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One of the most significant changes in this profession is the evolution of the school business manager.

Getting Focused

By Angela D. Peterman, RSBS

It is such an honor to serve this organization and its members and truly awe-inspiring to follow in the footsteps of so many outstanding professionals who have helped develop ASBO into the exemplary professional association it is today. I appreciate your support and trust and will be looking to you for your continued guidance during my term as president of ASBO International.

This year, on the doorstep of our Centennial, we have the opportunity to Get Focused—our theme for the 2009 Annual Meeting that will be held in Chicago next October. One way to Get Focused is to look at our future through a lens from the past.

It’s May 16, 1910. Seven men—school accounting officers—are gathered around the U.S. Commissioner of Education’s desk in Washington, D.C. They have come together to establish standards for school accounting and reporting. After three days of meetings, the National Association of School Accounting Officials is born. The object of NASAO, as outlined in its first manifesto, was “standardization of fiscal, physical, and educational data of school systems for presentation in the form of public reports.”

Do you suppose those founding fathers ever imagined the legacy they would leave? Today, 99 years later, we’ve grown from a membership of 7 to a membership of 6,000. Many of the founding principles remain the same; there is no doubt the roles of the school business professional and public education have evolved significantly since 1910.

Changing Times

The school of 1910 was likely one room where the teacher was the administrator. Sanitation, plumbing, heating, ventilation and air conditioning were terms that were foreign. Students served as the custodian. Today, ASBO and its members focus on so much more: operating, building, maintaining, purchasing, financing, transporting, and feeding students. And let’s not forget about the expertise needed to negotiate employee contracts, health insurance benefits, tax sheltered annuities, and the political system.

One of the most significant changes in this profession is the evolution of the school business manager from the “back room bean counter” to an invaluable member of the education team. ASBO and each of our members have been instrumental in facilitating that change. Each day sees new challenges in public education, whether it is the changing economic picture, the “health” of our buildings, or the social service expectations now placed upon us. Now, more than ever, we must look to ASBO and our peers to help us hone our skills and share resources. Get involved with ASBO, join a committee, mentor a peer, or submit an article for School Business Affairs.

ASBO has a history rich in advocacy, innovation, and professionalism. From the organizational meeting in 1910 to the Economic Crisis Summit hosted in Washington, D.C., in December 2008, this association has been a leader of change in school business. Those changes occur only when you are involved.

As we explore the evolution of school business and reflect upon our role from 1910 to 2009, I will be sharing some “interesting historic tidbits” in each issue. For example, in 1918, Mary C. O’Farrell, secretary of the board of education at Waverly, New York, became the first woman to attend an ASBO annual meeting.

If you have historic “tidbits” to share regarding the evolution of school business, please email them to me at angie.peterman@comcast.net

President, ASBO International
Executive Director, Oregon Association of School Business Officials
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GET FOCUSED: 2009

In 1959, ASBO International implemented the idea of a themed Annual Meeting—the first theme was Business Management Improves Education. Since then, the annual meeting theme has guided and reflected the direction of the association. In the past few years, topics have included Reaching New Summits, Change Is a Journey, and Celebrating the Success of Children.

This year, ASBO President Angie Peterman selected Get Focused as the theme. I want to share with you some of the internal discussion surrounding how Get Focused came to be and how it will relate in 2009.

Our goal throughout this year is to take a closer—and retrospective—look at our association and the school business profession over the last 99 years. We will be focusing on, analyzing, and highlighting the profession as we build up to our centennial in 2010.

Because ASBO’s first headquarters was in Illinois, the 2009 meeting in Chicago is an ideal venue to showcase our history—to focus on where it all began. We are also taking a closer look at our members’ current needs, the future trends of the profession, and the tone of the environment within which our members work.

So with the direction set, the ASBO staff sat down to design the logo for 2009 and created the image you see above. The camera lens is the graphic element through which we’ll tell our story. The logo corresponds with the look of a camera that zooms in and focuses on snapshot moments. ASBO will not only be commemorating the history of the profession, we’ll be looking ahead with the lens from the past.

YOUR PERSPECTIVE

Continuing a good thing…

In 2008, Jerry Brendel made a bold statement in each month’s President’s Message, asking members to weigh in for or against his position. This gave us some great opportunities to hear many differing opinions on a variety of topics. We will be continuing this in 2009. We also will be accepting lead statements from members. In my managing editor hat, I must point out that none of the statements reflect any stand by ASBO, so please don’t be offended if we choose a contrary position with which to respond!

Our topic for this month is Salary Schedules Aren’t Efficient or Effective. What’s your opinion? Email your thoughts to me at smcmahon@asbointl.org.

—Siobhan McMahon, Managing Editor

Colophon: During this issue, Lauren travelled to Denver for her first ASBO Annual Meeting and then seven hours home for Thanksgiving in New York; Siobhan bought a new washing machine; and Pat worked with Carter Publishing Studio to develop this new look for School Business Affairs.
As we usher in 2009, we begin the countdown to ASBO International’s 100th birthday. We celebrate many benchmarks throughout our lives, but turning 100 seems to be at the top of the list. As we began planning our pre-birthday bash, many of us at ASBO reviewed the past 98 years and noted many differences and just as many similarities. Throughout this next year, we will reflect on our past as we look toward our future.

My father always told me never to forget where I came from. The same holds true with ASBO. We should never forget how we got to this point. The many who came before us have paved the way for all that we enjoy today.

Just as 2009 brings with it this great pre-birthday bash, it also brings with it very uncertain times. Many of us can’t remember when the economy of the United States has been so dire. We will be challenged as we have never been challenged before as we continue to manage our district budgets and provide the same services to our nation’s students, but often with fewer resources. The resources of people, time, and money all will be stretched as far as they can go, and then will be stretched a bit more. And while tough challenges are nothing new for the school business official, the challenges before us will take all of our collective talents if we are to be successful.

We Stand by You

For the past 98 years, ASBO has been there for the school business official, providing quality professional development opportunities to help manage during good times and bad. As we move toward that 100 year mark, ASBO will continue to stand by its members, helping them meet the challenges they face every day.

Last month, ASBO brought together some of the best minds at our economic summit to put together a document that could serve as a resource to our school systems. Additionally, last month ASBO began working with President-Elect Obama’s transition team as we move forward to find better ways to meet the needs of the children in our nation’s classrooms. ASBO will continue to work with other organizations and within our own profession to provide our members with the tools they need to be successful.

Understanding that the current economic crisis has taken its toll not only on school and district budgets but on personal budgets as well, ASBO is stepping up to the plate to help our members on a more individual basis. As school systems manage resources through reductions in force, ASBO wants to make sure that ASBO members who are victims of staff reductions are able to maintain their ASBO membership. During this tough year ahead, ASBO will extend any active member’s membership that has expired through the year if they lose their job due to a staff reduction. This is ASBO’s way of showing our commitment to our loyal members. Any member who needs to take advantage of this offer should simply write me a letter of request.

As we forge ahead in these uncertain times, one thing is certain: ASBO International is there for you . . . our members. I leave you with a quote from Erich Fromm: “The quest for certainty blocks the search for meaning. Uncertainty is the very condition to impel man to unfold his powers.”

One Thing Is Certain: Nothing Is Certain

John D. Musso, RSBA

Next month in School Business Affairs:
Managing School Facilities After a Disaster
Minimizing Your District’s Carbon Footprint
Clean Facilities for Healthy Students
Since then, school business officials’ areas of responsibility have grown and changed. As former ASBO International Executive Director Anne Miller explains: “These are the people who are in charge of allocating resources in these hard economic times and with the implementation of No Child Left Behind. It’s critical that you have someone in that role who not only knows the numbers side, but also the education side” (Archer 2003, p. 3).

As an important cabinet-level position that reports directly to the superintendent and board of education (Stevenson and Tharpe 1999), the school business official (SBO) often holds the second most powerful position in the district. Along with calls for fiscal and educational accountability, this elevated stature underscores the need for business officials to have leadership skills to complement their critical technical skills.
Exploring Views of ASBO Members

Effective leaders help others build an organizational vision on a sense of purpose. They support others’ accomplishments and work collaboratively to make necessary changes to promote an effective system (Fullan 2005; Kouzes and Posner 1987).

Clearly, SBOs agree that budget, financial resource management, administration, and compliance are the most essential skills.

To better understand the leadership skills that today’s SBOs need in their evolving role, we surveyed hundreds of ASBO members. Our online survey asked respondents to identify the degree to which the identified skills are needed to fulfill their responsibilities. Possible responses were 1 (essential), 2 (somewhat essential), 3 (somewhat not essential), and 4 (not essential). Respondents could also indicate that a particular skill was “not applicable.” The survey also asked about the SBO’s gender, age, ethnicity, education, experience, career path, district size and type, and district collective-bargaining status.

All 4,350 subscribers to the ASBO Listserv received the survey by email. The overall response rate (18.4%) and primary demographic characteristics of respondents were similar to other surveys of ASBO members. The findings report the views of 743 SBOs from school districts in the United States.

The survey used the leadership domains of the Total Leaders model outlined by Schwahn and Spady (1998). Their model includes five pillars of organizational change: purpose (it has meaning for me), vision (it’s clear and exciting), ownership (I want to be part of it), capacity (I can do it), and support (our leader is helping us do it). The pillars translate into five leadership domains:

- Authentic leadership
- Visionary leadership
- Cultural leadership
- Quality leadership
- Service leadership

Three performance roles, in turn, describe how organizational leaders carry out each domain. The resulting 15 performance roles compose the leadership skill set in our research. We also used 33 technical skills based on ASBO’s Professional Standards.

Ranking Technical and Leadership Skills

SBOs reported that 10 of the 33 technical skills listed were the most essential. The average ratings were 1.25 or less (see Table 1). The relatively low standard deviations indicate that SBOs agree that the first three technical skills are absolutely essential: analyze and manage budgets; gather and organize information; and prepare, analyze, and report financial information. It should be noted that average responses for all 33 technical skills fell between 1.04 and 2.16. Since no questions had mean results near 3.0 or 4.0, SBOs generally viewed each skill as at least somewhat essential.

