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New Wiscasset School Committee members, Chelsea Haggett and Michael Dunn, are sworn in prior to a June 11 board workshop.

Autism center, music camp eye charter approval for 2015

Four potential charter school applicants, including the Margaret Murphy Center in Auburn that specializes in autism and the New England Music Camp attended an informational meeting with members of the Maine Charter School Commission on June 18.

Also attending were Maine Virtual Academy with connections to the national corporation, K-12 Inc., which was rejected by the full commission earlier this year, and Inspire ME Academy in Sanford, which had considered applying for a 2014 opening, but pulled out of the process.

John Wiggin of the New England Music Camp in Sidney said he wants to start an arts academy for high school students, who would have to meet standards in all the required content areas. The teaching of some of that content could be supplemented with online classes, he said.

Wiggin said since the word got out that the music camp wanted to apply for a charter, he has been hearing from parents of home-schooled children.

That's going to create a budget problem," Wiggin said. The districts where those students live will have to pay the charter school, on average, \$9,000 per student, even though they initially will get no money for those students from the state.

Michelle Hathaway of the Margaret Murphy Center said she was looking into creating a charter school as a way to expand her program. The center is a special purpose school serving children with autism and other developmental disabilities.

The June 18 meeting was an opportunity for potential applicants to review and ask questions about the application process.

The next step is to file a letter of intent to apply for a charter. Those letters are due on June 25.

There are currently five charter schools operating in Maine, and Connections Academy – the state's first all-virtual school, will make it six, if it can meet the conditions in its contract to open in September. State law limits the number of schools that can be approved by the commission to 10 until 2021 – 10 years after the charter law was passed. That means four slots will be available over the next six years.

Candidate forums scheduled for September

The Maine School Boards Association and Maine School Superintendents Association are partnering to host candidate forums in the state's nine school regions this September where those running for the state Legislature will get a chance to hear and respond to the associations' positions on issues affecting K-12 education.

These first-ever events are designed to spotlight MSBA and MSSA legislative priorities for the next legislative session and allow candidates to meet their local superintendents and school board members who can help inform them of the impact legislation has on their school districts.

All school board members, superintendents and House and Senate candidates in the state are being invited.

The evening forums are still in the planning stages, but the following dates and places have been decided by region:

- Region 1/Aroostook: Sept. 8, Caribou High School Performing Arts Center
Region 2/Penquis: Sept. 18, United Technology Center, Bangor
Region 3/Washington: Sept. 25, Wabanaki Culture Center, Calais

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Extensions available on standards-based diplomas

DOE Commissioner Jim Rier has announced that his office will use its authority under law to grant extensions on the time when school districts have to start awarding standards-based diplomas.

Under a law passed in 2012, that starting date was set at 2018, but the commissioner's office also was given the authority to waive that requirement for a limited period of time.

Commissioner Rier has been hearing concerns from educators about the complexity of developing quality proficiency-based learning systems and will grant extensions on the 2018 deadline, if certain conditions are met. The commissioner met with various groups, including the Maine School Superintendents Association, to get feedback on the process.

Commissioner Rier said school districts are feeling the crunch as their high schools prepare to welcome a ninth-grade class expected to be the first to graduate with the new diplomas.

"Increasingly, the department has been hearing from you about the complexity of developing quality proficiency-based learning systems," Commissioner Rier said a letter to superintendents. "Even districts that have eagerly pursued implementation and believe deeply in the value of these systems in strengthening teaching and learning admit they may not be ready in all content areas by 2018."

Commissioner Rier reiterated that in an interview and call-in show on standards-based diplomas aired on MBPN and said he expected a significant number of districts to apply for the waivers.

The department has outlined six options to extend the deadline through 2020. Click here to view online: [Implementation of Proficiency-Based Diploma Extension Request for SAUs Awarding Diplomas](#).

The department has been careful to say that the extensions are just that and not waivers of the requirement because work has to continue. It is still the DOE's position that districts will have to transition to a proficiency-based graduation system.

"The Department of Education is committed to ensuring every Maine student graduates with a diploma that signifies they are leaving high school with the knowledge and skills needed for college and career success," the commissioner said.

