the local taxpayers' money. Get a handle on school finance by covering 10 topics that are essential to a better understanding so that you can talk finances with your constituents and feel more confident in your decisions.

WASB LEGAL AND LEGISLATIVE VIDEO UPDATE

Wednesday, Dec. 16, 12 pm (*Registration not required*)

Each month, WASB attorneys and government relations staff provide a complimentary update on recent legal and legislative issues.

STRATEGIC PLANNING ONLINE WORKSHOP: What Does Quality Planning Look Like and Why Should You Do It Now?

Thursday, Dec. 17, 7 pm (*Registration is required*)

In a time of great educational upheaval, this is precisely the right time to plan for changing our schools for the better. As anthropologist Margaret Mead said, "Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world. Indeed, it is the only thing that ever has."

This online workshop is designed to address: what quality strategic planning and strategic thinking looks like; strategic frameworks; how strategic planning addresses major issues in schools, such as racial justice, equity and the pandemic; the differences between strategic planning and tactical planning; and how to monitor progress toward goals and outcomes.

Gullicksrud Joins WASB Consultant Team

Cheryl Gullicksrud has joined the WASB as a Search Services and Organizational Services Consultant. Over the past 36 years, Gullicksrud has served Wisconsin schools in a variety of positions, including business education teacher, career and technical education coordinator, district assessment coordinator, curriculum coordinator, principal, superintendent and CESA administrator.



At the WASB, she'll be specializing in superintendent searches, board and administrator relationships, and school district fiscal operations. Cheryl can be contacted at cgullicksrud@wasb.org. □

Blankenheim to Lead Team in 2021

In January 2021, Louise Blankenheim will take over from Guy Leavitt as director of WASB Organizational Consulting Services. Blankenheim will manage the WASB's organizational, governance and superintendent search services. She can be reached at lblankenheim@wasb.org.



The WASB thanks Guy Leavitt and Roger Foegen, who also retired from WASB Consulting Services in 2020, best wishes in their retirement. □



WASB Connection Podcasts Discuss Stress, State Education Convention

In a recent WASB Connection Podcast, WASB consultants discussed the impact of stress on school leaders and how to mitigate it. It was followed by another podcast that focused on what to expect at the upcoming virtual 2021 State Education Convention. Visit WASB.org or search for the WASB Connection Podcast wherever you listen.

Congratulations to Our School Leaders

Recognizing the 12 school board members who reached Level 5 of the WASB Member Recognition Program

Congratulations to the following school board members who achieved Level 5 recognition — the highest tier possible — this year in the WASB Member Recognition Program. Members earn points for

participating in WASB and National School Boards Association activities, including attending events, serving on committees and serving as a delegate to the WASB Delegate Assembly.

David Schmidt, Chequamegon
Diane Hoffman, Shawano
Barbara Rodgers, Algoma
Micki Swoboda, Algoma

Amy Riddle-Swanson, Menomonie Area
Anita Jagodzinski, Holmen
Holly Thurow-Riahi, Brillion
Earl Wallace, Kickapoo Area

James Knutson, Tri-County Area
Karla Walker, Pardeeville Area
Scott Cincotta, Union Grove J1
Kevin Hermening, Mosinee

Want to Rate Your Board's Effectiveness?



It can be hard for a school board to rate its own skills and performance. School

Perceptions and the Wisconsin Association of School Boards have recently updated their Annual Board Development Tool. It allows board members to rate their work in policy, culture, planning, data-driven

decision making and five other dimensions.

The intent of the online survey tool, which is aligned with the Key Work of School Boards, is to give your board an opportunity to clearly see which areas of governance you agree on and which areas require more discussion. It is intended to be the start of a conversation at the local level.