Seven of the highest-rated skills fall within the financial resource management area of ASBO’s Professional Standards:

1. Analyze and manage budgets
2. Prepare, analyze, and report financial statements
3. Present financial data
4. Forecast revenue sources

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 1. Highest-Rated Technical Skills</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>ASBO Standard</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Analyze and manage budgets</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gather and organize information</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prepare, analyze, and report financial statements</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Present financial data</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Solve problems and resolve conflicts</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Know and apply ethical frameworks</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Forecast revenue sources</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Develop an operational plan</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prepare a budget calendar</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interpret school finance funding model</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note: The table includes the 10 technical skills receiving the highest average ratings (1.25 or less). A complete list of skills and ratings can be obtained from the authors.*
5. Develop an operational plan
6. Prepare a budget calendar
7. Interpret school finance funding model

The other three fall within ASBO’s educational enterprise area:
8. Gather and organize information
9. Solve problems and resolve conflicts
10. Know and apply ethical frameworks

In contrast to SBOs’ agreement that many technical skills are very essential, all 10 of the technical skills noted above were more highly rated than the highest-ranked leadership skill. The highest-rated leadership skill averaged 1.39.

**SBOs view technical skills as more essential than leadership skills in their positions.**

The six leadership skills that received the highest average ratings (less than 1.7) are detailed in Table 2. Although the respondents seemed to agree on the importance of technical skills, the standard deviations reveal greater disagreement among school business officials about the importance of leadership skills. This lack of agreement may relate to SBOs’ beliefs that overall leadership responsibilities belong to the superintendent.

Overall, analysis of responses indicated an agreement in the perceived importance of seven technical skills and two leadership skills (see Table 3). Once again, the clusters of technical skills are deemed to be more essential (means closer to 1.0) than are the skills encompassing leadership.

Statistical analyses revealed no differences in mean responses on the basis of SBO or district characteristics. Responses to inquiries about the technical and leadership skills were quite similar when examined by gender, age, ethnicity, educational level, years of experience in current position, career path, district size, district type, state, district collective-bargaining status, and number of years in the profession. Because none of the differences in responses were statistically significant, the findings suggest that ASBO members agree that technical skills are much more critical to their performance than are leadership skills.

Clearly, SBOs agree that budget, financial resource management, administration, and compliance are the most essential skills. These highly rated technical skill factors are much more important than the two leadership factors (organizational and inclusive). Organizational leadership skills focus on determining direction for the educational organization through various leadership activities. Inclusive leadership skills include activities that help employees support and participate in the direction and leadership of the organization. In addition, the human resources management factor was rated as somewhat essential.

**Comparing Skills with ASBO Standards**

The technical and leadership skill factors differ somewhat from ASBO’s Professional Standards and the Total Leaders performance roles. The ASBO Professional

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**Table 2. Highest-Rated Leadership Skills**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Domain</th>
<th>Domain</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>SD</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Model core organizational values and personal principles</td>
<td>Authentic</td>
<td>1.39</td>
<td>0.601</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Develop change-friendly culture</td>
<td>Cultural</td>
<td>1.55</td>
<td>0.689</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Support organizational purpose and vision</td>
<td>Service</td>
<td>1.61</td>
<td>0.702</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Employ a client focus</td>
<td>Visionary</td>
<td>1.61</td>
<td>0.704</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Restructure the organization</td>
<td>Service</td>
<td>1.61</td>
<td>0.724</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Involve everyone in productive change</td>
<td>Cultural</td>
<td>1.69</td>
<td>0.681</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note: The table includes the six leadership skills receiving the highest average ratings (1.7 or less). A complete list of skills and ratings can be obtained from the authors.*
Standards are listed at the top left of Table 4, and the seven factors are at the top right. There are some differences between the standards and skill factors. For example, ASBO’s financial resource management standard is segmented into three technical skill factors: budget (analyzing and managing resources), compliance (following generally accepted accounting principles, Governmental Accounting Standards Board, and audit compliance), and financial resource management (accounting, record keeping, managing cash flow). Two ASBO standards, facility management (operations and maintenance) and ancillary services (food service and transportation), are represented in only one support services factor.

The bottom left of Table 4 lists five domains of the Total Leaders model, and the two factors resulting from this study of SBO views appear on the bottom right. Two of the Total Leaders performance roles (authentic and visionary leadership) become the organizational leadership factor, and the other three (cultural, quality, and service leadership) join in inclusive leadership.

### Improving ASBO Standards and SBO Skills

Based on the results of this survey, we conclude that SBOs view technical skills as more essential than leadership skills in their positions. They agreed strongly that budget and financial management skills are the most essential skills. Further analysis suggests a modification in the ASBO Professional Standards. The standard currently labeled “financial resource management” would better highlight essential skills if it were subdivided into three areas: budget, compliance, and financial resource management.

Many respondents thought leadership skills were important, but SBOs were not strongly aligned regarding the importance of leadership skills. Because SBOs are critical members of districts’ leadership teams, and because they need to have an effective voice in making strategic decisions, we believe ASBO should make leadership skills a stronger component of the professional standards.

Interestingly, there were no significant differences between responses of men and women or among those of different years of experience, large and small districts, and so on. We believe that despite the small response rate, it is possible to make recommendations for improving technical and leadership skills of SBOs in all school districts.

Examining the technical and leadership skills can be helpful to current SBOs as they tend to their own professional development; to districts as they recruit, screen, and interview candidates for the school business officer position; and to superintendents as they evaluate current SBO performance and consider skills in relation to responsibilities and future leadership roles.

ASBO and other state and national professional organizations should consider technical and leadership skills when determining topics for professional development. SBOs’ reports that leadership skills are less essential may reflect less self-confidence in performing those responsibilities. If so, there may be a market for workshops centered on leadership skills, ethics, and accountability in all areas of school operations.

Those who decide what skills and standards compose SBO qualifications or states’ certification and credentialing criteria might consider a blend of technical and leadership skills. Universities that offer degree or certification programs for SBOs might also ensure that leadership skills are represented along with technical skills when planning course content and internship experiences in business offices.
Looking to the Future

Many unanswered questions remain about the essential skills for current and future SBOs. Future research might be designed as follows:

- Interview and observe SBOs’ behavior on the job to understand the degree to which they demonstrate technical and leadership skills in effective performance.
- Seek superintendents’ reports of essential SBO skills to understand whether they think SBOs should develop leadership skills or focus only on technical skills.
- Design better studies of SBOs to understand differences in how demographic groups view skills. If, for example, beginning SBOs view skills in different ways from more experienced SBOs, then ASBO and professional organizations can better address respective group needs through focused training programs.
- Plan periodic surveys to assist ASBO in understanding trends in SBO views, revise standards accordingly, and encourage future professional development activities.

For the first time in many years, we now have research-based information on which to continue studying essential skills for school business officials. Now is the time for national and state professional associations to capitalize on this research and use it to continue to improve these organizations and our professional development in the coming years.

References


E. Glenn McClain Jr., Ed.D., is superintendent of the Platte Valley School District in Kersey, Colorado. Email: gmcclain@pvs.k12.co.us.

Richard A. King, Ph.D., is professor and associate dean at the University of South Florida Sarasota-Manatee.
ASBO International believes that every child deserves the power of education.

Every day, school business officials foster a learning environment where education can flourish. To support the idea that every child deserves an education, ASBO created the ASBO Research and Education Fund. The fund champions the behind-the-scenes work of school business professionals by sponsoring and advancing education and research initiatives to help them better serve students.

From research projects that explore how to best help students despite limited resources to initiatives that address the schools’ role in the local and global community, this fund will advance the effective management of education resources. Together, we can make a difference for the profession and for our students.

Affiliates Embrace AREF
ASBO International would like to thank Pennsylvania and Colorado ASBO for their support of AREF and ASBO’s “Positive Impact” program, a new initiative to make a difference in the cities we visit. Thanks to the fundraising efforts of these ASBO affiliates at their Annual Meeting networking event, school business officials raised $800 for AREF and donated another $800 to the Denver Library Early Literacy Program.

Visit www.asbointl.org/AREF for more information.
Do You Have Their Support? How to Make Informed Decisions Using Focus Groups

By Brian O. Brent, Ph.D., Kara S. Finnigan, Ph.D., and Tricia Stewart

W e spend our days making decisions. Often, the consequences of our choices seemingly affect only a handful of stakeholders. Few, for example, would anticipate much praise (or scorn) to follow their selection of a waste management company, although timely garbage removal is certainly important to students and staff. In this instance, the apparent trivial nature of the decision affords us much discretion and invokes limited scrutiny.

Eliciting useful information from stakeholders involves thoughtful questioning and listening—skills that are a bit more complicated than you might think.
Other issues, however, engender considerably more attention. The usual suspects include the decisions we make about our budgets, collective-bargaining agreements, capital projects, and other issues that involve substantial costs or are otherwise controversial (e.g., pouring rights contracts and bus routes). When confronted with such decisions, we do our best to employ Stephen Covey’s Habit Five: “Seek first to understand, then to be understood.” We listen to the views of our board members, union representatives, Parent-Teacher Association officers, and maybe our neighbors. Then, secure in our belief that we have our hand on the community’s pulse, we charge ahead.

Regrettably, when we rely on a scattershot approach to gauging stakeholders’ opinions, we often find ourselves off the mark. Perhaps, we give too much credence to “squeaky wheels” even though their views do not represent other stakeholders. For instance, we have a colleague whose district shelved a capital project after several “spirited” exchanges with members of a taxpayer association. Ultimately, the district learned of the broader community’s support for the project—but not until after the budget vote, when the incentive aid for the project had lapsed.

How can you better predict how various stakeholders will react to proposed district actions? We suggest that you ask them, using a well-planned series of questions in a nonthreatening environment. We call this process conducting a focus group.

In what follows, we describe how you can use focus groups to inform your decisions. You will discover that eliciting useful information from stakeholders involves thoughtful questioning and listening—skills that are a bit more complicated than you might think. And if you take the time to develop these skills, you will make better decisions.