Those with questions about the extension options and requests for technical assistance should contact Diana Doiron at diana.doiron@maine.gov.

Autism center

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The timetable for the charter commission review is as follows:

- Letters of Intent to Apply due June 25
- Applications due Aug. 25
- Vote on which applications move forward Oct. 14
- Public hearings on pending applications to be announced
- Vote on approval of pending applications Nov. 13

Legislative overview online

The June edition of the MSMA Legislate News, which gives an overview of all the bills that got passed this session and those that didn't, is now online.

A copy of the overview was emailed out to all superintendents and school board members, but if you missed it, go to www.msmaweb.com and click on the "legislative newsletter" link on the right-hand side.

The most decisive action on behalf of local schools was protection of General Purpose Aid, which will essentially remain steady from this school year to next. That was no small accomplishment given there were substantial holes in the state budget, and GPA is too often tapped to fill them.

Other bills of note include adoption of the rules that will guide development of teacher evaluation systems next year, with implementation required in school year 2015-2016. Another bill, which created a study commission to suggest changes to the Essential Programs and Services funding formula, could create the real action next year if the 127th Legislature is asked to vote on its recommendations.

Candidate forums

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- Region 4/Hancock, Sept. 18, Hancock County Technical Center, Ellsworth
- Region 5/Mid-Coast, Sept. 11, Camden Hills High School Lecture Hall
- Region 6/Western Maine, Sept. 25, Green Ladle, Lewiston Regional Technology Center
- Region 7/Cumberland, Sept. 30, Gorham Middle School
- Region 8/Kennebec, Sept. 30, Messalonskee High School Performing Arts Center, Oakland
- Region 9/York, Sept. 18, York County Community College, Wells

MSMA staff is coordinating the forums and also preparing position papers outlining key positions. The goal is to make sure every legislative candidate in the state has one of these position paper packages in their hands well before the November election.

The positions cover a "Focus on Students", including giving every student a comprehensive curriculum regardless of their zip code; implementing quality teacher evaluations; and, supporting high standards and adequate funding for pre-kindergarten programs.

Under "Local Control", the associations oppose any attempt to make education policy negotiable and advocate for local superintendent control over student transfers.

"Education Funding" is a top priority, with support for 55 percent state share; an end to unfunded mandates; and, opposition to shifting additional teacher retirement costs onto school districts.

On "Charter Schools" there is a call for changing the way charter schools are funded in the state and support for a moratorium on new charter schools to assure proper oversight of the six that already have been approved.

Focus on Boardsmanship

Under Siege: Ten Questions Every School Board Member Should Ask

By Ken Odam

Siege [seej]—(noun): the act and process of surrounding a fortified place in such a way as to isolate it for the purpose of lessening the resistance of the defenders and thereby making capture possible.

I am a big fan of history. I love to learn about the issues, conflicts, decisions, and relationships that have shaped the way in which we relate to today's world. I believe, like many others, that the lessons of the past can help us to better navigate the future.

Recently, many of my history studies have included military confrontations. The combination of strategy and luck that determines the victor in these disputes makes for fascinating reading. One particular type of battle has really gotten my attention—the siege.

A siege normally occurs when a larger, better funded army meets with a smaller army that does not enjoy access to as many resources as its foe. Instead of risking open battle, the smaller army will sometimes decide to hide in some place that seems, at the time, to be safe. Typically this safe place is a heavily fortified sanctuary from which the smaller army hopes to wait out the larger army, hoping they will get tired or bored or distracted. The idea is that the larger army will eventually fade away and that the smaller army will have survived the encounter.

Besides heavy fortifications, sieges share a few additional characteristics. Often, the besieged army begins to suffer. Physically, they may experience a lack of food and water that gradually wears at the endurance of the soldiers. Mentally, the army must fight against boredom and ennui. Socially, there may be internal dissension—remember the arguments that you and your siblings had when you were forced to share the back seat on a long family road trip. Spiritually, the besieged army may rapidly lose its will to fight. Surrender becomes a more palatable option when victory is not foreseeable.

The most striking shared characteristic, though, is the manner in which many sieges end. In my reading it seems that, almost always, a siege ends poorly for the smaller army. Almost always, a siege ends in death and destruction for the besieged.

