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#### Candidates' Forum (continued from page 3)

##### Set the Ground Rules

Develop a simple list of rules for the event itself. Following are some suggestions.

- ◆ The order of speakers will be determined by choosing numbers out of a hat. With each new question, a different candidate will be the first to respond. Consider whether you want candidates for the same seat to speak consecutively.
- ◆ Candidates will (or will not) know the questions in advance.
- ◆ Responses will (or will not) be timed.
- ◆ Signs and campaign literature will (or will not) be allowed in the room.
- ◆ The Candidate Forum will (or will not) be broadcast. Determine and announce the times.
- ◆ The sponsor and/or moderator reserve the right to ask disruptive audience members to leave.
- ◆ Members and board members of the sponsoring organization can support any candidate as private citizens, but should not associate their political activity with the non-profit organization.

##### Make Sure You've Covered the Logistics

1. Gather the supplies you will need:
  - a. Signage directing the public to the forum location.
  - b. Nameplates for each participant and moderator.
  - c. Stop watches for the timers.
  - d. Signs for the timers to use indicating how much time remains, i.e., If speakers have been allotted two minutes, timers should show one minute, 30-second and STOP cards.
  - e. Microphones for the candidates and, if the public is allowed to ask questions, for the audience.
  - f. Skirted tables with comfortable chairs for the participants.
  - g. Lectern for the moderator, with mike.



WISCONSIN SCHOOL PUBLIC RELATIONS ASSOCIATION

## Keeping the Focus on Kids During Budgetary and Political Challenges

■ Anne Egan-Waukau, Wisconsin Education Association Council

Staying focused on kids during tough budgetary and political challenges is vital to maintaining great schools and a great education for all students.

Years of revenue caps and decreasing enrollments are now having a crippling effect on many Wisconsin school districts. In fact, districts throughout the state face the task of working with shrinking budgets.

Yet, parents and the community as a whole don't have a clear understanding of what is going on, or how decreased school funding affects their children.

It is clear, there is a need to join forces with parents, teachers and the community as we fight to provide all students with a great education.

The Wisconsin Association of School District Administrators and the Wisconsin Education Association Council's annual survey of school administrators uncovered a new trend in the 2003-2004 school year: Districts are being forced to cut academic programs because of state-imposed revenue controls; revenue controls severely limit the funds school districts can raise and spend.

Five years ago, 41 percent of the districts said they reduced the number of academic courses.

In 2003-2004, 52 percent reported cuts to academics:

- ◆ 13 percent reported cutting sections of foreign language, vocational education, business education, family and consumer education, music, art, band, and physical education programs.
- ◆ 12 percent reported eliminating entire courses in content areas.
- ◆ Cuts were least likely in the core (tested) areas of English/language arts, math, science and social studies.

Other findings in the study show that:

- ◆ 68 percent increased class sizes.
- ◆ 60 percent offered fewer courses.
- ◆ 55 percent reduced programs for gifted and talented students.

- ◆ 53 percent reduced courses in art, music, theater.
- ◆ 51 percent reduced extracurricular programs.
- ◆ 49 percent reduced programs for at-risk students.

We must have a plan for engaging support from staff and the community so we can all fight together to maintain great schools. If there is a plan for dealing with the cuts as well as gaining support and input from your staff and community, you can work together to join the fight against decreasing budgets.

The first thing you need to do is focus on your internal public. That includes administration, staff and parents, because good communications begin inside.

The next thing is to deal with facts. Check and recheck your facts. And don't forget to keep the administration and staff in the communications loop.

What can you do?

- ◆ Keep parents informed.
- ◆ Work to keep these issues out of the classroom and away from children—don't involve them in a political game.
- ◆ Monitor *how*, as well as *what* you communicate.
- ◆ Listen: Stay tuned to rumors and feelings of frustration that may trigger the need for further communication.
- ◆ Develop key message points for your district—AND STICK TO THEM!
- ◆ Communicate in multiple formats.
- ◆ Decide who will be your district spokesperson or spokespeople and refer all contacts with the media to them.
- ◆ Have a plan for addressing the issues in a positive way.

