



Easter Egg Hunt
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BRIAN WILSON/THE STAR NEWS

Medford Area Public Schools hosted a legislative meeting inviting area legislators to meet and talk about issues with school officials from 20 area districts. (Above) Sen. Jesse James (far right) asks a question of a presenter. others attending were Rep. Jimmy Boy Edming (l. to r.) Rep. Patrick Snyder, Rep. Donna Rozar. (Right) Medford director of curriculum Laura Lundy uses a yard stick to illustrate a point on mandated standardized testing.



Saluting veterans

Area veterans to take part in Never Forgotten Honor Flight on April 17

103 area Veterans will Board the 43rd Never Forgotten Honor Flight to Washington D.C. on April 17.

The Never Forgotten Honor Flight organization based in Wausau will fly 4 Korea and 99 Vietnam Era veterans from central and northern Wisconsin to Washington, D.C. to see the memorials that honor their service on Monday, April 17. It's the organization's 43rd flight since the first Never Forgotten Honor Flight took place April 27, 2010.

Among those veterans on Monday's flight, there are a number of veterans from Taylor County and surrounding areas who are taking part in the trip.

Local Vietnam era veterans taking part in the 43rd Never Forgotten Honor Flight to Washington D.C. on April 17 include:

John Fehlman of Medford. He served in the Army and was stationed in Germany - Supply 7th Inventory Control. He also served in Vietnam - 1st Signal Battalion in Phu Lam.

James Gorichs, of Medford served in the Marines in Vietnam from June 1963 to Sept 1966. He served with artillery in Vietnam.

Paul Hemmer of Medford served in the Army in Vietnam from July 1972 to September 1, 1977, with the rank of E5. He served with the Merrill National Guard unit and was called to active duty for Gresham Novitiate Uprising and Waupun State Prison Guard Duty.

Daniel Jaslowski, of Medford served in the Air Force in Vietnam from October 1968 to October 1972. He was stationed at Sawyer AFB, Michigan.

Dennis Nuernberger, of Medford served in the Air Force in Vietnam from September 1967 to September 1971 with the rank of Sgt., serving in Kansen, Germany as a Nuclear Weapons Specialist.

John Polzin of Medford served in the

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Event connects school, legislative leaders

BY BRIAN WILSON
NEWS EDITOR

School districts across the state are being impacted by concerns over financial stability, staffing and testing mandates.

On Monday evening, representatives from 20 school districts from throughout the region came to Medford to meet face to face with a panel of state legislators to share their concerns and urge action at the state level. The event continued a long tradition of inviting area legislators to learn first-hand about school issues. The district began hosting the events each spring in the 1990s.

Taking part in the session were State Sen. Jesse James of the 23rd senate district, 87th district Rep. James Edming, 69th district Rep. Donna Rozar and 85th district Rep. Patrick Snyder, all of whom

are Republican. Across them the legislators represent a broad stretch of central Wisconsin stretching from Wausau to Eau Claire and from Marshfield to Barron County to the north.

Panels of speakers presented on five different topic areas presenting information to the legislators. The legislators had the opportunity to ask questions and make comments on the topics.

Vouchers

Colby district administrator Steve Kolden led the call for increased transparency and accountability when it comes to public funds going to private schools under the state school voucher system.

Kolden explained that many people are unaware that the money that goes to voucher schools comes off the top of the state aid that public school districts receive. He said in the Colby School district

this year the local private school received \$243,571 in voucher funds which reduced the district's state aid by that amount. The Department of Public Instruction said the public school could increase local property taxes to offset that lost aid.

Kolden said people are unaware of where the voucher funds come from.

"They come dollar for dollar from local property tax payers," Kolden said. As a result he said the Colby district's levy is artificially inflated by nearly a quarter million dollars. Kolden emphasized that he was not casting blame at the private schools who utilize the voucher program, noting that it would be financially irresponsible of them to not take the money that was available for their students. "They are playing by the rules given to them," he said.

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LIVING: Area couple celebrates 70 years of marriage



SPORTS: Softball sees action in Rhinelander dome



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School officials present issues and concerns during legislative meeting

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Kolden went on to highlight what he sees as another major flaw in the voucher program — lack of accountability. “If I have a problem with my local school board, I vote,” Kolden said, of the power of the people to hold boards accountable at all levels of government. He said there is no place at the ballot box to oversee how private schools spend the taxpayer dollars they received.