Our discussion draws from Richard A. Krueger and Mary Anne Casey’s Focus Groups: A Practical Guide for Applied Research, an invaluable resource that outlines the steps necessary to conduct a meaningful focus group.

**How to Conduct a Focus Group**

Conducting a focus group is not simply a matter of calling people together to talk about an issue. Further, focus groups are not means to share information, express our positions, reach consensus, or facilitate shared decision making with stakeholders; that is what we typically do during board and staff meetings. Instead, conducting a focus group entails bringing together 6–10 people who are representative of a group whose views we would like to understand better, questioning them about an issue, eliciting responses from each participant, listening, and interpreting what we heard.

A simple example will help us illustrate how you can (and should) use focus groups to inform your decision making. Consider the following scenario:

Faced with declining K–12 enrollments, a school board wants to understand how its community and staff would react to three options: (1) consolidate with another district, (2) close the secondary school and tuition out its students to other districts, or (3) do nothing—and continue to have a comparably higher equalized tax rate.

**Whom Do You Ask?**

Our first task is to identify the stakeholders in the decision. Here, several groups come to mind immediately: students, teachers, administrators, parents, and taxpayers. However, some deeper thinking reveals that these groups are too broad. For example, we could reasonably anticipate that elementary teachers’ views would differ from those of secondary teachers regarding the tuition option, since the secondary teachers stand to lose their positions. So, too, might taxpayers’ views differ, depending on whether they have children in the district’s schools.

To increase the likelihood of our focus groups yielding useful information, it is important that the participants represent a distinct group whose views we want to understand—what researchers term “homogeneous.” Homogeneity is important because we want participants to feel comfortable sharing their opinions. Groups composed of participants with different stakes in the issue—in our example, parent taxpayers and nonparent taxpayers—might have conflicting views that limit honest discourse. That is not to suggest that we want all participants to think alike—indeed, we expect members of a stakeholder group to have contrasting opinions among themselves—but we understand that participants will more likely share their views in a nonthreatening environment.

It follows from this point that we will need to conduct several focus groups, each representing a different stakeholder group. Continuing our example, we believe that four stakeholder groups frame the issue: elementary personnel, secondary personnel, parent taxpayers, and nonparent taxpayers.

Conducting separate focus groups with the various stakeholders will afford us the opportunity to compare and contrast multiple opinions about the issue at hand. But conducting only one focus group per stakeholder might offer us only limited insight. What we need is confidence that we have reached saturation—the point in the process when we begin to hear the same points over and over, when the stakeholders are not providing new insights into the issue.

To reach this point, we typically need to conduct three to four focus groups with each set of stakeholders:

- **Group 1:** elementary personnel
- **Group 2:** secondary personnel
- **Group 3:** parent taxpayers
- **Group 4:** nonparent taxpayers

As noted earlier, each focus group should have only...
6–10 participants so that each member of the group can share his or her opinions; larger groups make this difficult. We can use a number of strategies to identify the participants, such as staffing records, student records, and taxpayer rolls. However, we want to guard against groups that are biased. Remember, the intent of the focus group is to gather a range of opinions that offer insight into how various stakeholders view the issue.

What Do You Ask?

Once the groups have been identified, we need to develop a line of questioning so that participants’ responses will inform our decision. The recommended time for a focus group is one to two hours; if any longer, participants seem to disengage and the utility of conversation declines. Accordingly, we need to be prepared to ask about 10–12 questions, which Krueger and Casey organize as (1) opening questions, (2) introductory questions, (3) transition questions, (4) key questions, and (5) ending questions.

Homogeneity is important because we want participants to feel comfortable sharing their opinions.

**Opening questions.** The purpose of an opening question is to get people comfortable speaking with one another. To do so, we ask everyone to respond to a short, fact-based question that requires no more than a 30-second answer. Because we want to encourage later discussion, we also want to be careful not to ask questions that might privilege one person’s opinion over another.

For example, in school settings, we generally don’t want to ask participants to reveal their education level, believing that some group members might defer to more educated participants on educational issues. Instead, we might request:

*Please share your name and how long you have been living in the district.*

**Introductory questions.** Introductory questions serve to “introduce” the issue—that is, to get participants to reveal what they understand about an issue and their initial thoughts. For example, we might ask parents,

*Have you heard that the district is experiencing declining enrollment?*

**Transition questions.** Transition questions enable us to learn participants’ initial thoughts about the issue and serve as a link between the introductory question and the key questions that follow. Consider the following:

*What was your first reaction when you learned that the district enrollment is declining?*

**Key questions.** Participants’ answers to our key questions are the raison d’être for conducting focus groups. In other words, participants’ responses to these questions will afford us the greatest insights (in our example) about how they regard the various options the board is considering.

Key questions typically require us to probe each participant’s responses so that we best understand his or her comments. However, when we probe, we want to ensure that participants do not feel like they are being interrogated. To do so, we recommended that you ask “Why?” sparingly. Instead, queries like “Can you say more?” will likely prompt further elaboration without seeming confrontational.

Continuing our example, we might use the following key questions and probes:

*How would you feel if the district consolidated with another district?*

*How would you feel if the district closed its secondary school and tuitioned out its students to other districts?*

*How would you feel if the district maintains its current K–12 structure, although it will have a higher equalized tax rate than neighboring districts?*

*What are the advantages and disadvantages of each of these options?*

**Ending questions.** Ending questions close the discussion and give participants a final opportunity to share their views. Typically, focus group moderators use a combination of the following types of ending questions:

- The “all things considered” question: *All things considered, if you could advise the board, which option would you recommend it pursue?*

- The “summary” question, asked after the moderator summarizes the discussion: *Does my summary accurately reflect the points that were made in our discussion?*

- The “final” question, to ensure that in planning the focus group we did not miss a critical aspect of the issue: *Is there a point or issue that we did not address today that you feel is important to the debate about how the district should address declining enrollment?*

How Do You Ask (and Listen)?

All focus groups require a moderator—the person who asks the questions and guides the discussion. Ideally, the moderator is someone with whom the participants are fully comfortable sharing their views. Accordingly, you or other administrators may not be suitable moderators. Consider the reluctance that teachers, particularly those...
Who are untenured, might have sharing with administrators their views about district policies on compensation and promotion.

In our example, participants might believe that district administrators already have a preferred course of action (e.g., do nothing) and will not accurately represent their opinions to the board. This is not to suggest that you cannot serve as moderator but remember, the value of a focus group is to gather accurate information from stakeholders—information that will result only if participants feel comfortable sharing their views. Therefore, we suggest that your moderator be someone who knows the issue well enough to probe participants’ responses, but does not limit discussion.

It is also paramount that the moderator refrain from sharing his or her views on the issue—either explicitly by agreeing with a point a participant makes verbally (e.g., I agree) or stating his or her views independently (e.g., I would tuition out students) or implicitly by nodding in affirmation of a participant’s comment. Though we want to communicate our respect for participants, we also need to ensure that we do not signal our agreement with a comment. Remember, focus groups are about listening to others’ views, not advancing our personal or district’s position.

Analyzing your data can be the most difficult step and takes time and patience. Keep in mind that your unit of analysis is the group level: what themes came out of your elementary teacher focus groups, rather than what individual teachers said.

A good way to start your analysis is to read through all your transcripts, then come up with a list of words that are used as codes to categorize your data into important themes. Use your knowledge of this situation and previous studies of the topic to guide your coding process, but do not overlook unexpected themes or findings. The old-fashioned “cut-and-paste” method can help you organize your data into thematic categories; there are also a number of useful software packages, such as NVivo 8 and ATLAS.ti, that can facilitate this work.

We Know Just Enough . . .

This discussion only highlights the basic principles and steps of focus group interviewing. We strongly encourage you to read Krueger and Casey’s book; we are certain that it will be worth your time.

At this point, you might be thinking that conducting focus groups is a lot of work, and not worth the effort. Yes, focus groups take time and effort, but recall the amount of time and energy you have spent fixing problems that could have been avoided if, before acting, you had taken the time to better understand stakeholders’ positions.

We suspect that you would have saved time in the long run—not to mention scoring points for listening.

Reference


Brian O. Brent, Ph.D., is a professor and associate dean at the Warner Graduate School of Education, University of Rochester in New York. Email: bbrent@its.rochester.edu.

Kara S. Finnigan, Ph.D., is an assistant professor at the University of Rochester.

Tricia Stewart is a doctoral student at the University of Rochester.

www.aspointl.org
The recent shift toward greater accountability has put many educational leaders in a position where they are expected to collect and use increasing amounts of data to inform their decision making. Yet, because many programs that prepare administrators, including school business officials, do not require a statistics course or a course that is more theoretical than practical, administrators tend to have only limited knowledge of how to analyze, interpret, and use their data.

We’re here to help. This article provides a user-friendly primer on basic statistics and how you can use them to make sense of your data.

Statistics can be broken into two broad categories: descriptive and inferential. Descriptive statistics are used to describe or summarize a collection of data.

You almost certainly have experience with descriptive statistics, such as the mean that is often used for reporting attendance data and personnel salaries. Inferential statistics, in contrast, are most often used when you want to generalize beyond the data that you have. For example, your district has results from a curricular intervention that was piloted in two elementary schools and needs to determine whether to expand the intervention to the rest of its elementary classrooms. You would use inferential statistics in your decision-making process.
The type of statistics you use depends on the data you have and the types of questions you want answered. Given the breadth of this topic, we focus herein on descriptive statistics and leave inferential statistics for another time.

Suppose your superintendent asks you for information regarding teacher salaries in your district. Chances are she is not interested in seeing the salary of every teacher. Rather, she wants a small amount of information that will enable her to judge how well teachers are compensated. A couple of summary statistics and a simple chart would likely provide the superintendent with the information she needs. Descriptive statistics can come in handy in this situation.

**Measures of Central Tendency**

A measure of central tendency provides a single number that is most representative of your data points. It is an indicator of what value is “typical.” There are three measures of central tendency: mean, median, and mode. Which measure you use largely depends on the types of data you want to describe.