► *Take the survey each year to find out how you are progressing.*

NEW FOR 2020-21:

- **Enhanced Administration** — School Perceptions designed a web-based Administrator Dashboard that allows a district to easily manage their Annual Board Development Tool. The dashboard allows a district representative to preview the survey, send out the survey in multiple ways, follow who has responded, send reminder emails to board members who have not yet completed the survey, and access real-time results as they become available.
- **Expanded Questions** — The WASB added questions about a board's role in meeting the needs of all students to foster conversations about how resources are allocated.

The tool is complimentary for all Wisconsin school boards. Information on how to access the tool was sent to school districts in November. *Contact the WASB for more information.*



Celebrating 100

In recognition of the upcoming centennial anniversary, the WASB is featuring a decade of highlights from the association’s past in each issue of the *Wisconsin School News* through early 2021. In this issue, we cross the threshold of the new millennium ...

2000s No event shaped the decade as much as the terrorist attacks of Sept. 11, 2001. Like Pearl Harbor 60 years earlier, the strike on U.S. soil galvanized the country and the war on terror began in earnest.

The new millennium began with the swearing in of George W. Bush as president after the U.S. Supreme

Court settled a recount dispute in Florida in *Bush v. Gore*. Eight years later, a global economic plummet marked the end of Bush’s presidency. U.S. Sen. Barack Obama of Illinois promised hope and that November he handily defeated Arizona Sen. John McCain by more than nine million votes and 188 electoral college votes, becoming the nation’s first Black president. □



In 2006, Northland Pines High School proudly opened the first LEED-certified school in the state and the first Gold Certified public high school in the country.

Oshkosh West High School students work on a Project Lead the Way project in 2009.

In 2004, the Kern Family Foundation began providing financial support for Wisconsin schools to implement the program, which had begun in 1997, to support engineering education.



School gardens and outdoor education have a long history in Wisconsin public schools. The first major school garden movement in the U.S. began in the late 1800s and culminated with a “U.S. Garden Army” of school children producing food for the World War I effort. Here a Madison public school student works in his school garden in 2005.



■ THE WASB

2000. Citing a need to consolidate services, the Board of Directors closes a satellite office in Wausau.

2002. A potential \$1.1 billion state budget deficit prompts delegates to oppose further K-12 cuts with a La Crosse delegate maintaining, “We can’t educate children with more cuts.”

2004. The WASB leads opposition to a taxpayer bill of rights (TABOR) constitutional amendment that would have reduced local school board control.

2005. The Board of Directors hires John Ashley to be the association’s third executive director.

2007. Henry Winkler, aka “The Fonz,” keynotes at the State Education Convention.

2008. The WASB focuses on helping school districts implement the state’s new PI 34 teacher licensure rules.

2009. The WASB unsuccessfully fights to keep the qualified economic offer provision of teacher contract law.

■ OUR STATE

2000. UW-Madison wins its second straight Rose Bowl game.

2001. State Sen. Margaret Farrow becomes Wisconsin’s first female lieutenant governor after Lt. Gov. Scott McCallum takes over from Gov. Tommy Thompson, who left to become the U.S. Secretary of Health and Human Services.

2001. Tests show that 3% of the 446,000 deer killed by Wisconsin hunters are infected with chronic wasting disease.

2002. Baseball’s All-Star game, played in Milwaukee, ends in an 11-inning tie when both teams run out of pitchers.

2003. The 2003-05 state budget eliminates the state’s obligation to pay two-thirds of school costs.

2004. Louis Butler, Jr. becomes the first Black justice on the Wisconsin Supreme Court.

2006. Principal John Klang loses his life after heroically confronting an armed student at Weston High School in Cazenovia.

2007. A 20-year-old, off-duty county deputy murders six Crandon High School students and recent graduates and critically injures a seventh at a homecoming party.

2008. Wisconsin Dells’ Lake Delton completely drains after record rains cause its banks to burst; General Motors closes its Janesville plant, ending 100 years of auto manufacturing in the state; and Aaron Rodgers becomes the Packers’ starting quarterback.

