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#### Negotiations (continued from page 3)

in a positive way to stress that students are the district's primary concern.

The community sees the school district as a whole. Always work to convey that the issues being addressed in negotiations are bigger than one district or one community. It is also critical when communicating that administrators and board members make sure they are not violating elements of the bargaining agreement with their union.

*Select the Most Effective Communication Strategy.* Although it is well known that personal communication is more effective than mass communication in almost every instance this is impossible when the message needs to be delivered to large numbers of people. Districts must search for ways to "personalize" the message to their key audiences.

#### Plan to Address Critical Issues in Negotiations

It is imperative for districts to be proactive in planning for responses they will provide throughout the negotiation process. Advance planning can help the district preserve its reputation, minimize misunderstandings and maintain the best possible internal relations. Failure to be prepared is likely to result in chaos, misinformation and hard feelings.

#### Plan for Possible Job Actions

As long as there have been unions, there have been job actions. While state law prohibits teachers from going on strike, it does not prevent a variety of actions that could impede smooth operations of the school district. These job actions can take the form of expressive activities or other actions such as working to contract, use of personal days, sick outs, picketing, or using parent-teacher conferences to disseminate information.

In order to minimize the effect of job actions on students, districts should have a plan in place outlining a response to each possible scenario. Being prepared should not be left to a random series of responses to the actions of others. Being prepared MUST involve



WISCONSIN SCHOOL PUBLIC RELATIONS ASSOCIATION

## Principals Play Critical Role in School District's Public Relations Efforts

■ Lori Holly, Menomonee Falls School District

In her first year as principal of Riverside Elementary School in Menomonee Falls, Kathy Myles introduced a site plan to the Board of Education that included a public engagement initiatives as a top priority in the coming year.

In a District where parental involvement and PTA and PTSA membership is historically high, Myles said it would be a mistake for her school — or any public school — to assume that new efforts in public relations and community engagement are not needed.

"When I think about the way education is right now, with parents having so many choices, schools have to start selling themselves," Myles said.

The first priority for Myles is to grab the attention of parents immediately when school begins and to get them involved from the very first day.

To do that, Myles has invited parents to join their children for the first day of school.

The "First Day Celebration," as Myles has dubbed the event, will welcome parents to spend time with their child the first day of school Sept. 2. Parents will be in the classroom with their children as they begin a new year. Parents will also spend time with Myles, learning about her, the school and her plans for the year. The morning events will be followed by an all school picnic.

Myles is hoping the event will help her promote the school's theme for the year: "Catch the Spirit: I am someone who makes a difference."

"The way parents will be making a difference that day is they will be spending time with their child in their school," Myles said.

Even before school starts, though, Myles and her staff will be working to better connect the school to the community by staging a *Back To School Fair* on August 25.

On that day, families can come to school together, children will have their pictures taken and be able to see who is in their class. Parents can also register their children if they are not

already registered and they can enjoy an ice cream social on the school grounds.

Myles said she began researching ways to build community within her school and to enhance the school's image when the site planning team indicated public relations a priority.

Some of her inspiration has come from organizations such as the First Day America Foundation, a grassroots movement aimed at bringing together schools, families and communities.

According to foundation officials, the concept is simple. Schools present First Day activities for families, as simple as a morning assembly with refreshments, or as ambitious as a full day of workshops, picnics, and parades. Employers allow time off to working parents (paid, unpaid or flextime) who participate in First Day activities at their children's schools. Parents begin the school year right, building better relationships with their children's teachers, starting on day one.

First Day activities, the foundation says, has been successful at building community within schools where other activities have failed because it "attracts all parents, even those who usually avoid parent-teacher conferences, PTA meetings, and other events which they may find intimidating and unwelcoming."

"First Day generates widespread community support of schools and education, and excitement about the beginning of another school year. It gains the attention of business and political leaders, and of the local news media, and helps generate stronger community partnerships for education."

To Myles, reaching *all* parents is key.

"Parents are our most valuable asset. In order for me to educate any child, I've got to have the parent," Myles said. The "First Day Celebration" is only one step in Myles' public relations plan. She hopes to implement other initiatives currently in the talking stages throughout the year to broaden the parental involvement at the school. "You always have that same core of people," Myles said. "We need to broaden that parent base."

"We have to keep redefining parent involvement in order to keep parents involved," she said. "If we can keep building

Mark Your Calendar!  
WSPRA Annual Fall Conference • November 6-7, 2003  
Heidel House Resort & Conference Center • Green Lake  
Watch your mail for details! Coming in September.