**Mean.** Your initial reaction to the superintendent’s request might be to provide her with the mean salary of teachers in your district. This makes sense given that the mean is perhaps the most well-known and often-used measure of central tendency. As Salkind (2008) explains, the mean of a distribution of data is like a fulcrum on a seesaw; it indicates the centermost point of your data. The mean is easy to calculate and is generally considered the most precise measure of central tendency because it takes into account all the data points in your collection of data (Gravetter and Wallnau 2008).

You must recognize, however, that the mean is not always a good representation of a set of data. For example, if your data contain outliers (i.e., data points that are much higher or much lower in value than the majority of your data points), those outliers will influence the mean. As a result, the mean will be higher or lower than what is typical of the majority of values in your data set and will poorly represent your data.

It is for this reason that the mean is not generally used to report home sale prices or managerial salaries (the sales price of mansions and the salaries of CEOs tend to be outliers). With teacher salary data, you could have a problem with outliers if you have a situation in which most teachers in your district are relatively new to the profession, but a few are on the verge of retirement after spending 30 years in the classroom.

Alternatively, you may be asked to report on types of data for which a mean is neither very informative nor appropriate for use. As a case in point, student performance on New York State assessment exams is reported on what is called an ordinal scale, ranging from 1 (below proficient) to 4 (advanced). The numbers 1 through 4 are used to represent rank-ordered achievement categories, but they have no real numerical meaning aside from the ranking. It is entirely possible to calculate a mean for ordinal data, but it will provide only limited information (what does a mean of 2.7 really tell you?).

**Together, a measure of central tendency and a measure of dispersion provide valuable information about the characteristics of a set of data.**

Nominal data are similar to ordinal data, except nominal categories have no rank order and may not even be represented numerically. Examples of nominal data include gender, race/ethnicity, item responses on multiple-choice tests, and courses taken by high school students. The mean is not at all appropriate for this type of information.

**Median.** If you order your data points by value from lowest to highest, the value or score that falls exactly in the middle of the list is called the median. Thus, the median identifies the midpoint of a data distribution based on the number of values or scores involved. The median is typically used in place of the mean when a data set includes outliers. That is because the numerical value of the outliers has no influence on the median.

The median works well with ordinal data, too; once you know the median, you know (by definition) that half the scores in your distribution are at or below the median and half are at or above it. Finally, the median, like the mean, is inappropriate for use with nominal data because such data cannot be ordered.

**Mode.** The mode is the value or score that occurs most frequently in your data. The mode can be used with any types of data, including nominal data. When appropriate to use, the mean and median tend to be preferred to the mode because they convey better-representative information. Nonetheless, the mode is very useful for describing nominal data, like item responses on multiple-choice tests (e.g., B was the modal response on question 1).

Unfortunately, measures of central tendency by themselves provide an incomplete picture of what a set of data looks like. This is because two data sets can have the same result for a measure of central tendency, but they can be quite different for the range of values or scores that comprise them. Figure 1 provides an example using teacher salary data for two districts, both of which have a mean teacher salary of $50,000. In district A, individual teacher salaries range from $22,000 to $78,000. In district B, salaries range from $42,000 to $58,000. There is much more spread in the salaries in district A. As a result, the mean by itself is not as good a representation of the salaries in district A as it is for district B.
Measures of Dispersion or Variability

A measure of dispersion is used to capture how different or spread out the values in a data set are from one another. We present three common measures of dispersion here. It is important to note that there are no measures of dispersion that are appropriate to use with nominal data.

**Range.** The range is the simplest measure of dispersion. It is the difference between the largest and smallest values or scores in your data set. The ranges for the teacher salary data shown in figure 1 are $56,000 and $16,000 for the distributions of districts A and B, respectively. This indicates that the salaries of the lowest- and highest-paid teachers in district B differ by only $16,000, but they differ by $56,000 in district A.

A major drawback of the range is that it is determined by just two values in a data set. As a result, it is very sensitive to outliers and fails to account for how spread or clustered all the other values are. We can use our salary example to illustrate this latter problem. With a mean of $50,000 and a range of $16,000, it could be that half the teachers in district B earned $42,000 and the other half earned $58,000. Looking at figure 1, that is obviously not the case. However, we would be unable to determine that knowing just the mean and the range.

**Interquartile range.** The interquartile range tends to be preferred to the range as a measure of dispersion because it is based on only the middle 50% of a distribution. By disregarding the lowest 25% and highest 25% of values, the interquartile range is much less sensitive to extreme values than the range. This measure of dispersion still does not capture the degree of spread or clustering of the rest of the values in the data set. Nonetheless, the interquartile range is often used when the median is used as a measure of central tendency.

**Standard deviation.** The standard deviation is the most commonly used measure of dispersion. In very simplistic terms, it indicates the average distance of all the values or scores from the mean of the distribution. The more each value differs from the mean, the larger the standard deviation will be. In our teacher salary example, district A’s salaries have a standard deviation of $7,000, 3.5 times larger than district B’s standard deviation of $2,000.

When the shape of a distribution of data is approximately normal (i.e., bell-shaped) like those shown in figure 1, knowing the standard deviation provides you with a wealth of information about the spread of values in your data set. More specifically, about 68% of the values or scores in a normal distribution lie within ± 1 standard deviation of the mean (roughly 34% fall within one standard deviation below the mean and another 34% fall within one standard deviation above the mean). About 95% of the values or scores fall within ± 2 standard deviations of the mean (Gravetter and Wallnau 2008). Applying this to our salary example, 68% of the teachers in district B earned salaries between $48,000 and $52,000, whereas 95% earned salaries between $46,000 and $54,000.

Given its relationship with the mean, the standard deviation is appropriate to use when the mean is used as the measure of central tendency.

Your Turn . . .

Together, a measure of central tendency and a measure of dispersion provide valuable information about the characteristics of a set of data. There are additional descriptive tools not covered in this article, such as frequency tables and charts, that we know you would find useful as well. Statistical and spreadsheet programs, like SPSS and Excel, now make it easy to calculate such statistics. It is up to you, however, to determine what statistics to use to best represent your data. We hope the basic information provided here will prompt you to seek additional information that will help you make good use of your data.

References


Karen J. DeAngelis is an assistant professor in the Department of Educational Leadership at the University of Rochester in New York. Email: kdeangelis@warner.rochester.edu.

Steven Ayers is the assistant superintendent for business in the Hilton Central School District in New York. Email: SAYERS@hilton.k12.ny.us.

Karen J. DeAngelis is an assistant professor in the Department of Educational Leadership at the University of Rochester in New York. Email: kdeangelis@warner.rochester.edu.

Steven Ayers is the assistant superintendent for business in the Hilton Central School District in New York. Email: SAYERS@hilton.k12.ny.us.
Thank You ING

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"ASBO International is pleased to welcome ING as a strategic partner. ING has partnered with ASBO International in helping school business officials meet the needs of every child every day."

—John Musso, RSBA, Executive Director, ASBO International
Massachusetts is a small but vocal state. Citizens pride themselves on maintaining as much local control of their government entities as possible. Thus, there are many small school districts in the Bay State. Ipswich, with about 2,200 students, is one of them.

Located 26 miles from Boston on the northeastern shore of Massachusetts, this beautiful oceanfront community is home to 13,300 residents (see Table 1). The public schools are highly regarded in the town and region, especially since a new combined high school–middle school was opened in 1999.

Ipswich is governed by an open town meeting at which every registered voter may speak and vote. Day-to-day affairs are conducted by an elected five-member board of selectmen, which employs a professional town manager. The school department, which spends about 60% of the town budget, is headed by a seven-member elected school committee and a superintendent of schools. Both boards meet regularly with a highly regarded finance committee composed of nine appointed citizen members. The finance committee tends to be the arbiter of financial disputes between town departments and provides a recommendation on every financial article to come before the town meeting.

In 1980, the state passed so-called Proposition 2½, effectively limiting increases in property taxes to 2½% per year of the total assessed value of property in each
municipality. At the time it was passed, residents of “Taxachusetts” carried the second-highest property tax burden in the United States, in addition to income, sales, and many other taxes.

To buy additional local services, citizens must vote to tax their real property at a higher rate by passing an operating budget tax override or a debt exclusion override. The operating budget override mechanism allows a designated amount of money to be added to the total levy in perpetuity. Debt exclusion overrides fund major capital projects, and the tax increase ends when the bond debt is paid.

Ipswich residents passed a bond debt override to build the new school, but with a few exceptions have not been willing to pass other overrides.

In 1993, the Massachusetts legislature passed the Education Reform Act, calling for increased funding for education and a significant increase in student performance standards. Performance is measured by numerous statewide tests administered under the Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment Standard. Some increased funding was realized, but an additional provision disallowing new educational mandates without supporting funds was not.

Ipswich worked hard in bringing a majority of students to Proficient or Exceeds Expectations levels under the Massachusetts assessment standards and in maintaining a very high success rate under the No Child Left Behind requirements.

As the tax-limiting laws squeezed the community’s ability to tax itself for nearly three decades, and especially with the recession that began in 2002, downward pressure increased on all municipal budgets, including the schools’ budgets. In 2008, the Ipswich cost per pupil was considerably below the state average. Teacher pay was below the state average and substantially below that of like districts. And maintenance and operating expenses were at their lowest reasonable level because of bond-funded upgrade projects and conservation measures already in place. The municipality’s health insurance cost share with employees was already the lowest in the state.

The school department had met funding limitations for at least five years by making cuts to programs and by using a spaghetti of other means:

- Increased fees
- Raised funds
- Competitive grants
- Entitlement and targeted purpose grants
- Gifts
- Special programs with local businesses
- Tuitions from extended day, prekindergarten, summer, and facility rentals
- Tuitions from students choosing to attend school in Ipswich rather than in their home districts, through the Massachusetts School Choice program.

In addition, the school committee aggressively pursued funding from a trust left for the benefit of the “Grammar School” in 1660. The proceeds of the trust were garnered from the rents of mostly seasonal residents of 167 “cottages” located on a neck of land overlooking Ipswich Bay and the Atlantic Ocean beyond.