“I don’t see oversight and accountability of taxpayer dollars,” he said, noting that last year the state spent \$444 million in vouchers.

“I have no voice in how those dollars are spent,” he said.

Rep. Rozar asked if he would feel more comfortable if they were able to separate it out on tax bills. Kolden said this would be a first step.

Rep. Snyder asked about the idea of a system where it was total open enrollment where the state funds followed the students to wherever they went. “I don’t know that Wisconsin could fully fund two education systems with property tax dollars,” Kolden said.

“Could vouchers cohabitate with public schools?” Snyder asked.

Kolden replied that they already do and that there was no way to take it away now. He said they need to work toward increased transparency and giving the public some oversight as to how those dollars are being spent.

Ryan Christianson, administrator of Marshfield School District, noted that in an entirely voucher-based system public schools would still be at a disadvantage because they have the responsibility to provide busing, Title programs and special education services to all the students in the district.

Testing

“Is the juice worth the squeeze?” asked Laura Lundy Medford Area Public Schools curriculum director as she and Greenwood School District administrator Joe Green presented about state testing requirements stating that the benefits did not outweigh the time and expense of the testing.

According to Lundy, the fixed-form state mandated testing has little value to districts or students in its current form. She instead called for the state to go toward an adaptive testing model, which she said presents a more complete measure of student learning.

Lundy used a yard stick to illustrate her point saying the fixed form testing measures student knowledge in a narrow band. In adaptive testing, if students get an answer wrong, it presents them with a slightly easier question and correct answers go on to harder questions. “In adaptive testing we use the whole ruler,” Lundy said, noting students may be low on one area but higher on others.

“It gives a better idea of where our kids land,” she said.

Lundy also noted there was a huge delay in getting results for the state-mandated standardized testing with the school district not getting the results until months later and the students and parents not getting results until the following school year. She compared this to other testing the district uses to measure student progress where the results are known instantly.

She said with the delay in getting results, the state tests mean nothing to students and teachers resulting in zero motivation for them to try to do well. She said districts try to motivate students to try their hardest on them, but told of students pushing the tests away after a few minutes or making patterns by filling in the bubbles on the Scantron answer sheets.

In addition, she said the tests present a significant investment in time and money. She noted that each year the state spends between \$16 million and \$18 million on testing which doesn’t include the staff time in local districts.

By comparison, Medford spends about \$18,000 a year on its own assessment testing. She noted that state law accepts local testing for reading assessment in grades Pre-K to two. She proposed that rather than duplicating what districts are doing for assessment testing, they expand this to all grades.

Green spoke specifically about the mandate for all juniors in the state to take the ACT test on specific days.

He said the ACT used to be a common requirement for those going on to college in the state, but many colleges and universities have gone away from requiring tests such as the ACT and SAT. Further, he said it made little sense to take someone in a trade program out of class to take the ACT when they have no intention of going on to college or university.

Green said school districts have done a “phenomenal job” with individualizing instruction. Yet, the testing falls under a “one size fits all” measurement.

Green said the school uses its own testing and assessments and figures out how to adapt and change instruc-



BRIAN WILSON/THE STAR NEWS

Rep. Jimmy Boy Edming makes a point while responding to a panelist at Monday’s Legislative Meeting held at Medford Area Senior High School.

tion to meet student needs. He said things like Forward Testing and ACT only measure a small percentage of what is taught and yet is used to make schools compete against each other in the state.

Snyder said he likes the idea of allowing schools to decide on testing but questioned the level of pushback they would get from the DPI and the governor’s office.

Green replied asking when has that stopped the legislature.

“We got 127 vetoes last session,” Snyder said. “We aren’t shy.”

“We want kids to improve. You are the experts,” Snyder said. “We need to get out of your way.”

Rozar noted the adaptive testing was what is currently being used for those getting nursing certifications and supported the idea of using it as a measure for students and schools.

Stratford administrator Nathan Lehman noted that many school districts are developing the “portrait of a graduate” and their own local “report cards” to show the public what the school is doing including things like the number of youth apprenticeships. He said this is more important than the information on the state report cards.

“I wonder if the rest of the state is being punished by the faults of the Milwaukee school district,” Snyder said.

Licensing flexibility

Medford administrator Pat Sullivan said school boards and administration should be able to assign experienced teachers where they can do the most good, but that the current licensing model does not allow them the flexibility to do that.

