

Empowering Schools for an Educational Landscape of Increased Choice

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The message behind that theme is direct. If we want students and families to have real choices after high school, we must keep our public schools strong, trusted, and central in the life of each community.

Public schools remain the center of the community

One of the main messages from our PAC work is that we must do a better job telling our story.

Public schools are not separate from their communities. In most of our towns the public school is the hub that holds everything together. When there is a concert, a game, a funeral dinner, a blood drive, or a community meeting, it often happens in the school. We serve every child who shows up at our doors, regardless of disability, family situation, or income.

We live in a society in which most families work. Over time schools have picked up more and more of the slack. We feed students, connect them to mental health services, supervise them before and after the regular day, and provide the consistent adults that some students may not have at home.

Students also arrive with very different early learning experiences. Some children have been read to every day since birth. Others have been read to very rarely. Many of us use a simple estimate that students who have been read to daily before school can have a vocabulary advantage of at least two hundred thousand words by the time they begin kindergarten. That gap shows up in vocabulary, comprehension, and confidence. Yet by grade three we expect all students to be at roughly the same level. That is a tall order, and it is our public schools that do most of the work to close that gap.

In southwest Wisconsin many of our districts serve student populations in which a large share of families qualify for free and reduced price meals. Even with that reality, and even with revenue limits that have not always kept up with inflation, our schools continue to graduate students who are ready for work, ready for technical college, ready for university, and ready for military and community service.

Do we still need to improve. Of course. But we also need to be honest. We have far more successes than failures. If we are not telling that story, others will tell a different story about us.

The expanding voucher environment and local levy pressure

Another major focus of PAC this year is the rapid growth of private school vouchers across Wisconsin and what that means for local taxpayers and for public schools.

Wisconsin now operates a state wide parental choice program that provides taxpayer funded tuition to private schools for eligible students. When a student in a public school district uses a state voucher to attend a participating private school, the state reduces general aid to the resident public school district. The district can then raise local property taxes within its revenue limit to make up the difference, but the state funding is gone.

Two important points for board members:

- These are public tax dollars. The tuition for private voucher schools is funded by reductions in aid to public school districts and by increased local property tax levies.
- The student does not need to attend a private school in the resident community. The voucher can follow the student to private schools in many locations around the state.

The state has placed percentage limits on how many resident students in a district can participate in the state wide voucher program. That limit has been increasing each year. As the limit moves upward, and as rules change, we are moving toward an environment in which any student who meets the income rules and other eligibility criteria can use a voucher. Those vouchers are paid with taxpayer dollars.

We are already seeing clear local impacts. In some of our own area districts, around twelve percent of the local levy is now effectively paying tuition for students who attend private schools in the voucher program. These include schools that are not located in the local community.

As voucher participation grows, the state sends more money directly to private schools and reduces the aid that would have gone to public districts. Local boards then face pressure from both directions. On one side taxpayers want lower property taxes. On the other side community members expect the public school to maintain programs, activities, and class sizes.

There is another concern that boards need to understand. Many families will understandably be attracted to what looks like a shiny new option. A private voucher school may promote small class sizes, special programs, or a particular philosophy. The voucher pays the tuition to that school. But if the student later returns to the public school, the public district does not get that voucher money back. The local public school

then serves the student with local resources after state dollars have already been redirected.

We often think of long standing religious schools when we think of private education. Going forward we are likely to see more private for profit schools appear in new locations across the state. This has occurred in other states with very broad voucher systems. Wisconsin is now moving into that environment.

This is not about attacking parents who want options or criticizing private education. It is about ensuring that board members and superintendents understand the financial and program impact of state policy on local districts.

Human resources and the competition for talent

The final major PAC theme for this year is human resources.

We no longer compete only with neighboring districts for teachers, specialists, and support staff. We now compete with the private sector for many of the same people. Teachers and administrators bring strong content knowledge, collaboration skills, communication skills, and the ability to learn constantly. Those are the same skills valued by many employers in other fields.

Board members are wrestling with very real questions. How do we attract and keep staff in a tight labor market. How do we think creatively about compensation, benefits, and working conditions. How do we support early career teachers so they stay in the profession. How do we grow our own future staff from our current students.

At PAC meetings we invite experts in human resources and gather examples from districts that are trying new approaches. We talk about compensation structures, benefits, flexible options where possible, and ways to recognize and support staff that do not always cost more money but do require intentional leadership.

What PAC does for you and your district

Each PAC meeting follows a similar pattern.

We begin by grounding our work in the theme of empowering schools in a time of increased choice. We then focus on one of the three major strands for the year:

- Artificial intelligence and technology leadership
- The voucher environment and its impact on public schools
- Human resource strategies for recruitment and retention

The goal is simple. When your superintendent walks into a board meeting, you can know that they are not facing these issues alone. They have a network of colleagues, experts, and supports working on the same problems, and they are bringing that collective thinking back to your district.

In a time when state policy is shifting rapidly, when private and for profit options are expanding, and when new technologies are changing how learning happens, we cannot afford to be passive. We must be intentional.

As board members and superintendents, you are the stewards of public education in southwest Wisconsin. Together, through our PAC work and through the daily decisions you make, we can empower schools for an educational landscape that offers more meaningful choices for students, not fewer.

-Dr. Jamie Nutter, Executive Director

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