2009. The first Little Free Library appears in Hudson.

■ OUR NATION

2000. Dow Jones hits 11,722; US Census counts 281,421,906 residents — a 13% increase from 1990.

2001. Congress reauthorizes the Elementary and Secondary Education Act as the No Child Left Behind Act with demands for more accountability and testing; and “The Producers” wins the Tony award for best musical.

2003. Saddam Hussein, Iraq’s deposed leader, is captured by U.S. troops; space shuttle Columbia disintegrates as it re-enters the atmosphere, killing all onboard; and Beyoncé releases her first solo studio album.

2004. Mark Zuckerberg launches Facebook.

2005. Hurricane Katrina devastates New Orleans and the Mississippi Gulf Coast, killing nearly 2,000 people and causing \$81 billion in damage.

2006. Jack Dorsey and two colleagues pitch the idea for a new online platform called “twtr,” now known as Twitter.

2007. A Minnesota bridge on I-35 over the Mississippi River collapses, killing 13 and putting a focus on the nation’s aging infrastructure.

2009. Pilot Chesley Sullenberger and co-pilot Jeff Skiles (from Oregon, Wis.) successfully crash-land US Airways Flight 1549 on the Hudson River.

2020 Election Analysis

Looking at the results and what impacts they may have



In this month's column, we take a look at the results of the November 2020 general election and the likely impact those results and subsequent decisions will have on the state Legislature and Congress in terms of education policy.

State

At the state level, Republicans have maintained strong control of both the Senate and Assembly, but did not win enough seats in either house for a two-thirds supermajority and the ability to override Gov. Tony Evers' vetoes without Democratic lawmaker votes.

The dynamic of control of state government split between a Democratic governor and Republican legislature will not change in the coming session. Compromise will be necessary to accomplish any changes requiring legislation.

Republicans picked up two seats in the Senate while Democrats defeated two Assembly Republican incumbents. Right now, the Republican majorities stand at 21-12 in the Senate and 61-38 in the Assembly.

Current State Senate Majority Leader Scott Fitzgerald (R-Juneau)

was elected to the U.S. House of Representatives to fill the seat of retiring Congressman James Sensenbrenner. Fitzgerald is likely to resign in January, creating a vacancy until a special election can be held to select his replacement. Because Fitzgerald's 13th Senate District seat leans heavily Republican, we expect the Senate Republican majority will temporarily drop to 20-12 in January and rebound to 21-12 when Fitzgerald's successor is seated.

There will be many new faces in the next state Legislature, a bit unusual this far into the cycle of redistricting, with current district maps having been in place for nine years. There will be eight new senators and 16 newcomers in the state Assembly when the 2021-22 legislative session convenes in January.

All four legislative caucuses (one each in the Senate and Assembly for Republican and Democratic lawmakers) have selected their leaders for 2021-22. The Senate Republican caucus was the only caucus to see significant changes with Sen. Devin LeMahieu (R-Oostburg) being elected majority leader and Sen. Chris Kapenga (R-Delafield)

elected president. Many Capitol observers suggest this signals the Senate will be more conservative.

Sen. Janet Bewley (D-Mason, minority leader), Rep. Robin Vos (R-Rochester, Assembly speaker) and Rep. Gordon Hintz (D-Oshkosh, minority leader) retained their leadership positions.

As expected, Rep. John Nygren (R-Marinette) was reappointed Assembly co-chair of the budget-writing Joint Finance Committee. He will be joined by Sen. Howard Marklein (R-Spring Green) as the co-chairs of the committee that will lead the Legislature's work on the 2021-23 state budget. A certified public accountant and certified fraud examiner with experience in conducting annual school district audits, Marklein has been a member of the Joint Finance Committee since 2015.

Watch the Legislative Update blog for other Joint Finance Committee assignments as well as the announcements of committee chairs. There is particular interest in who will replace retiring Sen. Luther Olsen (R-Berlin) as the Senate Education Committee chair.