Sullivan gave the example of Medford having a 7th grade math position that was unfilled and longtime elementary teacher interested in moving into the position. He said licensing requirements blocked that option.

In the era of low turnouts for jobs, Sullivan called on the state to give more flexibility to get good teachers in front of students.

“Schools aren’t immune from staffing shortages,” Green said. He echoed Sullivan in calling for more local control in deciding where teachers should be, noting that local administration and school boards are where people will go if there are concerns among residents.

Green also called for the creation of a pathway to teacher licensure for para-educators. He described them as being among the most important people in the schools working with some of the toughest students. He called for increased flexibility to allow schools to put these experienced staff members in front of students.

Green said at the beginning of the school year there were over 1,000 teaching jobs unfilled in the state and objected to barriers that prevent people from getting in those positions.

He highlighted one such barrier in the Foundations of Reading Test (FoRT). Green said he has yet to find a teacher that he can identify as being the best teacher solely because they passed the FoRT. He noted that it is a

one-time snap shot test.

He said other programs such as the American Boards pathway don’t require the FoRT and he said the teachers he has hired through that program have been outstanding. He said this has more to do with the districts giving them strong mentors within the school building.

“We need that flexibility to put the right people in front of our kids,” he said.

The legislators recognized the teacher shortage and asked about the rules on bringing retired teachers back. Current law says they have to have 75 days of separation. In addition, they can only come back for 880 hours per calendar year, which works out to a .42 full time equivalency, or lose their retirement.

Rep. Edming noted there were issues with people “double dipping” by getting paid to work and getting their retirement.

“Who cares? It is their money,” Green said, noting he wanted to get qualified people in front of students in the classroom.

Rozar noted that in the past there were teaching colleges and nursing schools where they didn’t receive a bachelor’s degree. She asked if bringing back similar programs for kindergarten or elementary teachers would help the staffing shortage.

“We are in a staffing crisis,” Green said, noting that any measure would help, and that they didn’t need to necessarily be long-term solutions.

Sen. James asked if it would be better to go through the administrative rule process with the DPI or through the state legislature. Sullivan noted that with the legislators there, they were asking for legislative action and that school officials would support action.

School funding

“School districts have been getting crushed under the revenue caps,” said Neillsville district administrator John Gaier speaking to the legislators about the need for increased funding for schools.

Gaier highlighted what he said were inequities in the system in particular between the amount schools were able to spend on students from one area to a nearby area.

“The caps were inequitable from day one,” Gaier said, noting the state constitution requires education to be “as nearly uniform as practical.” He said the inequity grows when they see the lowest revenue districts are also the most economically disadvantaged districts.

He said many districts have had to go to referendum to keep their existing programs in place with two districts this spring saying they would have to dissolve if referendums were not approved.

Gaier also called for increased funding for special education. He gave the example of Neillsville schools where the district had to use general education funds to cover a \$900,000 shortfall in the special education costs. He said in his district of 886 students, it amounted to him not being able to spend a cent on the first 90 regular ed kids in order to backfill special education costs. Noting that special education is required and essential.

Gaier called for the state to increase school funding in the next biennial budget and to consider changes such as to the tax levy credit and switch it to a homestead-type credit which will keep the money in Wisconsin and get to those who need it the most.

He said the tax levy credit goes to the highest valued properties in the state with large amounts of it going to people in Illinois and elsewhere who own vacation property in the state.

Legislators pointed out that of the state’s budget surplus there is a large portion that is from one-time money while others are from additional revenues. Rozar said legislators are looking at how to use those funds differently including looking at tax reform.

“We are taking too much money from people,” she said, adding that she hoped for significant reforms and investment. She also said she believes education is important.

Snyder suggested school officials also work on U.S. Senators Tammy Baldwin and Ron Johnson to get additional federal funds for special education, noting that in the past the federal government gave much more support for special education than they do now.

Spending flexibility

Medford school finance director Audra Brooks closed the program with a presentation calling for greater flexibility in how schools can use common school fund dollars. This amounts to about \$40 per pupil per year.

The common school fund comes from the Wisconsin Bureau of Public Lands and specifically goes to support school libraries. Brooks said she would like to keep the funds in the libraries, but loosen restrictions on how the money may be spent to include such things as library furniture, professional development for school librarians or supplies such as copy paper for the libraries.

“I think it is needed,” Edming said.