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## If You Don't Speak, They Won't Hear

■ Joseph H. Quick, Madison Metropolitan School District

It is currently the "high budget season" at the Capitol. During May, the Joint Finance Committee (JFC) will make changes in the Governor's proposed 2007-09 biennial budget (Senate Bill 40). In June, both houses of the Legislature will make changes to the JFC's version of the budget.

May is a critical time to have parents, teachers, staff and members of the community contact local state legislators about key items in the state budget for one's school district.

When making contact with legislators, be specific and narrow regarding a request. Ideally, meet face-to-face to talk about how revenue limit cuts are hurting opportunities for students. Whether it's a school district eliminating SAGE, reducing the number of extracurricular offerings, or cutting back on a Gifted and Talented program, the key is to tell one's stories.

Legislators typically refer to stories from constituents when they debate bills. Don't stop at telling them about financial hardships. Focus on the needs that will go unmet and put a human face on the cuts necessary to comply with state-imposed revenue limits.

If a personal visit cannot be arranged, call legislators at home on Friday or Monday, when they are usually in their legislative district. Express concerns and ask them if they will support important budget initiatives. A letter or e-mail are options, but again, have specific and targeted concerns. *Always* ask if they support your position, and if communicating in writing, indicate a desire for a response.

Be cordial, tell one's stories, and ask the legislator if he or she supports the school district's position. If a school district's hardships are not brought to the people elected to represent them at the Capitol, help will never materialize. ❖



WISCONSIN SCHOOL PUBLIC RELATIONS ASSOCIATION

## Reconnecting with the Community after a Defeated Referendum

■ Brian Hanes, School District of Oostburg

Recently 73 school districts in Wisconsin faced referendums in the April election (35 passed and 37 failed). It seems obvious there is a growing need and concern to fund expenses that directly or indirectly relate to meeting student needs. State-imposed revenue caps have had a negative effect on school districts' ability to address needs such as ongoing maintenance, staffing and classroom space.

In the School District of Oostburg the revenue cap substantially reduced the district's ability to address its maintenance needs or to add needed classroom space. Prior to revenue caps, the district was able to allow five percent to six percent of its total budget to address building and grounds upkeep and equipment replacement. Today less than two percent is allocated.

Like many school districts Oostburg carefully planned to conduct a referendum to address needs outlined above. We put together a committee, conducted a facility needs study and outlined a referendum with the input of a cross section of the community, staff and board members. Information sessions were conducted in the building and with local service clubs; building tours were organized; a video tape was televised on a local cable channel; copies of powerpoint presentations and other fact sheets and frequently asked questions were made available via our district web site; and an organized calling committee was mobilized prior to the vote. Our referendum failed and we were faced with the tough question of what to do next.

Following the failed referendum, the school board decided to conduct a survey to identify specifically what the voters would be willing to support. The survey was mailed to district residents and also made available on our web site. It included nine questions specific to our needs and ended with an open

ended "additional comments" area. Based on the community feedback from the survey, we trimmed down our original referendum and eventually passed a 9.8 million referendum for building additions and renovations for our high school and elementary school.

**What did we learn from this two year process?** There is no "magic bullet" that will get a referendum passed. In preparation for the referendum that eventually passed, I asked for additional advice from Kit Dailey, strategic communications advisor with First Trust Portfolios LP.

Some of her key suggestions proved to be very helpful:

- Strive for 100 percent board unity and consensus on what you decide to do.
- Put together a defined statement of WHY you decided to bring this issue back to voters.
- Define three key messages (look at your current ones... anything muddy?)
- Develop strategies that involve one-on-one contacts (we formed a new committee that was led by a parent and they worked more closely with the media, neighbors, etc.).
- Provide information appropriately to support groups that can focus on advocacy, not just information.

As simple as it sounds, we learned that what will pass is what people are willing to support. Take the time to reconnect with the community; carefully listen and communicate district needs on an on-going basis. Today we are grateful for the support to move programs forward in Oostburg and to continue the excellence that we earned in the past! ❖

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## From the President . . .



Dorreen  
Dembski

As we close another school year, I would like to thank the many WSPRA members who have walked the talk about school community relations. The WSPRA office receives many calls and emails asking for assistance and advice. As a result, I know that you have been very busy.