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## From the President . . .



Janay  
Wittek-Balke, APR

Greetings WSPRA Members!

I have just returned from the National School Public Relations Conference in Denver, CO. When I left Wisconsin I was feeling drained and worn-out. Instead of being ready for several days of learning and sharing, I was ready for a nap! But I should have known the NSPRA conference was just the dose of inspiration I needed to refuel and get ready for a new school year. The conference was a valuable opportunity to share and exchange ideas.

I think we all need to take time to reenergize — clear our minds and our desks to prepare for the new school year. Too often we are wrapped-up in deadlines and problem solving, and one year rolls right into the next. Do you take time to reflect on the past year and determine where you are heading next? This is an important part of being successful in our jobs.

Public education is being presented with a variety of new challenges. The need for planned communication is primary. “No Child Left Behind,” PI34, budget shortfalls, building referendums, and increasing diversity in our classrooms name just a few of the complex issues we must clearly communicate to our communities and parents.

Your WSPRA Board has been working hard to provide you with a few new tools to help you in your communication efforts this year. I hope you will plan on attending our fall conference, November 6-7, and perhaps attend one of our drive-in workshops too.

I encourage you to take time before the school year begins and celebrate your successes and prepare for the challenges ahead. Public education has been faced with change in the past. Schools continue to improve and

## Doyle Protects, Defends Budget Priorities with Vetoes

### Revenue Limits for Schools will Keep Pace

#### with Inflation

■ Joseph Quick, Madison Metropolitan School District

Gov. James Doyle kept his commitment to K-12 education as a budget priority and vetoed the Legislature’s cut to the allowable revenue limit increase for schools. The Legislature cut the inflation increase from an estimated \$236 per student to \$120 for Fiscal Year 03-04 and an estimated \$241 to \$100 for FY 04-05. The loss of revenue would have required massive cuts in K-12 programs across the state.

Doyle and the GOP-controlled Legislature crossed swords on property taxes with Doyle maintaining he would not be party to harming local governments when it was the state that had a \$3.2 billion deficit. “(The Legislature’s budget) reflects the politics of the past — caving to special interests, attacking education, imposing mandates on local governments and passing off tough decisions to another day.

“The budget I introduced in February was balanced without tax increases. The Legislature’s partisan budget raises taxes, increases the structural deficit, blames schools and local governments for the state’s budget mess, threatens environmental protection efforts and leaves seniors at risk,” Doyle said in his veto message.

He continued, “The proposal passed by the Legislature would cut funding for our public schools by as much as \$400 million over the next two years. The result would be teacher layoffs, larger class sizes, and sharp reductions in instructional programs. School districts, which have been operating under strict spending controls since 1993, would now be prohibited from even keeping pace with inflation.”

The political stakes are high; with both the Governor and GOP legislators maintaining the other is taking the state down the wrong path regarding property taxes. Property tax relief has long been the Holy Grail of Wisconsin politics — elusive, yet foremost on the minds of state politicians. Republicans turned up the heat on the issue after Tuesday’s special election in suburban Milwaukee — where the GOP captured a seat from the Democrats for the first time since 1928 — with the GOP candidate hammering away at the property tax freeze issue.

A brief description and part of the governor’s veto message of key education vetoes follows.

**Revenue Limit** — Doyle vetoed the allowable revenue limit increase back to current law, as described above. In his veto message the governor said, “While I believe it is fiscally prudent to keep the current revenue limits in place at this time, the provisions passed by the Legislature would reduce school spending to levels below inflation and would force school districts to make deep cuts in the classroom.” Doyle cautioned school districts to show restraint, but said his veto recognizes “that locally elected government officials, rather than state officials, are charged with the responsibility of managing their local units of government and are ultimately the ones who should be held accountable for the cost and quality of local services, including education.”

**Four-Year-Old Kindergarten** — Doyle vetoed the \$40 million cut to 4-year old kindergarten, by restoring state aid to current law, or a .5 FTE reimbursement. Legislators cut state support to .25. Doyle noted that over half of Wisconsin’s school districts offer 4-year old kindergarten, serving over 17,000 students. Doyle said, “Rather than pulling back on our commitment to four-year-old kindergarten, we must at least maintain our current efforts, even during this difficult state budget period.”