You can be the catalyst in the fight for funding for education. You should keep your focus on the children and meeting their needs. You can also help your community come to an understanding of the critical financial issues by placing the issue of school funding in the broader context of the

(continued on page 2)

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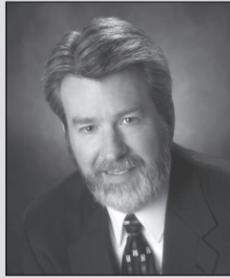
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 WISCONSIN SCHOOL PUBLIC RELATIONS ASSOCIATION



## From the President . . .



Mark  
McLaughlin

Last month I set up a new computer system. There were times when monitor, computer and printer seemed to be working on their own. None of the pieces worked together like they should. The correct electronic message wasn't getting through to the appropriate component. I had to go back through the manual, step-by-step, to get it all working together.

I also had a minor problem with my Jeep recently. The engine warning light went on for no apparent reason. The automotive technician explained that the computer chip in my Jeep was receiving "confusing messages" from the battery. The computer chip was misinformed about a problem so it had to be re-programmed.

What do these events have to do with school-community relations? They reminded me about the importance of communications. We need to communicate effectively and continually in order for people to understand the message we are trying to convey. We need to tell them everything they need to know. We can't expect them to fill in the details or to come to a conclusion on their own. We should be communicating exactly what we would like people to know or what we would like them to do.

All this reinforces the need for a formal communications plan. We may be communicating frequently and we may be communicating with a variety of audiences. But if the communications aren't following a well-designed plan, despite our best efforts the message may not be getting through as intended.

Are you following a communications plan or are you just repeating a variety of different

## Keeping the Focus (continued from page 1)

quality of life for the entire community.

And most of all - retain high standards for your district.

When dealing with the media, emphasize that the district maintains high standards, but that the future of some programs is in jeopardy. Then, develop a series of stories that provide background and tell how your district is working to address the state funding situation.

## Legislators Need to Hear from You on the 2005-07 State Budget

■ Joe Quick, Madison Metropolitan School District

With the elections in the past, now is a critical time to converse with your legislators about important issues for your district. Let them know how a property tax "freeze" would adversely affect your schools. Don't talk merely in terms of dollar amount cuts, but put a human face on what those cuts will mean—larger class sizes, fewer academic and extracurricular opportunities for students, reduced teaching staff that translates into fewer opportunities for one-on-one tutoring.

The Taxpayers Bill of Rights (TABOR), an idea that would dramatically curtail resources for public schools, has the potential to cut school funding via the state Constitution. Familiarize yourself with the issues related to TABOR ([http://www.wccf.org/pdf/TABOR\\_education.pdf](http://www.wccf.org/pdf/TABOR_education.pdf) and <http://www.wiscities.org/>) and express your concern to your legislators about allowing the current inequities in the tax system to remain in place without thorough review.

Be specific and pointed in your comments to legislators. Focus on a handful of issues—yes, all programs are important, but your district has set priorities and it's best to narrow your request list to those issues most essential for your schools.

Consider organizing a meeting for your legislators to visit a school. Showcase some of your stellar programs and then invite the legislators to sit down and discuss local budget issues with parents, student and community members active in your schools. Invite your local media to report on the meeting. Stories from parents, students and local business people are more apt to stick with a legislator than budget numbers—but both are important.

Keep written information concise; legislators are inundated by material from advocates for a wide array of state government-funded programs. If you're writing a letter or e-mail, again, tailor your concerns to select issues—and don't send a form letter to which you just sign your name, they have minimal influence. You don't have to be a lobbyist to influence your legislators; in fact, sometimes parents' heartfelt comments can have dramatic impact.

### Citizen Lobbyists

In a session at WSPRA's Fall Conference, Senator Luther Olsen (R-Berlin) quoted verbatim a mother concerned about a high stakes graduation test—five years after the fact! Parents, mostly mothers from across the state, put the skids on the high stakes test. (Due to fiscal constraints, the state never implemented the test.)

Olsen said not to be put off if you have to talk to legislative staff and can't immediately connect with the legislator. "You aren't getting blown off. They are an extension of us." Politics is about relationships and in an ideal world your end-goal should be for your legislator to call you unsolicited for your input on education issues. This happens with persistence, a willingness to listen to the legislator's perspective and oftentimes being willing to disagree.