In regards to plans for the next

The dynamic of control of state government split between a Democratic governor and Republican legislature will not change in the coming session. Compromise will be necessary to accomplish any changes requiring legislation.

AS A CANDIDATE, PRESIDENT-ELECT JOE BIDEN called for big increases for federal education programs like Title I and special education (IDEA) in contrast to the cuts, particularly in Title I funding, proposed by his predecessor.

state budget, updated state revenue projections had not been released as of this writing but were due to be released on November 20. Those forecasts will hopefully clarify the state's budget outlook as we head into 2021-23 state budget discussions.

■ **School referendum results**

Voters on Tuesday, Nov. 3 continued the strong overall support for local school referendums seen in recent elections, approving 43 of the 51 school referendums (84.3%) on the ballot.

Fifteen of 19 requests to exceed state-imposed revenue limits on a non-recurring (i.e., temporary or time-limited) basis were approved, a 79% passage rate. Nine of 10 requests to exceed state-imposed revenue limits on a recurring (i.e., permanent) basis were approved, a 90% passage rate, while 17 of 20 (85%) school district borrowing referendums were approved.

■ **Federal**

As a candidate, President-elect Joe Biden called for big increases for federal education programs like Title I and special education (IDEA) in contrast to the cuts, particularly in Title I funding, proposed by his predecessor. Ultimately, President Donald Trump's cuts were rejected by Congress. The Biden proposals also likely face Congressional resistance, especially if Republicans hold onto control of the U.S. Senate, which now appears to be likely determined by two January run-off elections in Georgia.

A Biden presidency will bring a new U.S. secretary of education, who would almost certainly look to reverse initiatives and guidance advanced by current Sec. Betsy DeVos while also reinstating Obama-era policies on Title IX, racial disparities in school discipline and others. President-elect Biden's appointee would also likely oppose expansion of vouchers and other privatization efforts backed by DeVos.

The President-elect has voiced support for additional COVID-related relief aid to school districts, something the Trump administration and House Democrats were unable to agree to before the election. As a candidate, Biden endorsed a plan to provide at least \$88 billion in additional federal funding to help stabilize state education funding and pay a share of the costs for protective equipment, ventilation systems, reduced class sizes and other expenses needed to safely operate schools during the pandemic. Extending broadband access to all areas and students across the nation would also take a higher priority.

There will be a new education committee chair in the U.S. Senate as current chair Sen. Lamar Alexander (R-TN) and senior Republican member Sen. Mike Enzi (R-WY) are retiring after the current session ends. Alexander, a former U.S. Secretary of Education, played a key role in guiding the enactment of the Every Student Succeeds Act in 2015. ■

RESOLUTIONS ADVANCE TO THE ASSEMBLY

The WASB Policy and Resolutions Committee met in three virtual meetings to evaluate resolutions from school boards throughout the state. They advanced all the submitted resolutions to the Delegate Assembly in January, although with significant modifications for some. WASB Delegates should look for their delegate packets in the mail or on the WASB website with more information on the following resolutions:

1. One Cent Sales Tax for School Infrastructure and Technology
2. Broadband Access
3. Enrollment Hold Harmless to Address Emergencies
4. Instruction on Indigenous Tribes and Bands — Act 31
5. Special Education Flexibility to Address Emergencies
6. Assessment and Report Card Waivers
7. Rehiring Retired Staff
8. District Superintendent Evaluations
9. Comprehensive School Safety Legislation
10. School District Mascots, Logos and Imagery

The WASB Delegate Assembly will be held in a virtual format on Wednesday, Jan. 20, 2021.



