

WSPRAgram is published five times annually. It is the official newsletter of the Wisconsin School Public Relations Association. Please address any questions or comments to WSPRA, 122 West Washington Ave., Ste. 400, Madison, WI 53703.

Printing: Rogers Publishing
Winneconne, 920-582-4541
Distribution: WSPRA Office
Madison, 608-257-3220

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Board Seeks Member Input

■ Mark McLaughlin, McLaughlin & Associates, Manitowoc

A research project already in progress will provide all WSPRA members with the opportunity to express their opinions about school public relations issues. The information provided by the membership is important since the board works to develop educational programming and services to meet the current and approaching needs of the membership.

The questionnaire addresses issues including educational needs, professional responsibilities and the value of WSPRA membership. The results will be used by the board of directors in preparation for the annual planning retreat to be held June 24. In addition, all district administrators who are not WSPRA members will receive a similar questionnaire. The information from the administrators will also help the board better understand the needs of

all districts throughout the state. This will be valuable as the board develops services for non-member districts and seeks to increase membership.

This year the research will be conducted using internet technology. All WSPRA members will receive a notice explaining how the process works and directing them to the web site where the questionnaire is located. The questionnaire can then be accessed and completed at the member's convenience.

When you receive your notice, take a few minutes to complete the survey. The information you provide is important to maintaining a professional organization designed to meet your own needs. Highlights of the results will be presented in a future edition of the *WSPRAgram*.

The board of directors would like to thank Amanda Brooker, former WSPRA president, and the Green Bay School District for use of their web site and research software. This technology will make it convenient for our members, and will reduce the



WISCONSIN SCHOOL PUBLIC RELATIONS ASSOCIATION

TABOR Threatens Wisconsin's Future

GOP legislators secretly crafting constitutional spending curbs

■ Joseph Quick, Madison Metropolitan School District

GOP legislators are secretly working on a constitutional amendment dubbed the "Taxpayer Bill of Rights" (TABOR) that could dramatically change the historical relationship between the state of Wisconsin and local units of government—including schools. TABOR is modeled after a 1993 Colorado constitutional amendment restricting both the revenues and spending of state and local government. Leadership in both houses of the state Legislature say they plan to hold an "extraordinary session" this spring to pass the measure. A constitutional amendment must be passed by two successive sessions of the Legislature and then be approved by the voters.

A broad coalition of local government and public advocacy groups have joined together to oppose the measure. The groups include: the Wisconsin Counties Association, the Towns Association, the League of Municipalities, Alliance of Cities, the American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees, Wisconsin Council on Children and Families, WEAC, the School Administrators Alliance, the Wisconsin Association of School Boards, the UW System and several others.

Property Tax Freeze

Since 1993, school districts have operated under state-imposed revenue limits, restricting the amount of revenue a school board can raise from the property tax levy. Last year, Gov. Jim Doyle twice vetoed a so-called "property tax freeze" passed by majority Republicans who control both houses of the Legislature. Both vetoes were upheld, as the GOP failed to muster the necessary two-thirds to override.

Soon thereafter, Assembly Joint Resolution 55, a constitutional amendment restricting spending, began to receive more attention from legislative leaders. A constitutional amendment circumvents a potential gubernatorial veto, as the governor has no role in the process to put the question to the voters. If passed this year, and then again during the next legislative session, lawmakers could put the amendment on the ballot in November of 2006—when

Doyle is up for re-election.

AJR 55, pushed by Rep. Frank Lasee (R-Bellevue), would tie spending to the annual rate of inflation and enrollment (or population for other governmental units) growth. However, in late February, Rep. Jean Hundertmark (R-Clintonville) told the *Milwaukee Journal-Sentinel* that a Colorado-like TABOR for Wisconsin "is dead." Since then, closed meetings have been held sporadically, but few know how TABOR will be "Wisconsinized," as proponents argue that the Wisconsin amendment will improve upon what Colorado has done.

Colorado's Experience

In Colorado, by all news accounts, the impact has been devastating:

- ◆ In 2001-02 Colorado ranked 48th in K-12 spending per \$1,000 of personal income;
- ◆ In nearly every category, the achievement gap for minority, low-income and female students in Colorado widened on the 2003 National Assessment of Educational Progress math and reading assessments for 4th and 8th graders;
- ◆ In 2003, the Colorado General Assembly eliminated at-risk funding, funding for new textbooks, reduced kindergarten funding, repealed a teacher pay incentive program, and repealed summer school grants, among other cuts to K-12 education;
- ◆ For the current school year, 28 percent of Colorado school districts are on a four-day schedule and have cut school to less than 160 days;
- ◆ In 2000, Colorado ranked 7th highest in the US on high school dropout rates;
- ◆ Colorado ranks at the bottom in on-time immunization rates and prenatal care, and at the top in the number of uninsured low-income children.

Last year, the *Denver Business Journal* interviewed Douglas Bruce, the "father" of Colorado's TABOR, about some of the

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Watch your mail for details! Coming in September.



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From the President . . .



Janay
Wittek-Balke, APR

Spring has finally fought its way through the long Wisconsin winter and signs of summer are not far behind. As the end of the school year quickly approaches I encourage you to take time to celebrate the successes of the year. Too often in education we are on to solving the next problem or challenge and do not stop for that moment and reflect on our achievements.

It is important not only for ourselves as individuals, but for those who we work with to recognize a job well done and the extra effort put into the hard work we all do for children. Most people do not go into education seeking glory, but that does not mean they don't want a thank you from time to time.