You have presented information in your community through newsletters, websites, and the media. You have presented information at service groups and at conferences, conducted surveys, and hosted listening sessions. You have asked for assistance on how to better implement these activities, and you look for staff development in the area of effective school-community relations with diverse audiences. You have hosted forums, developed e-letters, met elected officials, written press releases and professional articles, and given media interviews. You are actively involved in community service and volunteer for many agencies that benefit youth. I'm sure you've done much, much more.

Your focus has been on strengthening community support for our schools and serving all students to the best of your ability. Thank you for a job well done! We have much to be proud of at WSPRA because YOU are WSPRA. It is increasingly clear: What one of us does to positively impact public education has a direct impact on all of us. As superintendents, administrators, teachers, school public relations specialists, media specialists, community relations coordinators, and school board members all over this State reach into their communities to increase support for schools, we all benefit back at home.

Thank you also for allowing me to serve you as President this school year. It has been an honor to become better acquainted with so many talented professionals who have dedicated their careers to education. It has been a rewarding yearlong experience I will always treasure and I look forward to a very bright future for WSPRA.

Please keep in touch: WSPRA exists to support you in your efforts to build strong school-community relations. We are indeed, all in this together. ❖

## Creating Connections that Work for the Entire Community

■ Mary Ellen Marnholtz, Wausau School District

Sometimes an idea can make connections in ways one can't even imagine. That's what happened in Wausau when several different organizations found they were all trying to find ways to bring business and education together for dialogue and action. Individuals from six business and educational organizations met, planned, and created the Business · Education Leadership Summit. This group became the Partners in Innovation (PII) and its members represent the Wausau School District, Wausau School Foundation, The North Central Wisconsin Workforce Development Board, North Central Wisconsin School-to-Career Partnership at Northcentral Technical College, University of Wisconsin-Marathon County Continuing Education, and Wausau Region Chamber of Commerce's Marathon County Partners in Education. The group's mission is *to create opportunities for collaborative dialogue and action among Wisconsin's business, education, and community partners.*

On October 20, 2004, PII held its first Business · Education Leadership Summit in Wausau. The day was an unqualified success, with over 350 people attending from throughout Wisconsin—some from as far away as Milwaukee and southwestern Wisconsin. The Summit featured keynote speakers Rebecca Ryan, of Next Generation Consulting, Inc., a national expert on working with and creating communities that attract new, young talent, and Dr. Tony Wagner of the Change Leadership Group at Harvard Graduate School of Education. The keynotes were powerful and challenging and the rest of the day featured breakout sessions on successful area partnerships and ended with a celebration of school-business partnerships. The introduction of Leadership in Action Challenge Grant opportunities for area business leaders and educator teams challenged participants to carry forward the work of the event.

Since then, PII has held two more equally successful Business · Education Leadership Summits and has awarded more than \$45,000 in grants to business-education partnerships focused on workforce development. At least one of the individual partners has changed since the concept for the Summit emerged, but Partners in Innovation still represents the same charter organizations as in 2004 and its members continue to fulfill the mission of the group.

As a group, Partners in Innovation works well because its members are basically leaders without authority. This fact creates an atmosphere that encourages collaboration, respect, breaks down artificial barriers, and leads to broader community acceptance and success for PII initiatives.

Some of the successes of Partners in Innovation include:

- Three successful Business · Education Leadership Summits.
- Over \$45,000 in Leadership in Action Challenge Grants awarded since the first Summit. New and innovative partnerships have been formed as a result.
- Currently, \$41,000 in Leadership in Action Challenge Grant funds is available to support future business-education leadership projects.
- A successful business-education partnership summit was introduced in southwest Wisconsin during October 2006 with the Business · Education Leadership Summit serving as its model.
- Other local business-education events have been sponsored by PII and attendance scholarships have been made available to both area educators and students. ❖

## Equity Corner

### Educators and Tribes Team Up to Promote Cultural Awareness

■ Anne Egan-Waukau, WEAC

Although Wisconsin school districts have been required to teach Wisconsin Native American history and culture since 1991, there have been few resources available to assist educators as they comply with the law.

In April, thanks to the combined efforts of Wisconsin's tribes, the Wisconsin Education Association Council and the National Education Association, educators across the state will have access to a package of materials that can be used to teach students about Wisconsin's rich Native American history.