Legal Implications of Employee Handbooks

The relationship between school districts and their employees is governed by a number of sources, including federal, state and local laws and regulations; contracts; and board policies. Another source of governance is the employee handbook. Since 2011, Wisconsin Act 10 and the elimination of collective bargaining agreements as the primary document outlining the wages and benefits, hours of work and other terms and conditions of employment for many district employees, employee handbooks have largely taken over that function. This Legal Comment will review the purpose of employee handbooks, legal issues involved in drafting them, and specific provisions that should be included in a handbook.¹

■ Drafting considerations for employee handbooks

Employee handbooks serve several important purposes. They serve as a means of communicating to employees the essential terms of their employment, such as wages, benefits, hours of work and time off. Handbooks also establish the expectations a district has regarding the conduct of its employees, such as attendance and use of electronic communications. Finally, some laws require school boards to adopt specific policies related to employment, such as policies on drugs and alcohol and discrimination and harassment. Handbooks provide a means of communicating those policies to employees and processes by which districts can comply with those laws.

Handbooks should be easy for employees to understand and, therefore, should be written differently than formal board policies or individual contracts. As such, districts should draft handbooks in plain

language, define commonly used terms clearly, and use those terms consistently. For example, the use of the term “school year employees” is ambiguous and could mean employees who are scheduled to work during the school fiscal year (July 1 to June 30) or those who are regularly scheduled to work only during the 9-10 months a year when students are in attendance.

Because handbooks are one of several sources of employee governance, they must reflect legal standards and be consistent with individual contracts and board policies. This does not mean that handbooks should be a pure recitation of those laws, contracts or policies. For example, handbooks often provide elaboration on how board policies are implemented, such as with respect to sick and vacation leave.

Given the different sources governing district employees, handbooks should contain disclaimers that in the event the handbook conflicts with individual contracts or board policies, the latter documents control. This is particularly true regarding insurance benefits. Handbooks commonly include information about which employees are eligible for insurance benefits, particularly health and dental benefits. However, most districts provide benefits to employees by contract with an insurance carrier, and those benefits are subject to the terms of the applicable plan documents. Districts might have difficulty summarizing the details of comprehensive insurance plan documents in a handbook. Additionally, plan documents can change over time. Therefore, handbooks should contain a disclaimer that the terms of applicable insurance policies control if they conflict with handbook provi-

sions. Handbooks should also contain language that explains that all insurance benefits are subject to the terms, conditions and determinations of the insurance carrier and the insurance plan.

Handbooks should also contain a provision noting that the handbook is not an exhaustive list of matters related to employment. This is particularly true with respect to handbook sections detailing misconduct which could lead to disciplinary action. No handbook section can enumerate every possible form of misconduct.

Board policies often change during the year, particularly if districts are using a policy service. Because of this, districts should also review their handbooks regularly, particularly when corresponding board policies change, to ensure that the handbook stays consistent with board policy. Handbooks should contain a provision that they can be changed at any time at the board’s discretion. Electronic or digital handbooks are a useful format because they can easily be updated, distributed and received by employees during the year, without having to print out a new paper handbook for each employee whenever an employment policy changes.

■ At-will employment standard

Employees in Wisconsin are at-will employees, unless a district changes this status by policy, contract, handbook or course of conduct. Under at-will employment, employees and employers may terminate employment at any time, without prior notice, for any reason (so long as the reason is not illegal) or no reason. At-will employment maximizes a district’s flexibility in managing its workforce.

Each school board must determine what standard it will use for discipline and discharge for each of its various classifications of employees. Whatever standard a board chooses, the board must make sure that the handbook is consistent in that respect with any applicable board policies and individual contracts.

If a board has established at-will employment as its governing standard, it must make sure that the handbook does not undermine that standard and inadvertently create a higher standard for discipline or discharge, such as just cause. In certain circumstances, courts have interpreted handbooks as creating either express or implied contracts if they contain provisions through which a court could reasonably infer that the employer and the employee intended to bind each other by the handbook.² If a court concludes that a handbook creates a contract, employees would have the ability to sue the district for breach of contract if the district failed to comply with the terms of the handbook, particularly with respect to an employee's termination.