The Little Neck homeowners own the structures they inhabit but rent the land beneath them from the trust. The revenues had been very small because rents were nominal for many generations, until 2002. During the ensuing few years, school committee members pushed the trustees to increase the rents; the residents disputed the increase formula; and in 2007, the matter went to court and payments to the school department ceased.

By 2008, about 10% of nondiscretionary spending came from these outside sources. (They included entitlement and targeted-purpose state and federal grants, such as Title I and Massachusetts Special Education Circuit Breaker funding.) State funding for pre-K–12 programs in the town covered less than 12%. (It included only Chapter 70 direct state education aid to cities and towns that had to be appropriated.) That left 78% of the budget to be funded by local taxes.

Table 1. Ipswich by the Numbers

| Population—2007 MA-DOR | 13,245 |
| Assessed value of avg. single family home—2008 MA-DOR | $504,300 |
| Average single family tax bill—2008 MA-DOR | $4,655 |
| School enrollment—2008 IPS | 2,200 |
| FY09 school budget (includes debt service) after override IPS | $21.2 million |
| FY09 outside funding dedicated to fixed costs IPS | $1.6 million |
| Ipswich cost per pupil (from all funding sources, FY07) MA-ESE | $9,734 |
| State average cost per pupil (same basis) MA-ESE | $11,819 |

Note: MA-DOR = Massachusetts Dept. of Revenue, Division of Local Services; IPS = Ipswich Public Schools; MA-ESE = Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education.
The Storm Gathers

Much like the storm that hit this region in October 1991, the perfect school funding storm developed as the school administrators, school committee, and other town officials tried to craft the fiscal year 2008–2009 budget.

1. All discretionary expenditures had already been removed from the budget, and the schools were relying heavily on non-tax-base funding to support basic instruction and operations.

2. The assessor’s office determined and the town manager informed the school committee that because of the contraction in the housing market and other factors, tax revenues would support only about a 1% increase over the prior year’s spending. (The budget called for a 3% increase in collectively bargained wage increases, which accounted for approximately 80% of the budget.)

3. The loss of about $500,000 in anticipated land grant revenue tipped the balance. This represented about 18.5% of essential outside funding.

The superintendent and administrative team drafted an initial level-services budget that could not be funded. Long-standing needs that had gone unfunded for several years, such as computer replacement, professional development, and school libraries, were not included in the level-services budget nor was rainy-day funding for uncertain new costs in energy, insurance rates, and special education. All that was left to cut was core staff and instructional programs.

Budgets in Ipswich are highly detailed public documents in which every salary, classroom, and operating expenditure is identified.

At its initial budget hearing in January 2008, the school committee instructed the superintendent to bring back a budget that could be funded and to identify clearly what would be lost. After cutting the number of teachers at every school level (increasing class sizes), world language programs, and classes for non-college-bound students, the mandate was met. The sacrifice, however, would be the quality of instructional programs in the classrooms that the community held dear, and that students from surrounding communities paid to obtain.

The FY09 school budget needed $23.3 million from all revenue sources; local and state taxes (local aid through Mass. Chapter 70 distribution) were projected to cover only $21 million. Without the land grant funds, nonappropriated revenues would cover only about $2.2 million. After cuts, the schools were $1.5 million short of a viable budget.

Budgets in Ipswich are highly detailed public documents in which every salary, classroom, and operating expenditure is identified. The budget book provides overviews, summaries, charts, and analyses, as well as plenty of information for individuals to argue for or against. Citizens began to become aware of the crisis as budget details were explained and publicized at televised meetings and in the press. The school administration spelled out clearly what would be lost. Soon, a core group of parents and businesspeople brought forth a call for “override” and the school committee agreed, though recent history suggested it would be unsuccessful.

Turning the Tide

As budget hearings and revisions continued, the small group of citizens started holding rallies to get out the word and gather support. The school committee passed a budget within funding parameters at the end of February with a strong statement that the amount was insufficient to provide the quality of education the town expected.

The school committee went to the finance committee and the selectmen to place an override question on the town meeting warrant and support it. They agreed, and with that, the foundation to prevail was laid.

The message of insufficient funding then went to citizens. Rallies turned into a highly organized campaign, led by a legally established political action committee carrying the name Turn the Tide. Its clear and stated purpose was to reverse the multiyear trend of lost educational programs in Ipswich and increase property taxes to support school expenditures at a more appropriate level. A 12-member leadership team (Table 2) included two residents with extensive experience in organizational structure and behavior, and in state and national political campaign development (Table 3).
The school committee and members of the school administration who resided in the town were asked to be highly visible in the community and to work from a strictly factual basis. A commitment was made to the public to identify the specific programs and expenditures to be funded and to be fully transparent and accountable for doing what was promised.

Turn the Tide developed and produced clear, succinct fact sheets, counted registered voters to determine the exact number of yes votes necessary to win, raised funds to support the campaign, and made sure to include something for every major interest group.

Families of tuition students from outside the town gathered to support the effort and pledged additional donated funds to the schools if the override passed. Seemingly endless statistics and analyses flowed from the offices of the superintendent and finance and operations director, to clarify all that had already been done to save money and the programs and classes that had been lost in prior years. Teams of phone callers went to work from local small business offices to reach every citizen, to identify those in support and still undecided, and to encourage them to review the facts. No time was wasted on definite no votes.

When the town meeting opened the evening of May 13, the high school auditorium was packed and residents overflowed into the parking lot outside. With the Turn the Tide message already out and seemingly reinforced by every yard sign and grocery store conversation, the town meeting vote overwhelmingly placed the question of an override of $1.49 million for the school department on the next election ballot.

Then, the intense activity increased. The next election was to be held in one week. Phone banks were reenergized, volunteers handed out more information flyers at every event and on street corners all over town, and babysitting and rides-to-the-polls teams were put on alert. Students contacted their older siblings away at college to vote by absentee ballot. And on voting day, rotating teams held signs at the one polling location in town . . . and waited when the polls closed for the tally.

Late that evening, it came: 2,831 for and 2,268 against with only 41 blank ballots. Turn the Tide had done just that. The years of budget cuts and program losses would finally be reversed.

The Tide Comes In

School opened the day after Labor Day with all programs intact and average class sizes back at the voted maximum for each grade level. Enrollment of choice students increased and for FY09 and FY10, the district will be able to adequately fund its programs. The land grant court battle continues.

Meanwhile, taxpayers are digging deeper into their pockets this year and, given current national and global economic news, many aren’t happy about it. Massive local efforts to increase taxes can’t be a standard MO for funding school budgets. This kind of effort produces a temporary fix, though a most appreciated one.

Like towns and cities everywhere that want to support their children, Ipswich is waiting and working for a permanent solution to the long-term problem: the cost of public education as currently delivered exceeds the available resources to support it.

Gail M. Zeman recently retired as director of finance and operations in the Ipswich Public Schools and is currently the president of the Massachusetts ASBO affiliate. A licensed school business administrator in Massachusetts, she works as a consultant in the field and is a member of the ASBO International Editorial Advisory Committee. Email: zmang@verizon.net.
Focus on where it all began.

99 years ago, seven men sat in a semicircle around the desk of the U.S. Commissioner of Education's desk. For three days, they "sat, perhaps smoked and certainly argued over standardization of school accounting and reporting procedures." Then called, the National Association of School Accounting Officers, ASBO International planted its roots in Illinois, where we had our first headquarters.

Join your colleagues to celebrate and prepare for the future of education as we look ahead with the lens from the past. Get focused on your professional development, on the needs of your district, on the history of school finance, and on where we’re headed as a profession.

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To Block or Not to Block? The Complicated Territory of Social Networking

By Michael McVey, Ed.D.

W hile standing behind a young woman in the school’s computer lab one day, I watched with interest as she updated her MySpace page. Just as she was about to save her work, she noticed me and, in a chilly tone, said, “Do you mind? This is private.”

I could almost hear 100 million subscribers to social networking sites begging to differ. Online social networking is more than just a passing fad; it’s a phenomenon that unifies people of all ages across the Internet and around the world.

The global growth of online social networking is startling. In 2006, only 7% of active Facebook users lived outside the United States; today, that number is 63%. According to market researchers ComScore Media Metrix (Swartz 2008), in the past year, the number of users of social networking sites increased by 50% in Asia, by 31% in Latin America, and by 69% in the Middle East.

The most popular social networking sites are Facebook and MySpace—both founded in the United States. However, the United States does not have a corner on the market. Hi-5 is rooted in Asia, Skyrock in France, and LinkedIn in the United Kingdom.

The global growth of social networking sites like MySpace and Facebook is social connectivity. People can now share and comment on videos, writings, Websites, and more. They can review and opine about everything from pizza parlors to politics. Friends, acquaintances, colleagues, and utter strangers swap images, movies, games, blogs, and bookmarks.

Sites like LibraryThing (www.librarything.com) allow a user to place online the titles from an entire lending library of books and then discuss them online. Even applications that at first blush appear to be without social networking characteristics actually are. For example, MapQuest (www.MapQuest.com) offers maps and directions, as well as the opportunity to review and discuss myriad subjects—from movies to the service at a restaurant.

And there’s the networking. LinkedIn (www.linkedin.com), for example, is a professional networking site designed to help participants develop their careers. Ryze.com is a similar free network. Members get a free network-oriented home page and can send messages to other members. They can also join special networks related to their industry, interests, or
According to Ryze, more than 1,000 organizations host networks on its site to help their members interact with one another and grow their organizations.

**Employee Interaction**

If your district is only now beginning to develop policies on employee use of networking sites, you are a couple of years late. Employees may already participate in social networking sites, such as Facebook or MySpace. Several education associations have Facebook accounts; the number of Listservs related to teaching and learning is astounding; and collaboration through online communities is commonplace among educators.

Such applications may be valuable to educators attempting to network and reach out to a larger community, but they should be aware that they can and should adjust their privacy settings so details of their profiles are available only to those whom they invite.