- ◆ A hand written note is a great way to let someone know you appreciate their hard work.
- ◆ Call a mandatory meeting just to show your thanks. There should be no other discussions in this meeting—just a showing of thanks. You'll surprise those who attend and show them your gratitude.
- ◆ Have an event. How about a morning donut break, a breakfast/lunch or even a victory rally!
- ◆ Insert a "thank you" letter into pay envelopes. Although it's not personal, it is guaranteed to be seen!

Put creativity behind your "thank you." Purchase cinnamon buns from your local bakery. Wrap them and attach a note that reads, "Thanks for working your buns off!"

It is critical to create a positive and good-natured work environment in our schools and district offices. Yes, we are being faced with significant challenges in education today. However those challenges are being handled head on by the great people working in our schools across the state. We must

TABOR Threatens Wisconsin's Future (continued from page 1)

unintended consequences caused by TABOR during the preceding decade. On K-12 education Bruce recommended a statewide voucher program. "When people realize they don't have to put up with crummy schools, that they can achieve higher test scores, fewer discipline problems, less bureaucratic solutions. . .the house of cards will collapse," he said. He argues for the elimination of Medicaid. What would Bruce do about poor people without insurance that need treatment at emergency rooms? "If you don't have the money, you don't get the service," he maintained. A modern day equivalent of, "Let them eat cake."

Few believe this is what Wisconsin residents envision for their state's future. But "lowering your taxes" is appealing on the surface, while explaining how taxes, spending and services are all intertwined doesn't lend itself to sound bites and 30-second commercials. Due to a constitutional nuance, a resolution must pass first consideration by August 3rd.

Opponents argue that there is no need for a constitutional amendment; legislators have the prerogative to make many of the changes they say are necessary to improve Wisconsin's fiscal situation – they merely lack the will to make the changes.

Time for Action

The uncertainty of what exactly the constitutional amendment will say makes it difficult to mount specific arguments against TABOR. But legislators must hear from us. Contact your legislators at www.legis.state.wi.us/waml/ and let them know you're watching and concerned. Ask your legislators for an analysis of how your local schools will be affected by TABOR. More information about TABOR is available at the WI Alliance of Cities Web site at www.wiscities.org/ and the WI Council on

Communicating During Difficult Negotiations Be Prepared—Have a Communication Plan in Place

- 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—often with ever-decreasing resources. 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 and the relationship of new laws to the broader aspect of managing a public school system.

It is not surprising, that these growing demands, increased accountabilities, and dwindling resources often lead to 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 unions, 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 focusing on the creation and maintenance of open, effective channels of communication. It works only if districts have 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 consider all of their audiences—the internal and external recipients of their messages. It is not enough that these groups simply receive the information; it is necessary that the district tailor its message for each group.

The Communication Process

- ◆ **Begin with a Plan.** Communication must never be haphazard. 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, 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 in a positive way to stress that students are the district's primary concern. 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.** 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 proactive planning which includes carefully planned communication strategies for all audiences.

The Wisconsin School Public Relations Association has prepared a resource handbook, *Communicating During Difficult Negotiations*, for school districts to assist in developing effective communication strategies. To order, go to www.uspra.org or use the order form enclosed. This article was provided by Genie Malachuk, WSPRA Past President, using School Prepared by ASB authors. Members of WSPRA are invited to submit articles for *Wisconsin School News*, WASB's monthly publication. This publication is a primary source of information for school board members throughout the state.

This arrangement is beneficial to both WASB and WSPRA. WASB members can learn more about school public relations. WSPRA benefits by exposing more people to a professional association that supports public relations practitioners.

Previous topics by WSPRA members have addressed issues including No Child Left Behind, Communications during Negotiations, Working with the Media and Safe School Preparedness.

WSPRA is scheduled to provide a total of six articles per year. The schedule of authors and topics for 2004-05 is currently being completed. People interested in writing an article are encouraged to

Member Spotlight Creating a Sense of Belonging for All

- Dorreen Dembski and Dr. Ovid Wong, West Bend School District

Achieving *academic excellence* for *all students* requires engagement of all students and their families. The English Language Learners (ELL) population in the West Bend School District is growing: we currently have 100 ELL students speaking 14 different languages. Recognizing that parental involvement is key to a student's success, the West Bend School District hosted its first ELL parent meeting in November 2003, devoted completely to ELL families.

To get the event rolling, our ELL teachers invited all of our families, personally when possible. To accommodate busy families, the evening included a light dinner. The response testified that there was a need: we welcomed over 70 guests

to the High School cafeteria. Before dinner, Superintendent Randal Eckart and Assistant Superintendent Ovid Wong presented the district's vision, the ELL program structure and purpose, and suggestions regarding how parents can help their students be successful in school. An ELL teacher stood-by, translating into Spanish as each presenter spoke. Questions from parents ranged from what English proficiency is required for college entrance, to how to find out more about after-school taxi service for students.

Informational brochures regarding all types of community resources and extracurricular activities were available to encourage families to involve their children in school and the community. A translated school calendar was provided to our Spanish speaking families. To top off the night, nine lucky students were thrilled to receive English dictionaries donated by book publishers McGraw Hill and Houghton Mifflin.

A parent captured the essence of the night. While eating dinner with his family and a staff member he said, "The evening is giving me a sense of belonging. Thank you." ❖