"It's important for all children to understand the struggles of Native people in Wisconsin," said Patty Loew, associate professor at the University of Wisconsin –Madison's Department of Life Sciences Communication.

"In this way, we build understanding and appreciation for cultural differences and similarities and we are able to meet future challenges together," said Loew, who narrates a 30-minute video that is part of the *Native American Educational Package*.

The package includes a study guide and a collection of video programs and educational materials that highlight Indian heritage and history, interpret tribal traditions and customs, and examine the future of America's aboriginal people through their respect for land and nature, said Gloria Cobb, deputy director of economic development for the Great Lakes Inter-Tribal Council (GLITC), which is heading the project.

"We have found that the public is woefully unaware of the strides that have been made and the challenges we face in our Native American communities," Cobb said. "The Council has come to understand that we must increase awareness of our needs throughout Wisconsin, beginning with schools and helping educators comply with Act 31."

In fact, the package has been written and produced under the supervision and direction of representatives of each of the state's 11 tribes to ensure its accuracy and adherence to tribal traditions, she said. The project was developed by the Native American Tourism Organization of Wisconsin (NATOW), an ad hoc committee of GLITC.

It began in 1994 with a goal of providing information and education about the history, culture and recreational opportunities of the 11 sovereign nations within Wisconsin's borders. The effort started with the publication of a 16-page *Native Wisconsin Magazine* accompanied by a 30-minute *Native Wisconsin* video presentation.

Since then, the NATOW project has taken a giant leap forward.

A 38-page, sixth edition of the magazine has been published. And the educational package will include a full-color magazine featuring special segments on each of the 11 tribes, a companion 30-minute video edited especially for students, a DVD tribal guide, a set of 12 posters and a comprehensive teacher's guide to complement the program.

"The members of NATOW feel there is an urgent need to convince schools to utilize this project that provides information and education about the history and culture of the 11 sovereign nations in Wisconsin," Cobb said.

"The goal is to show how Native Americans live today, to illustrate how we work to save the Earth with its clean air and water and preservation of forests, and to show how we have positive social and economic impacts on the many communities surrounding our sovereign nations," she said.

"Through this vehicle, the tribes of Wisconsin have taken a leadership role in promoting our history and culture in the public school system, while attempting to combat prejudice and discrimination," Cobb said.

In fact, the project is being monitored by Native American tribes across the United States as it approaches the challenge to educate students and the public on the history, tradition and culture of Wisconsin's Native peoples, Cobb said.

While the tribes have the capability to provide much of the educational materials, the GLITC wanted help from educators to ensure that the materials are available to schools and libraries and, more importantly, that they are presented in such a fashion that they will be used by teachers and accepted by the students, she said.

The opportunity came in 2005 when Wisconsin Education Association Council President Stan Johnson asked the GLITC board how the 98,000-member organization could work with the tribes to ensure that all children were given the opportunity to learn about Wisconsin's tribes. When Johnson heard about the *Native American Educational Package*, he not only pledged WEAC's support, he also garnered the support of the NEA, which has 2.7 million members. "I want to make sure this partnership works," Johnson said. "We hope this project will become a model for other states. We are all on the same planet and we need to remain connected. Now that you've got us, we are here to stay," he said. "We will promote this program at our October 2007 Convention in Milwaukee. In fact, there will be a training session that will be led by NATOW and Native American educators," Johnson said.

NEA President Reg Weaver echoed his support for the project and matched a WEAC grant that has gone toward production of the education package. "NEA is proud of WEAC and the Great Lakes Inter-Tribal Council for developing resources for educators that promote the history and culture of Wisconsin's native peoples and at the same time combat prejudice and discrimination," Weaver said. "Where are the curriculums that teach Native American children and all children about this important part of our past and present? A curriculum that engages all students and encourages mutual respect among teachers, students, parents and the community is a critical part of the solution," he said. In fact, Weaver said that the NEA has forged a working partnership with the National Indian Education Association. "No one group or organization can do it by itself," he said. "But together, we can make a difference and accomplish great things." For more information about the curriculum or to order materials, go to: [www.act31resources.com/videos/](http://www.act31resources.com/videos/)