Siege of Jerusalem, 597 B.C.

Key Players: Zedekiah (King of Judah), Nebuchadnezzar (King of Babylon).

As punishment for rebellion, the might of the Babylonian empire—the most powerful military might that the world had yet seen—surrounded Jerusalem after Zedekiah's retreat. In the end, Jerusalem was burned to the ground, Solomon's temple was looted, and the priests of the temple—the Levites—were executed. And, in the ultimate act of cruel humiliation, Zedekiah was forced to watch as his sons were executed and then had his eyes poked out. The last thing Zedekiah would ever see was the death of his children.

Telltale Effects of the Siege

I think that sieges reveal a particularly valuable lesson for those charged with leading public education because, in many ways, public education is under siege. A large army with seemingly endless resources—an army of politicians, professors, unions, nonprofits, charter school operators, and others—is arrayed against a small and unique group of diverse and fragmented locally elected individuals. This small group faces an arsenal of funding cuts, mandates, and district takeovers. In response, local public education leaders have increasingly retreated behind fortifications of administrative minutiae.

A brief glance at public education, and especially at the typical local school board, reveals the telltale effects of the siege. School board agendas are littered with managerial tasks that are only tangentially related to education improvement. Tasks like approving the check register, granting easements, and reviewing field trips dominate valuable board discussion time. Schools are beset with flat or declining achievement as they are starved of the critical leadership energies needed to sustain continuous improvement. Internal dissension, in the form of rancorous political divisions between and among board members and school administrators, captures the headlines. Obscured by the walls of administrative detail, a clear and consistent vision for education is seemingly impossible. Ensnared within the cocoon of management, school boards increasingly lose touch with the citizens who elected them to serve their interests.

Most disturbingly, a negative perception of the school board's value has become the norm among those who advocate for education improvement. School boards, it is argued, are not equipped to drive meaningful change. School board activities, it is suggested, are divorced from student achievement. School boards, it is asserted, are increasingly irrelevant in the conversation about improving education.

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Under Siege

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For proof that these perceptions are pervasive one needs only to listen to any of the many conferences and symposiums held by well-meaning organizations in the hopes of adding to the body of knowledge that will drive education reform. As a marathoner, my training includes a number of long, slow runs on early weekend mornings. This winter, I decided to listen to the recordings of some of these conferences as I trained. I listened to hours of reports, studies, and debates about what is ailing education and how it might be cured. In that time, I heard from politicians, policymakers, professors, union leaders, state education administrators, nonprofit leaders, and charter school operators. Never once, though, did I hear from those on the front lines of education leadership. Never once did I hear the thoughts of a locally elected school board trustee.

Siege of Acre, August 28, 1189–July 12, 1191 (Third Crusade).

Key Players: King Richard the Lionheart, Saladin.

The Muslim leader Saladin had split his army, with a core group operating from the mountains and a smaller group entrenched near the seaside town of Acre. Of the Holy Land cities, Acre was perhaps best suited to withstand a siege. It was surrounded on three sides by thick stone walls and on the fourth by the sea. The sea route was guarded by a wall that went beneath the water and a tower that commanded the approach of any enemy vessels. Two-thousand seven-hundred Muslim soldiers sought Acre's shelter.

Despite surviving numerous assaults by Christian crusaders, Acre eventually succumbed as the foundation beneath its walls was weakened until the stone fell to the ground. The city surrendered, and all 2,700 Muslim soldiers were executed.

School Board as Vital Link

What if this set of pervasive beliefs is wrong, though? Research tells us that well-trained and motivated teachers impact student achievement, and so we focus on teacher preparation and selection. Research suggests that a rich, diverse, and broad curriculum leads to better educational outcomes, so we invest in developing a more comprehensive offering. Research insists that design principles like class size and shape dictate student engagement, so we build new buildings and hire new staff. Yet, in spite of all of this, education still seems stuck in neutral. What if the local school board is, in fact, the missing link in the chain of an education breakthrough?

Far from being irrelevant, the local school board can be a core determinant of student achievement. This is because, even though the school board trustee is not engaged in the day-to-day effort of direct student engagement, the school board controls the conditions that allow for successful teaching and learning. The school board makes decisions about district leadership, district priorities, accountability, resource allocation, and community engagement. Each of these decisions contributes to the environment in which our students learn and grow.

