Wisconsin Public Education Network

Note from Nov. 20. 2014 meeting in Madison

- 29 people attended the meeting which was held, Nov. 20, 2014 at WEAC in Madison.

- Dana Schultz summarized the agenda and then led a discussion about adapting the agenda to fit the urgent challenges faced by public schools after the Nov. 4 election. It was decided that in addition to thinking, talking, and acting in terms of a longer-term agenda to sustain the Wisconsin Public Education Network (WPEN), it was essential to think, talk, and act on a short-term agenda that addresses the ongoing assault on public education.

- The people around the table introduced themselves by completing the following statement: “I am ____________, from ______________ with _______________. We are working on (or our top priority is) ______________ in order to ______________.”

- Dana recapped what she heard as concerns and priorities and a discussion was held about how those concerns and priorities impacted and will impact WPEN.

- Chris Thiel led a discussion of the legislative landscape following the Nov. 4 elections—
  - In terms of public education, Thiel explained that the Wisconsin Assembly is now firmly in the hands of Republicans who, in the past, have passed anti-public education legislation and have already promised an agenda for 2015-17 that will be even more harmful to public schools. He did say that rural Republicans might hold the key to some success because they represent school districts that are in dire straits.
  - Thiel said the best place to stop even more harmful public policy might be in the Wisconsin Senate. In the last session, it stood against even more damaging bills being passed. Although Republican Sens. Michael Ellis and Dale Schultz retired, Thiel indicated Sens. Terry Moulton of the 23rd Senate District, Robert Cowles of the 2nd Senate District, Sheila Harsdorf of the 10th Senate District, Jerry Petrowski of the 29th Senate District, and Roger Roth, newly elected to the 19th District seat, represented enough votes to balance action by the Assembly.
  - Thiel also discussed what Republican policy initiatives might be included in the budget (which will be introduced shortly and that the Governor has said he wants passed quickly) …… voucher expansion (including special education vouchers) and independent, non-public school district charter schools (including a statewide charter school authorizing board). Thiel said he though separate bills would be introduced for increased public school accountability and measures to dismantle Common Core State Standards.
  - In conjunction with the discussion, Thiel made the following available to the group:
    - The reflections of Representative Steve Kestell, the Republican outgoing chair of the Assembly Committee on Education in the Sheboygan Press.
    - Links to a CNBC piece on the profit to be made in using public funding for non-public charter schools; an article about the poor performance of non-public charter schools in Ohio; and an article detailing how non-public charter schools generate profits through building lease deals.
    - A program on WUWM Milwaukee Public Radio featuring Alan Borsuk speaking about the 25th anniversary of the Milwaukee experience with the voucher scheme.

- Dana Schultz then summarized Thiel’s discussion by saying it was the goal of the meeting to determine what WPEN can do to advocate for public schools and play defense against anti-public school policy. She reiterated that WPEN wasn’t formed to tell groups and organizations throughout the state what to do, but, instead, to figure out how to support those groups and organizations in what they do and to magnify the impact of actions around the state.

- The group answered this question, “Where will WPEN be at the end of 2015 that will show the network was successful.” Answers were:
There will be a change in the conversation around the state to be about increasing public school resources and stopping voucher school expansion.

There will be a concise aspirational agenda on public education and public school advocates from communities around the state will be using that agenda.

The expansion of vouchers schools and other privatization attempts will be discredited and derailed.

WPEN will have a menu of methods to engage the public.

- To work toward those goals, WPEN partners discussed various actions and activities:
  - A single school board passed resolution opposing voucher expansion
  - Community forums
  - Organizing parents, grandparents, and communities who “love their public schools”
  - Use a survey being developed by network partners as a way to engage communities and to take action
  - Media events

The next meeting of WPEN will be held on Dec. 16 at WEAC in Madison. Jeff Leverich and Jeri McGinley will work on the possibility of moving the site of future meetings (as early as January) to another location to facilitate more out-state participation (or, perhaps, more than one meeting in various regions). At the Dec. 16 meeting, reports and sharing will take place from partner groups on the action items below—

1. Most importantly—because of the urgency following from the last election—WPEN must help its partner groups and organizations block/discredit voucher expansion and begin driving the conversation to be about what kids, schools, and communities need to deliver a world-class education to every public school child (specifically, increases in state-supplied public school resources). It will be the job of WPEN to facilitate the working together of groups and to magnify the message and the impact of the activity (for example, writing and distributing the anti-voucher resolution mentioned below). Activities considered included—
   - Writing opinion pieces for local media
   - A single resolution for school boards to adopt that opposes voucher expansion
   - Social media campaigns
   - Local/regional community events
   - Letters to the editor
   - Using a survey to make people aware of what is happening and to “turn them into” local public education advocates
   - Legislative contacts

2. Continue work across Wisconsin to change the conversation about public education to be about our aspirations for our children and our communities. A discussion centered on how that conversation can take on a “we are in this together” approach. Activities discussed included—
   - Repetition of a single aspirational message
   - Speaking in unison for public school children
   - Adding more pro-public education voices to the conversation
   - Forums designed to talk about the core values of local public schools that are shared in community
   - Using a survey to make people aware of what is happening and to “turn them into” local public education advocates

3. An ongoing strengthening of WPEN—
   - Fund-raising
   - Identifying organizations to invite to join WPEN
   - Education and training of partners in skills and public policy
   - Use of social media

- The progress on specific items partners are doing or contemplating that were discussed Nov. 16 will be shared—
  - A resolution school boards could adopt and pass along—with discussion—to their communities and elected representatives that will “block/discredit voucher expansion and begin driving the conversation to be about what kids, schools, and communities need to deliver a world-class education to every public school child (specifically, increases in state-supplied public school resources)” as WPEN partners decided. (Jeff Leverich)
  - A survey used in communities around the state to gather information on what people want/expect from their public schools while at the same time letting community members know about anti-public school
policies and how they affect their children. The survey could also serve to identify pro-public education advocates and drive local discussion to be about our shared value of public schooling. (Jeri McGinley and Pam Kobielsus)

- A strategy to involve Wisconsin’s school board members in advocacy for their public schools. This might include the resolution mentioned above and/or an action, presentation, discussion, etc. at the WASB convention in January of 2015. (Ellen Lindgren, Carol Carstensen, and Charlie Uphoff, and Susan Fox)

- Creation of a menu of activities, actions, and options that WPEN partner groups can consider when trying to drive the discussion about blocking vouchers and advocating for public schools (Jeff Leverich)

- A plan to identify and reach out to local, regional, and statewide groups and organizations that, if partners in WPEN, would give those groups greater influence in their communities and make our network more effective in connecting communities to their elected officials on behalf of their children and public schools. (Jeff Leverich)

- A strategy of where, when, and how WPEN can best impact legislative (both pro- and anti-public education) in the upcoming session. In other words, how can WPEN partners make the loudest and most effective noise. (Chris Thiel and John Forester)

- Possibility of establishing public education advocacy groups around the state based on the GRumps model (GRumps being Grandparents United for Madison Public Schools). (Carol Carstensen, Ann Arnesen, and Nan Brien)