**SAGE** — Doyle vetoed language that would have made SAGE, the class-size reduction program, optional at 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> grades. The Legislature’s proposal funneled savings from those districts that decided not to participate in SAGE into special education aid. Doyle said, “Both special education and SAGE are critical educational programs that deserve adequate funding. Both programs should be promoted, not weakened, and should not be at odds with each other.”

**Special Education Aid** — The Legislature cut the state reimbursement for driver’s education down to \$100 per pupil in FY 03-04 and eliminated state aid for FY 04-05. State aid for driver’s education is transferred to special education. The total increase for special education for the 03-05 biennium is \$5.9 million.

**Milwaukee Voucher Program** — The Legislature deleted the 15 percent Milwaukee Public Schools enrollment cap on the voucher program, expanded the program to Milwaukee County (current law is the *city* of Milwaukee), and allowed students whose family income exceeded program eligibility requirements to stay in the program. Doyle vetoed all the provisions back to current law. In his veto message the governor said, “I object to this expansion of the Milwaukee Parental Choice Program, and I believe the policy changes of this significance should be addressed through separate legislation, where a full and open debate can occur.”

**Transportation Fund Resources for School Aids** — The Legislature ended the transfer of transportation fund resources for school aids following FY 04-05. Doyle vetoed the “sunset” maintaining that, “Pupil transportation expenses play a significant role in overall school costs. Ongoing funding for general school aids from the transportation fund will be maintained at \$60 million for FY 04-05 and beyond.”

**Teacher License Fees** — The Governor vetoed the \$50 increase in the 5-year teacher license fee. The increase was designed to fund the mentoring program for new teachers required under Public Instruction 34, the new teacher license program. Doyle said the increase, “represents a tax on teachers at a time when they have already sacrificed salary increases under the provisions of the qualified economic offer.” GOP leadership has indicated they will attempt to override the governor’s vetoes related to property tax issues. Although the GOP does not have the party-line votes to override by two-thirds, Democrats will feel the pressure to succumb to the allure of property tax relief.

**Low-Revenue Ceiling** — Districts spending between \$6,900 to \$7,400 per pupil in the 2003-04 school year and up to \$7,800 per pupil in subsequent years are allowed to marginally exceed the per pupil revenue cap amount. Doyle vetoed language that would have required local school boards to pass a resolution with a 2/3 vote to authorize the additional spending. “I am partially vetoing this section to eliminate the two-thirds vote requirement because it is an unnecessary intrusion into local affairs.” Doyle’s original budget contained this provision with a majority vote. “Requiring school boards

## Communicating During Difficult Negotiations

■ Mary Ellen Marnholtz, Wausau School District; Mary Pat Pfeil, Wauwatosa School District; Janay Wittek-Balke, Franklin Public Schools

We live in time of radical change — a time when each of us is called upon to do more, communicate more, and be held more accountable — often with ever-decreasing resources. It is a time when the public expects far more from our schools than ever before. School districts are accountable to federal and state government as well as their own local constituents. These demands create pressures that can escalate as school districts work to understand the implications of new laws and the relationship of those laws to the broader aspect of managing a public school system.

It is not surprising then, that these growing demands, increased accountabilities, and dwindling resources often lead to frustration — frustration that is being played out at bargaining tables throughout Wisconsin. One thing is clear: efforts to build ongoing, meaningful dialogue with representatives of local teachers union, local media, and the community can and will pay off for everyone — at all times, but especially during prolonged negotiations.

### Elements of Effective Communication

It is critical that school districts have in place a strong communication system that focuses on the creation and maintenance of open, effective channels of communication. It works only if districts have had this system in play long before any difficulty occurs.

The characteristics of effective communication systems are that they are timely, accurate, targeted, and two-way. Districts must also consider all of their audiences — the intended internal and external recipients of their messages. It is not enough that these groups simply receive the information; rather, it is necessary that the district tailor its message for each group.

### The Communication Process

*Begin with a Plan.* Communication must never be haphazard. There is a process that will ensure effectiveness and success. Committing the plan to paper increases the possibility that all steps will be addressed and all parties understand their roles and the key components of the process.

*Develop Key Message Points.* At the outset of the bargaining process, the district’s leadership and negotiations team should develop key message points that are clear, concise, and understandable. Every time an individual is called upon to respond to an inquiry, these points should be woven into the response whether in formal or informal communication. Key messages reflect the broader scope of the political and societal issues facing the district and its students; they must be framed

(continued on page 4)