The Alamo, February 23–March 6, 1836.

Key Players: General Antonio Lopez de Santa Anna, Lieutenant Colonel William B. Travis, Colonel Jim Bowie.

Remembered as the glorious catalyst of the war that resulted in Texas independence, the Alamo was, in fact, a siege. One-hundred eighty-nine Texans took refuge in the Alamo as Santa Anna's 2,000 troops sought to take San Antonio. After a valiant fight, the Alamo was overrun. All 189 Texas fighting men were killed.

Recent research, such as the Lighthouse Project sponsored by the Iowa Association of School Boards, confirms the link between school board actions and student achievement. In fact, high-performing school districts are governed by school boards that are decidedly different—in their beliefs about education and in the ways in which they act in response to those beliefs—than other school districts. The challenge for the local school board—the path to ending the siege and returning to the offensive in the fight for public education—is to identify those beliefs and actions that appropriately position local leadership in the context of education reform.

School boards may begin that process by posing 10 questions, which can be asked of the individual school board member or of the school board as a body, that reveal areas for further contemplation:

1. What is the purpose of a school board? The locally elected school board is a uniquely American institution whose roots stretch back to the earliest foundations of our political system. Most countries do not govern education in this decentralized manner. In order to understand how to effectively use its power, the school board must first understand why it has the power in the first place.

2. Why did you decide to run for the school board? A position on the school board is a volunteer role that entails long hours, high visibility, and tremendous pressure, yet many school board members have trouble articulating why they would willingly take on this responsibility. Understanding what prompted you to run for the school board points to where time and effort should be spent.

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Under Siege

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3. Do you have a vision for public education? A school district without vision is like a blindfolded person trying to cross a crowded room. Some districts will never move from where they are today. They will make helpless noises and look with incredulity upon the arduous task that they have inherited. Those that do move may shuffle in the wrong direction, paying attention to irrelevant or unhelpful indicators. Districts that move in the right direction may focus too narrowly, reaching out to avoid crashing into something. No such district survives without bumps, bruises, and scars.

4. Does what you measure matter? School board members are busy individuals. We are volunteers and, as such, we are heckled and harried and have numerous and diverse responsibilities outside of the education realm. We simply cannot afford to be distracted by anything that does not advance our core calling to have a vision for kids.

5. Do you demonstrate commitment to education improvement? School board members are granted the gift of touching eternity. The work they do today will echo through the generations and pave the way for the continuance of our culture. If they fail to demonstrate true commitment, as evidenced by allotting meaningful time to consideration of critical dimensions of student achievement, that gift will be sacrificed.

6. Do you prioritize leadership development? Leadership can be—and must be—taught. Leadership is a skill that is developed through practice and focused discipline. Like other skills, there may be some who are born with traits that make that skill easier to master. However, possession of those traits does not guarantee mastery any more than the lack of those traits condemns one to failure.

7. Is your board united? There is no place for personal agendas in this most critical of leadership tasks. Stakeholders will not rally behind a divided board. And the board needs stakeholders to help execute its vision.

8. Do you take advantage of your resources? The school board is armed with an impressive assortment of tools. These tools, when used in support of a compelling vision within a leadership framework, are truly transformative. Indeed, they are among the most powerful tools that any local leader could hope to wield.

9. Do you share your vision for education with the community? Great movements require spokespeople who can communicate with and represent the values of the people they serve. Of all the groups that claim an interest in education and education improvement, only one would seem to unite all of the prerequisites to fill this role: members of local school boards.

10. What can you do now? Professional football great Peyton Manning once noted that there are two types of people in the world: people who make things happen and people who wonder what just happened. Too many school boards are wondering what happened—to local control, to the education agenda, to the future direction of our nation's youth. ❖

Ken Odom, a Tomball ISD trustee and member of the Leadership TASB Class of 2014, maintains a blog entitled IMPACT for Education at blog.kenodom.com. This story is an excerpt from Odom's book entitled Under Siege: Ten Questions Every School Board Member Should Ask, to be published this summer.

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