**Online social networking is more than just a passing fad; it’s a phenomenon that unifies people of all ages across the Internet and around the world.**

Some employees will be conscientious about their online interactions, but just as many may become caught up in online publication of information that could not only put their jobs in jeopardy but could also compromise their privacy, or their perceived sense of privacy. For example, they should be aware that displaying their day and year of birth on a profile page or sharing details of an upcoming trip might invite an unscrupulous person to abuse that information.

Adding personal insights to guest books, writing blogs, and interacting online through learning communities—all valid means for professional development and growth—also place the notion of privacy at risk of rapidly being eroded and challenged.

Even if school districts restrict employees from accessing these sites using district hardware, employees can easily set up their own blogs, join social networks, or add casual comments to Facebook pages from home. Public writing happens with such frequency and in so many online venues that a district cannot hope to monitor it.

**Changing Education**

The school district that slips into draconian policies that block everything social or shared may find itself forcing valid educational opportunities into the shadows and obstructing sites with excellent educational potential. With hundreds of millions of users of social networking sites, there is a new and overwhelming pressure to begin unblocking server ports.

There are valid networking sites with a role to play during school hours. Districts should certainly monitor their servers for social networking activity, but they may want to consider unblocking white-label social networks, such as those from Ning (www.ning.com). Using these sites, teachers can create their own social network complete with safeguards for privacy and for reviewing images and text posted to the site.

White-label Websites have been particularly helpful for schools wishing to enhance communication with parents or the broader community. One excellent example is a network constructed to keep parents current as their students travel to Washington, D.C., on a school trip (http://dc2008.ning.com). On this exemplar site, teachers added podcasts; threaded discussions, images, and videos from the trip; and created an engaging educational experience for not only the students but also their families.

School districts should be aware that if employees are going to use such Websites for valid educational purposes, they should employ the security features the Websites make available. For example, if a teacher is going to use a social networking site to engage students, it should be well within the district’s policy to expect and demand a higher level of security to ensure that students are participating safely. Employees should not accept a student into a group or into a network unless they are satisfied that he or she has a legitimate reason for being there.

As applications develop and social networking becomes more commonplace, the worst thing schools could do would be to impose suffocating restrictions on the use of these tools. It would be more valuable and set a better precedent for emerging tools and applications if districts took a proactive stance and educated students and employees on the power of this social networking reality. The more educators and their students know, the easier it will be for districts to maintain their security.

The hint for administrators is to watch the smartest and savviest users for their insights, learn from the mistakes of others, and listen to the advice of security experts.

**Reference**


Michael McVey, Ed.D., is an assistant professor in the education media and technology program at Eastern Michigan University in Ypsilanti, Michigan.
Students aren't widgets, and teachers don't work a 9 to 5 schedule.

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Leadership, History, Insights: Battlefield and Naval Academy Perspectives Change the Way School Business Officials Lead

By Nicole Verardi

Right now, students are stepping onto buses, raising their hands to answer questions, and feeling safe in classrooms. It’s just a regular day . . . made possible by school business leaders’ behind-the-scenes work. Drawn by that responsibility, more than 40 school business officials honed their skills as leaders in education by participating in the 2008 Eagle Institute, held July 31–August 1 in Annapolis, Maryland, and sponsored by AXA Equitable Life Insurance Company.

Leadership 101
Led by Jeff McCausland, Ph.D., retired colonel and professor of international law and diplomacy at the Penn State Dickinson School of Law, this group of esteemed professionals and emerging leaders began with Leadership 101, exploring what it means to be a leader. Insights from Will Rogers and Colin Powell illustrated the difference between management and leadership. For example, leaders cultivate vision and motivation, whereas managers focus on meeting day-to-day goals.

During this discussion, McCausland noted that “vision without resources is a fairy tale”—a truth school business officials know well. Leaders must create realistic visions. Participants also discussed the importance of identifying the stakeholders and communicating with them to ensure that they understand that vision.

It’s said that the best lessons come from making mistakes, a maxim proved by key players in the American Civil War: Confederate President Jefferson Davis and President Abraham Lincoln. With his prestigious background, Davis might be thought the better leader, but Lincoln’s failures might have better prepared him to face the challenges with the threat of defeat.

Lessons from the Battlefield
The next morning, attendees traveled to the Antietam Battlefield in Maryland to experience September 17, 1862, the bloodiest day in American history. Colonel Tom Vossler, U.S. Army (Ret.), brought to life the thunderous cannons, smoky air, and bravery of the day, while McCausland related the leadership challenges to the everyday work of school business officials.

Vossler set the stage for this Civil War battle, explaining that morale was high for the Confederate side, as General Robert E. Lee planned to invade the North by winning this battle. On the Union side, soldiers were still recovering from Second Manassas. Their leader, General
George McClellan, had been reinstated in command only two days before this battle and was still at odds with President Lincoln.

By walking along landmarks such as Bloody Lane and Burnside’s Bridge, these school business officials captured the essence of the struggle—and the leadership challenges—that the leaders faced at Antietam almost 150 years ago.

“Vision without resources is a fairy tale”—a truth school business officials know well.

That night at dinner, participants divided into groups to discuss these leadership challenges, how they rang true with them in their current positions, and how the day’s experience changed their understanding of leadership.

For example, from Union General Ambrose Burnside’s failure to cross Antietam Creek when ordered by McClellan, participants learned that leaders must take some risks or else miss opportunities. Unwilling to take a risk, Burnside delayed leading his 12,000 men across the creek—a creek that his men could have easily forded to meet the fewer than 500 Confederates on the other side.

Several other points resonated with the participants:

- **Make decisions quickly.** Although accountability can compel school officials to take their time when making decisions, the quick, off-the-cuff choices we make are some of our best. Trust your team, make your decisions, and accept responsibility for errors.
- **Create passion in your team, translating vision into action.** To get everyone on board, leaders must understand and believe in their goals, just as the soldiers needed to feel passion to fight.
- **When losing, keep fighting.** The day after this stalemate battle, even with the casualties suffered, Lee would not retreat. He said, “If McClellan wants to fight in the morning, I will give him battle again.” As the weight of standardized test scores and accountability increase, school leaders should not give up; instead, continue to keep your teams focused on the ultimate goal of student achievement.
- **Stay in touch with your team.** McClellan commanded from a house away from the line of fire, but Lee rallied his men’s support in person. Because school business officials work in administration buildings away from the day-to-day life of the school, they can feel isolated. It’s important to get another perspective—leave the office to visit classrooms, talk with teachers, and get to know the team.
- **Share what winning looks like with your team.** For President Lincoln, winning meant defeating the Confederate Army at Antietam to end the war. McClellan, though, defined winning as keeping Lee from advancing on Northern soil. Don’t assume that the people you lead share your definition of success; spell it out for them and create clear goals.
- **Recognize that small changes make an enormous difference in organizations.** The minor advance in technology for ammunition at Antietam affected the outcome of the battle. In school districts, small changes like new retirement plans or new textbooks make a difference. Don’t overlook these small differences that can lead to big changes.

**Leadership from a Naval Perspective**

Thursday morning at the Naval Academy in Annapolis, participants stepped back again, this time to their college days. Patricia Cook, Ph.D., visiting assistant professor who teaches philosophy to the midshipmen, posed the question from the story of Gyges’ magic ring in Plato’s *The Republic*: What would you do with absolute power and no accountability? A thought-provoking conversation to define morality ensued.

School business officials discussed the moral decisions they face every day. For example, a decision to cut retirement benefits for employees in order to meet the needs of students is difficult to make. Participants debated whether being a leader meant carrying the burden of those consequences and still championing the greater good.

Next, Penn State’s John Park, associate director of management development programs and services, engaged participants in a presentation about organization strategic planning. He energetically dispelled the myth that strategic planning is a boring process that results in a document that collects...
dust on the shelf. Park showed how plans coordinate action and can help achieve results.

Vice Academic Dean Michael Halbig presented the Naval Academy’s strategic plan. He shared the academy’s mission to develop midshipmen who are selfless, inspirational, proficient, innovative, articulate, adaptable, and professional. Halbig also gave an overview of the school’s institutional effectiveness assessment model that stresses continued assessments. Participants concluded the day with a tour of the academy.

**Parting Reflections**

On the final morning, participants learned how to help aspiring students gain admission to the Naval Academy. Then, McCausland related the current situation in Iraq to leadership. He emphasized the importance of questioning data and discovering embedded assumptions in order to succeed.

“ASBO’s Eagle Institute is a tremendous learning forum to foster growth among rising leaders in public education,” said Bernadette Mitchell, vice president of AXA Equitable Life Insurance Company. “I was impressed by the high-quality speakers and the development program that ASBO put together. AXA Equitable is proud to be a small part of this incredible conference.”

Of the experience, participants noted the power of learning from one another and from history. From sharing this experience, they developed camaraderie and a network that will continue as they take these lessons to their districts to lead their own teams. “Your vision doesn’t have to change,” explained Mary Lagnando, 2007 Eagle Award recipient. “It’s how you reach that vision that changes. You adapt to reach your goal.”

Nicole Verardi is the marketing and communications specialist at ASBO International in Reston, Virginia. Email: nverardi@asbointl.org.

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Throughout her 21 years as a school business manager, school business executive, and deputy superintendent, Margaret Boice has always put students and student achievement first. Her initiatives have included transitioning funding for one of the district’s playgrounds into the capital project, coordinating with the district technology department to infuse into a project more than $4 million of additional technology to enhance student learning, and enhancing learning environments for special needs students. She also provided significant guidance and influences to fulfill the mission of educating children by successfully expanding a $11 million project to a $35 million project with no impact on taxpayers.

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Cheryl M. Crates, Ed.D.
Chief Financial Officer
Community Unit School District No. 300
Carpentersville, IL

Cheryl Crates is considered by many at CUSD-300 to be “the secret to its success” in tightening operations, conserving energy, modernizing technology, and persuading voters to support their local schools. She has been CFO for the district, located in the northwest Chicago suburbs, for four years, and played a significant role in promoting passage of a 2006 referendum that acquired $185 million of bonds urgently needed for school construction. Instrumental in implementing the Educational Program Review Technique, which allows a district to define the value of an educational program in relation to its cost, Crates has ensured the district can plan ahead for a range of budget scenarios—always with an eye to student achievement.