In order to avoid this result, handbooks should contain a provision that the handbook is not intended to create any implied or express contract with the employee and does not establish an expectation of continued employment or otherwise alter an employee's at-will status. A recent Wisconsin Court of Appeals case highlights the importance of using such language.³ In that case, a teacher sued her former employing school district, claiming that the district's handbook contained a whistleblower policy and that non-renewing the teacher's contract in violation of that policy was a breach of contract. The court held that the employee did not comply with the requirements of the whistleblower policy. Additionally, the court noted that the handbook contained disclaimer language stating that the handbook did not constitute a separate contract of employment and that employment

may be terminated at any time, with or without cause, which suggests that, even if the employee had complied with the requirements of the whistleblower policy, the court would have concluded that the handbook did not create an employment contract.

Provisions that are routinely found in handbooks — mostly as a vestige of districts' collective bargaining agreements — that can erode an employee's at-will status include the following:

- Promises or suggestions of employment longevity, security or continued employment;
- References to “probationary” or “trial” periods of employment. This language suggests that when the employee completes the probationary period, the employee has achieved a new status other than at-will employment;
- Use of the word “permanent” in conjunction with references to employee status;
- Use of the terms “cause” or “just cause” regarding termination of employees;
- Establishing progressive discipline steps without providing a disclaimer that the district may impose discipline at any level, including termination, depending on the circumstances;
- Establishing a standard of review under the grievance procedure required by Wis. Stat. s. 66.0509(1m) for the impartial hearing officer at a level more restrictive than arbitrary or capricious;
- Creating seniority provisions that establish length of service as the determining factor in employment decisions, such as layoffs. Districts should maintain the right to use whatever legal criteria it chooses in making employment decisions (e.g., seniority, experience, performance, skill set);

- Including a “sign-off” section that contains a provision that the employee agrees to be “bound by” or to “abide by” all policies and rules stated in the handbook. This can potentially create an argument that if the employee abides by the provisions of the handbook, then the employee will remain employed. However, a “sign-off” section that merely acknowledges that an employee received the handbook is acceptable.

■ Legally required language

Every handbook should contain specific language to satisfy legal requirements or protect a district in the event a district is involved in employment-related litigation. The following language does not constitute an exhaustive list, but represents some of the most important sections to include in a handbook.

All handbooks must include a notice of an employee's Family and Medical Leave Act rights.⁴ As a practical matter, many districts include their entire FMLA policy in a handbook so that employees can easily reference it when reviewing their rights. Failure to include this required notice could result in an employee winning an FMLA interference claim against a district if the employee was eligible for FMLA leave and can establish that the employee did not understand his or her right to request FMLA leave due to the lack of proper notice by the district.

District handbooks should also include provisions prohibiting employment discrimination and harassment and providing employees with notice of prohibited conduct and the means by which to complain about prohibited conduct if it occurs. If a district widely disseminates a policy for reporting such conduct and a harassment victim unreasonably fails to report the conduct under the policy, the district may be able to avoid liability for harassment in certain circumstances.⁵ Similarly, Title IX requires districts to identify the district's Title

IX coordinator and include a notice that the district does not discriminate on the basis of sex in its education programs or activities. This notice should be contained in a handbook, among other places.⁶

Handbooks should include language that outlines when and where districts can conduct searches, including desks, public spaces, district computer servers and district-provided technology such as email, internet use and cell phones. This language should expressly state that employees have no expectation of privacy in district-provided equipment or in communications using such equipment or district servers. Such language maximizes a district's ability to search and monitor the use of this equipment and these communications, including during investigations into misconduct.

A handbook should also contain a section setting forth district expectations regarding attendance and tardiness. Such language is required if a district is going to challenge an employee's eligibility for unemployment benefits based on misconduct or substantial fault if an employee is terminated for attendance and tardiness.⁷ Districts also need to make sure employees sign an acknowledgment of receipt of the attendance language although acknowledgement of receipt of the entire handbook is likely sufficient.