As is always important in analysis of things political, Olsen admonished attendees at the WSPRA session that, "if you are going to talk to a legislator, you better know what you are talking about. If you miss what the other side is saying, you've lost the battle." It's what we would advise any student on the debate team, and words we

should heed.

The governor's budget, introduced on February 8, will be the focus of the first 8-9 months of the legislative session. Let your legislators know the key proposals that will help your district's students. For more information about contacting legislators, and keeping apprised of the important issues, check out WSPRA's legislative links (<http://www.wspira.org/legislative/index.htm>).

## How To Hold a Candidates' Forum

■ Mary Pat Pfeil, Wauwatosa School District

With the spring election just months away, how will your voters get to know the school board candidates? One common form of voter education is a candidates' forum.

Here are some tips for holding an effective forum. Plan now! Begin now! The essential elements of your plan are:

1. Find an organization to work with the school district to sponsor the forum, i.e., League of Women Voters, PTA, etc. This is especially important if the election is likely to be contentious. The IRS prohibits non-profits from engaging in "political activity," which is defined as "participating in, or intervening in, any political campaign on behalf of (or in opposition to) any candidate for public office." Non-partisan forums are a permissible activity for tax exempt organizations because such forums are considered voter education. THEN, work with the organization to:
2. Identify the purpose of the forum. Emphasize the nonpartisan nature of the forum.

3. Set the date, time and place. Try to estimate attendance, so you have a room large enough to accommodate those interested. Consider parking and accessibility needs. Confirm the date with candidates.
4. Establish criteria for which candidates will be included. Ask: Will unopposed candidates be asked to participate? Write-in candidates? Decide this in advance.
5. Invite the candidates. The letter of invitation should be on letterhead, identifying the sponsoring organization(s) and explaining the format for the forum. Provide a deadline for candidates to confirm their attendance at the forum.
6. Consider what you will do if all candidates are not able to attend the forum. Can you provide an audio or video hookup from a remote location to allow participation of someone who cannot be physically present?
7. Determine the format. There are several types of forum: Candidate speeches; question/answer; or debate style. In Wauwatosa, the Candidate Forum sponsored by the PTA Council combines the first two styles. Each candidate gives a two-minute opening statement, following by questions which each candidate answers. The questions are developed by PTA Council members. There is also a limited opportunity for audience members to submit questions that evening. Then candidates each have an opportunity to make a two-minute closing statement. Once you determine the time parameters for the forum and the number of candidates participating, you can adjust your time limitations and the number of questions accordingly.
8. Choose a moderator who will treat all candidates fairly and who is not publicly allied with any candidate. Consider using someone from outside the school district.

(continued on page 4)

## MEMBER SPOTLIGHT

### School Newspaper Brings Community and School Together

■ Anne Egan-Waukau, Wisconsin Education Association Council

Good community relationships are vital to all Wisconsin schools.

Mary Swingle and her students at Webster High School have taken this public relations concept one step further by writing and publishing their community's newspaper, called *The Bridge*.

"In 1996 we were brainstorming on ways to improve communication with the community and *The Bridge* is what we came up with," said Swingle, who has been the adviser since the paper was first published in 1997.

It is mailed to all community residents and contains community and school news.

The paper gives students realistic work experience. It helps them experience and learn team work, communication, how to work under deadlines, and the importance of producing quality work, she said.

"There is a lot of pressure on the students to do well, because no matter what you do the public is going to see it," Swingle said. "No matter how sick they are, the students make sure they make their deadlines. There is a lot of dedication from the students."

*The Bridge* also provides an opportunity for residents to see what is happening in their local schools and it gives students the chance to work with the community in a positive manner, she said.

Swingle said she wishes more schools in rural areas would publish a community newspaper.

"Especially rural areas like this," she said. "The paper helps build public relations for our school because it lets the community know what we are doing. Plus the students are connected with the community because they are actively searching for stories and involved with the community."

Swingle and the students who publish *The Bridge* have won numerous awards. The most recent is a certificate of merit from