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Kenai Peninsula Borough School District is the highest achieving school district of its size in Alaska, thanks in part to Melody Douglas’s commitment during the past 30 years to ensuring the school business office supports the district’s instructional initiatives. In addition to managing the day to day finance operations of the 9,300-student district, she oversees a $137 million budget to ensure the students and staff receive the support and resources they need. For example, she worked to change the “use it or lose it” mentality and developed a rollover fund to ensure schools had funds as needed for such items as new equipment and start-up supplies. Douglas also was instrumental in developing and managing the conversion of a real-time, online, fully integrated computerized accounting system and training all users in the system.

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I recently reviewed past issues of School Business Affairs and was especially taken by a May 1949 article about the Supreme Court and education cases that indicated that between its founding in 1791 and 1949, the Supreme Court addressed a grand total of 26 cases on education, of which only 17 dealt with K–12 schools; the remainder were set in higher education (Keesecker 1949).

In a prescient statement, the author noted, “Should Supreme Court decisions relating to education continue at the recent unprecedented pace, their future influence upon education is most likely to result in heretofore unexpected changes in education and Federal-State educational relations.”

The Supreme Court did not consider its first school case until 1859 in Springfield Township v. Quick, wherein it held that state officials did not violate the rights of a township in Indiana when they allocated funds from the state treasury by considering how much money schools there had available under federal law.

Yet, in the years since its monumental 1954 ruling in Brown v. Board of Education, which not only prohibited racial segregation in schools but is also considered to have given birth to the field known today as education law, the Court resolved in excess of 100 cases that directly affected K–12 schools. Moreover, the Court has handed down many more cases indirectly affecting various aspects of daily life in public education. Among its myriad cases, 33 dealt with issues involving race and school desegregation, while almost 40 examined disputes over the place of religion, whether aid to nonpublic schools or religious activities in public schools.

Setting the Stage

Clearly, the Supreme Court has played a crucial role in shaping education over ASBO International’s first century of existence. Accordingly, this column, the first of two on the Supreme Court and education, inaugurates ASBO’s centennial year with a retrospective look at key cases that were litigated in K–12 school settings around the issue of equal educational opportunities.

It is important at the outset to note that pursuant to the Tenth Amendment, “The powers not delegated to the United States by the Constitution, nor prohibited by it to the States, are reserved to the States respectively, or to the people.” That means that education is a duty of individual states rather than the federal government. However, if state or local school officials interfere with the federally protected constitutional rights of students or teachers, then the Supreme Court can hear the ensuing cases. In other words, as reflected in Brown v. Board of Education (1954), while states are under no obligation to create public schools, once they do, the Fourteenth Amendment dictates that they must be made available to all—regardless of race, let alone other characteristics such as gender or disability—on an equal basis. In this way, the Court found that school systems that denied African American children equal educational opportunities violated their Fourteenth Amendment rights.

As next month’s column will demonstrate, the Supreme Court can intervene in other cases as long as they concern federal constitutional or statutory questions. Other major areas in which the Court heard cases include aid to religiously affiliated nonpublic schools, school prayer, and the free speech rights of students and educators under the First Amendment; searches and seizures under the Fourth Amendment; and the rights of students and teachers who are subject to discipline under the due process clause of the Fourteenth Amendment.
In light of the role that the Supreme Court has assumed in shaping American education, this column reviews key cases dealing with equal educational opportunities since the line of cases beginning with Brown set the tone for much that has occurred in its wake.

After highlighting the Court’s major rulings on school desegregation, the column briefly reviews its only case on school finance because funding plays a major role in seeking to provide equal educational opportunities for children. The final part of the article examines the Court’s litigation on educational opportunities for females and students with disabilities.

The Court eventually extended Plessy to schools in Gong Lunn v. Rice (1927) in affirming an order forbidding a student of Chinese origin from attending a school for whites.

Second, Brown introduced an era of equal educational opportunities that led to the enactment of such far-reaching statutes as Title IX of the Education Amendments of 1972 (which was initially designed to ensure gender equity in higher education but later extended to fight sexual harassment in schools) and the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (which was created to safeguard the educational rights of students with disabilities).

As important as Brown was, it was limited to the question of ending segregation. As important as Brown was, it was limited to the question of ending segregation. A year later, in Brown v. Board of Education II (1955), the Supreme Court addressed remedies, directing educational officials to end segregated schooling “with all deliberate speed” (p. 301). Faced with the realization that “all deliberate speed” was not working, a decade after the original Brown, in a case from Virginia, Griffin v. County School Board of Prince Edward County (1964), the Court held that “the time for ‘mere deliberate speed’ had run out” (p. 234). The Court thus struck down a plan that would have closed public schools in a county while allowing public support for private segregated white schools.

In Green v. County School Board of New Kent County (1968), the Supreme Court was skeptical of freedom-of-choice plans. More importantly, the Court delineated the six Green factors that the judiciary continues to apply in considering whether school systems have become desegregated. These factors address the composition of a student body, faculty, staff, transportation, extracurricular activities, and facilities.

Frustrated with the slow pace of desegregation, in Alexander v. Holmes County Board of Education (1969), the Supreme Court eliminated the “all deliberate speed” standard. The Court declared that “the obligation of every school district [is] to terminate dual school systems at once and to operate now and hereafter only unitary schools” (p. 20). Swann v. Charlotte–Mecklenburg Board of Education (1969) stands out for two reasons. First, it was the first case in which the Court examined the use of busing to achieve school desegregation, and second, Swann was the Supreme Court’s last unanimous judgment in a major school desegregation case.

Milliken v. Bradley (1974) was the first major post-Brown defeat for supporters of school desegregation. The Court ruled that a remedy that would have required suburban districts to assist in desegregating Detroit’s schools was unconstitutional absent proof that the state or surrounding boards engaged in acts of discrimination. Although the Court upheld a federal trial court’s proposed remedy that created student assignment and remedial plans for the Detroit schools while directing the state to share equally in their cost in Milliken v. Bradley II (1977), it was clear that the justices lost interest in school desegregation.

After deciding almost 33 cases between 1954 and 1979, in the interim
the Supreme Court has resolved only 7 cases, with only 2 in the 1980s, both in 1982. With proponents of desegregation having lost the last three genuine desegregation cases, the Court has gone longer than it has since pre-Brown in addressing this important area. In Board of Education of Oklahoma City Public Schools v. Dowell (1991), the Court ruled that since desegregation orders are not meant to operate forever, the judiciary had to consider whether local boards acted in good faith in eliminating the vestiges of past discrimination as far as was practicable.

In Freeman v. Pitts (1992), the Court relied on the Green factors in deciding that judicial supervision of a desegregation order can be achieved incrementally. In Missouri v. Jenkins (1995), the Court found that lower federal courts exceeded their discretion in mandating a costly desegregation remedy.

It almost goes without saying that children cannot receive equal educational opportunities if their school boards lack adequate financial resources.

Finally, although the Court struck down race-conscious admissions remedies in Parents Involved in Community Schools v. Seattle School District Number 1 (2007), it cannot properly be classified as a desegregation case insofar as neither school system operated pursuant to court-ordered desegregation remedies.

SCHOOL FINANCE
It almost goes without saying that children cannot receive equal educational opportunities if their school boards lack adequate financial resources. Yet, in San Antonio Independent School District v. Rodriguez (1973), its only case on school funding, the Supreme Court reiterated that under the Tenth Amendment education is not a concern of the federal government. In refusing to intervene, the Court declared: “Education, of course, is not among the rights afforded explicit protection under our Federal Constitution. Nor do we find any basis for saying it is implicitly so protected” (p. 35). Following Rodriguez, most states have faced litigation in their own courts over the adequacy of their funding systems with results about evenly divided between cases upholding the state constitutionality of funding schemes and those calling for changes to make them more equitable.

GENDER EQUITY
As indicated, Title IX of the Education Amendments of 1972 was initially designed to ensure gender equity for student athletes in higher education but was extended to fight sexual harassment in schools. In the first two of its three cases on sexual harassment, the Supreme Court addressed misbehavior by teachers.

In Franklin v. Gwinnett County Public Schools (1992), the Court expanded the parameters of Title IX by applying it for the first time to sexual harassment in schools in allowing a student’s claim for damages against a school board and teacher after he subjected her to “coercive [sexual] intercourse” (p. 63). However, four years later, in Gebser v. Lago Vista Independent School District (1998), the Court affirmed that a school board was not liable under Title IX where a teacher had sexual relations with one of his students. The Court pointed out that the board was not liable since none of its officials with the authority to institute corrective measures had actual notice of, or was deliberately indifferent to, the teacher’s misconduct. Unlike Franklin, the Court was satisfied that since board officials behaved appropriately by promptly and decisively punishing the teacher, the student and her mother could not proceed with their claim.

Davis v. Monroe County Board of Education (1999) was filed by the parents of a female fifth-grader who was subjected to a lengthy pattern of sexual harassment by a male classmate. Although lower federal courts rejected the claims of the plaintiffs, the Supreme Court reversed in setting the rules under which school boards may be liable while returning the case to a lower court for further review.

After acknowledging that damages are limited “to circumstances wherein the recipient exercises substantial control over both the harasser and the context in which the known harassment occurs” (p. 646), the Court reasoned that school boards, as recipients of federal financial assistance, “are properly held liable in damages only when they are deliberately indifferent to sexual harassment, of which they have actual knowledge, that is so severe, pervasive, and objectively offensive that it can be said to deprive the victims of access to the educational opportunities or benefits provided by the school” (p. 650).

STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES
With 13 cases, the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), which provides a free appropriate public education in the least-restrictive environment for students with disabilities, has generated more litigation than all other topics involving students other than religion or desegregation.

Only seven years after its initial enactment, the Supreme Court heard its first, and arguably most important, case involving the IDEA: Board of Education of the Hendrick Hudson
Central School District v. Rowley (1982). In Rowley, the Court interpreted “appropriate” as providing a floor of opportunities rather than serving as a vehicle to maximize a child’s potential. In perhaps its second most important case, Honig v. Doe (1988), the Court addressed the rules for disciplining students with disabilities, affirming that the IDEA’s stay-put provisions prohibit educators from unilaterally excluding students with disabilities from school for more than 10 days for dangerous or disruptive actions that are manifestations of their disabilities.