Finally, a handbook should include the district's statement in compliance with the Drug Free Workplace Act. That law requires recipients of federal grants, which includes school districts, to "publish a statement notifying employees that the unlawful manufacture, distribution, dispensation, possession or use of a controlled substance is prohibited in the grantee's workplace and specifying the actions that will be taken against employees for violations of the prohibition."⁸ As a practical matter, most board policies also cover alcohol and include language prohibiting employees from

being under the influence of alcohol or a controlled substance at the workplace. Including this policy in a handbook assists districts in challenging an employee's eligibility for unemployment benefits based on misconduct or substantial fault if an employee is terminated for violating this policy.⁹

■ The importance of complying with an employee handbook

Districts that do not comply with their handbook provisions risk having their employment decisions — such as discipline, terminations, non-renewals or layoffs — overturned by a court.¹⁰ While a disclaimer might limit an employee's ability to bring a breach of contract claim, a court might determine that a district that fails to abide by its own policies is acting arbitrarily or capriciously in violation of the 14th Amendment of the U.S. Constitution.

Additionally, a district's failure to follow its handbook provisions can serve as evidence for an employee who files a discrimination claim against the district. For example, if a board terminates a female employee for a violation of the handbook's attendance policy and the employee sues the district for gender discrimination, one way the former employee can prove her case is by providing evidence that the district did not enforce the handbook attendance policy similarly with respect to male employees.

■ Conclusion

Employee handbooks play an important role in establishing the relationship between the district and its employees. However, if not drafted carefully, a handbook can create inadvertent employee protections, limit the district's flexibility in governing its workforce and create legal liability. Given the importance of handbooks, boards and administrators should understand the conse-

quences of any changes they make to them. Boards should also be aware that changes to board policies might require corresponding changes to handbooks. Boards that have questions about the implications of specific revisions to their handbooks should contact their legal counsel. ■

■ Endnotes

1. This Legal Comment was written by Michael J. Julka; Steven C. Zach; and Brian P. Goodman of Boardman & Clark LLP, WASB Legal Counsel. For additional information on this topic, see Wisconsin School News: "Discipline, Termination and Nonrenewal Under Districts' Grievance Policies" (June 2019); "Limitations on Modifying Retirement Benefits" (Sept. 2015); "Addressing Questions About Act 10 After Wisconsin Supreme Court Decision" (Sept. 2014).
 2. *Ferraro v. Koelsch*, 124 Wis. 2d 154, 368 N.W.2d 666 (1985).
 3. *Johnson v. Sch. Dist. of Flambeau*, No. 2019AP725, 2020 WL 6141029 (Wis. Ct. App. Oct. 20, 2020) (unpublished).
 4. 29 C.F.R. s. 825.300(a)(3).
 5. See *Burlington Indus., Inc. v. Ellerth*, 524 U.S. 742 (1998); *Faragher v. City of Boca Raton*, 524 U.S. 775 (1998).
 6. 34 C.F.R. s. 106.8(b).
 7. Wis. Stat. s. 108.04(5)(e).
 8. 41 U.S.C. s. 8103(a)(1)(A).
 9. Wis. Stat. s. 108.04(5)(a).
 10. See *Scheckel v. Sch. Dist. of Wauzeka*, No. 92-3121, 1994 WL 36060 (Wis. Ct. App. Feb. 10, 1994) (unpublished).
- "Districts should review their handbooks regularly, particularly when corresponding board policies change, to ensure that the handbook stays consistent with board policy."
 - "Every handbook should contain specific language to satisfy legal requirements or protect a district in the event a district is involved in employment-related litigation."
 - "If not drafted carefully, a handbook can create inadvertent employee protections, limit the district's flexibility in governing its workforce, and create legal liability."

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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