Among the cases dealing with questions that present significant cost ramifications for school systems, the Court allowed the on-site delivery of related services in public schools (Irving Independent School District v. Tatro 1984; Cedar Rapids Community School District v. Garret F. 1999); permitted parents to seek reimbursement for placing their children in nonaccredited schools if boards fail to offer a free appropriate public education (School Committee of the Town of Burlington v. Department of Education, Commonwealth of Massachusetts 1985; Florence County School District Four v. Carter 1993); declared that a student in a religiously affiliated nonpublic school could receive the on-site services of a sign-language interpreter (Zobrest v. Catalina Foothills School District 1993); placed the burden of proof on parties challenging the adequacy of individualized education programs (Schaffer ex rel. Schaffer v. Weast 2005); refused to allow parents to recover fees for expert witnesses even if they prevailed in claims against their school boards on the basis that their request was unauthorized in the IDEA (Arlington Central School District v. Murphy 2006); and permitted parents to file suit in their own name in disputes over the education of their children (Winkelman v. Parma City School District 2007).

Earlier, unhappy with the Supreme Court’s decision in Smith v. Robinson 1984), which concluded that the parents of children with disabilities could not recover legal expenses from their school boards even if they prevailed, Congress amended the IDEA by granting parents such a right (20 U.S.C.A. §§ 1415[i][3][B][G]), a provision that has cost local school boards significant amounts of monies.

**Conclusion**

As this column demonstrates, the Supreme Court’s decisions involving equal educational opportunities have had far-reaching effects on the lives of school business officials, other educational leaders, and everyone else associated with public education. About the only thing that we can be certain of as ASBO starts its second century is that during the coming years the Court will continue to affect education in many ways that we cannot now anticipate.

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Charles J. Russo, J.D., Ed.D., Panzer Chair in Education and adjunct professor of law at the University of Dayton in Ohio, is chair of ASBO’s Editorial Advisory Committee and vice chair of ASBO’s Legal Aspects Committee. Email: Charles_j_russo@hotmail.com.
A Salutatory Message

Editor Note: The following is an excerpt from an article that appeared in the first issue of School Business Affairs, published in 1936. Written by E. E. Oberholtzer, superintendent of schools in Houston, Texas, and former president of the Department of Superintendence for the National Education Association, the article seems a fitting introduction to a feature we will include in each issue of School Business Affairs for 2009–2010. Each month, we will include excerpts from past issues of School Business Affairs that illustrate how much the profession has changed…and how it has remained the same during the past 70 years.

Perhaps no period in the life of the public schools has been more critical than the past five years, and so far as I can ascertain, these problems will continue to confront us so long as we live in this rapidly changing world. Public education is charged with the obligation of keeping step in the march of progress with social, economic, and industrial changes, hereby necessitating great co-ordination of educational and business aspects of public school administration. The problem of finance and administration is immediately most vital and urgent. To meet this situation, trained, competent, and far-seeing executives are in demand. Such executives in their management must bring the public into intimate confidence and assist the supporting public to understand and intelligently determine policies.

Certain fundamental principles underlying the successful administration of a public school system are as fixed and immutable as the economic and fundamental principles which govern industrial enterprise, yet the objectives for which the public schools are maintained are extremely different from the ends sought by industrial enterprise. Profit or dividends accruing from public school administration are more or less intangible and cannot be computed in economic costs.

Public good will and the advancement of society to higher levels of living and good citizenship are too remote to be measured in the monthly or yearly balance sheets. The school executive must be alert always to the fact that public education and the educational problems are susceptible to the movement of society as a whole. Such social movements are never static but always dynamic, producing subsequent changes in educational policy, sometimes in teaching, sometimes in classification of pupils for in child accounting, each having direct bearing upon the business administration of a school system.

The greatest drama of the past twenty-five years has been the drama of educational readjustments attempting to meet social, civic, and economic responsibilities. Following recent phenomenal increase and expansion of the uses of the machine in industry, accompanied by increased division of labor, greater urbanization of people, and changes in the ways of earning a living, the scope of the school has been widely extended and the end is not yet.

The business management and educational administration of the school system are inextricably interdependent. There was a time when the Board of Education assumed that the business management of school systems was their own responsibility. The expansion of educational programs, increase in educational costs, and the greater complexity of organization have had their influence in changing this conception of school management. It is, therefore, becoming increasingly necessary for Boards of Education to delegate to experts or professional officers the executive management which school boards themselves formerly exercised.

Efficient business administration in a public school system makes possible the advancement of the material needs of such a system so that each child may progress educationally in accordance with the purposes and outcomes of the entire educational program....
In November, more than 1,200 school business professionals gathered at ASBO International’s 94th Annual Meeting and Exhibits in Denver to share best practices for effectively managing education resources. Against the backdrop of the majestic Rocky Mountains, they focused on Reaching New Summits and improving their school business management skills and knowledge through hundreds of informative sessions, networking opportunities, and exhibits. Here’s a snapshot of some of the highlights of this year’s annual meeting. Plan now to attend the 2009 ASBO International Annual Meeting, October 23-26 in Chicago, Illinois.
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Unveiled at the 94th Annual Meeting and Exhibits in Denver, Colorado, AREF champions the behind-the-scenes work of school business professionals by sponsoring and advancing education and research initiatives to help them better serve students.

From research projects that explore how to best help students despite limited resources, to initiatives that address the schools’ role in the local and global community, this fund will advance the effective management of education resources.

The beginning of a new year brings new resolutions, new expectations for what is to come. Let’s join forces to make 2009 a meaningful year for school business. If you share the belief that every child deserves an education, help make that belief a reality by contributing to AREF. Together, we can make a difference for the profession and for our students. Visit www.asbointl.org/AREF for more details.

ASBO sends a special thank you to Forrest T. Jones, the first company to contribute to AREF.

Insights into School Business Managers

As the economic downturn takes a toll, school business officials are facing decreased budgets for next year. It falls to them to balance priorities, to do more for their districts—for their students—with fewer resources. Along with that pressure, here’s what they say keeps them up at night:

- Rising healthcare costs (53.8%)
- Making budget cuts (41.6%)
- Ways to increase revenue for their school districts (37%)
- How to best communicate their budget to their stakeholders (23.5%)
- Balancing work and family (23.5%)

As partners in education, school business officials really need your help right now. Your expertise and experience working with other schools is valuable to help find ways to maximize the resources that we do have. This is a great time to demonstrate your commitment to the profession and to the students that you and school business officials serve.

What Corporate Members Are Saying

One ASBO member said that good vendors make school business officials look like miracle workers—helping them find solutions to difficult challenges within their districts. ASBO is thankful to have such a dedicated group of Corporate Members. Thank you for contributing to the school business community!

“Since 1969, National Insurance Services (NIS) has focused solely on the unique needs of school districts. Being a member of ASBO has helped NIS keep up to date with the ever-changing challenges facing business officials today. Our corporate membership with ASBO allows us to nurture our long standing relationships, find solutions to the latest issues, and customize products and services that make sense for schools.”

— Hank Ehrsam, VP of Sales and Marketing, National Insurance Services

See your name in print! Tell us why serving school business managers is one of the best jobs in the world. Why was it important for you to join the school business community by becoming an ASBO International member? Email maronstein@asbointl.org with your thoughts.
Spotlight on Matthew Malinowski: Fiscal Strength in Troubled Times

Less than six years ago, when it came to choosing between working for the GAO or a school district, Matthew Malinowski chose the latter. Since then, his master’s degree with a heavy emphasis on strategic and financial management has served him well in two Pennsylvania school districts. He is currently the assistant superintendent for business services for the Susquehanna Township SD in Harrisburg.

With the economy of the United States in such a fragile state, school districts are naturally concerned. “Pennsylvania is in a bubble of its own,” says Matthew, adding that overall, the state is insulated because its foreclosure rate is below the national average. Sound financial planning, in addition to a strong commitment to not reducing state education funding, has helped the district maintain stability.

Pennsylvania’s tax structure limits school districts in how they can raise taxes, which has been a financial burden as they try to keep up with rising costs. Matthew explains that Susquehanna’s response to this challenge has been to create strong business partnerships within and beyond district boundaries. This has proven beneficial on multiple levels. For instance, one of their partners is a bank, which has set up a branch onsite in the high school. “Students can put their money in the bank, and they are also employed there; it’s a great foundation for learning about money,” says Matthew. “We look to businesses for input and try to keep thinking outside the box.”

Susquehanna’s programmatic-based budget is a source of pride. A prime example is the district’s extended-day (versus full-day) program. Only students who are identified as being in need participate, and parental consent is required, which keeps them involved. “It has been proven fourfold that kids [in the program] are brought up to grade level, and it’s cost-effective,” Matthew says.

He also is proud of the district’s demonstrations of fiscal responsibility. Since he joined the Susquehanna staff two-and-a-half years ago, they have reduced their healthcare costs by 10%, a trend that will continue. And despite facing a 30% increase in utility rates, the implementation of an energy-saving program will keep those increases under control. “We are always looking for ways to reduce overhead and costs,” says Matthew, who credits Susquehanna’s smooth sailing to collaboration. “We have a wonderful school board and a truly fantastic superintendent. I wouldn’t be as successful without their support.”
The School Nutrition Association recognizes the best school nutrition program in the country as the District of the Year in School Nutrition. The award and grant of up to $25,000 are available to one school district each year through a competitive grant process.

“By winning the 2008 District of the Year Award, our school nutrition department has been nationally recognized for their exemplary commitment to advancing school nutrition for our students. Our district has received major recognition from parents and the community for providing a quality nutrition program. The $25,000 grant will help us take our program to an even higher level.”

Dr. Ralph H. Draper, Superintendent, Spring Independent School District, Houston, Texas

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403(b) compliance. Everyone’s favorite subject, right? Anyone?

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