

“If I Knew Then What I Know Now...”

Tricks of the Trade for New School Business Managers

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Although classes may have broken for the summer, it probably doesn't feel like much of a break for workers in the business office. Finding ways to save time and energy is imperative, especially for those new to the district. To that end, we asked a few Wisconsin school business officials to share some advice they wish they had when they first started to help make the many tasks ahead less daunting.

Be Organized!

As a school business manager, you may be responsible for such tasks as setting budgets, negotiating with vendors, financial reporting, supervising school and third-party personnel, fundraising and more. Staying on top of each of these responsibilities requires organization – and vigilance.

- When you tackle these responsibilities for the first time, you'll probably have questions and may need to ask for help. **Look ahead to upcoming projects and review them well ahead of their due date.** Start gathering what information you need and make a list of unknowns. Reach out for help early – even if you don't tackle the project until days before it's due, when you're ready, the materials and many of the answers will be in hand.
- **Keep a binder dedicated for each task**, such as Continuing Disclosure, and keep it up-to-date with the documents you need. This way, when you're ready to file, all the documents are at your fingertips. It also allows you to keep your documentation organized and, if questions arise, the supporting paperwork is easily accessible.

- **Having things in one place on your computer** can be very efficient. That said, some tasks may be easier to manage in hard copy. Don't be afraid to print out and reference such documents as employee handbooks, WUFAR (if you don't print this out, at least bookmark it!), reference sheets for insurance rates, employee compensation grids, employee names and positions, department contacts and budget figures.
- **Keep your bank reconciliation timely!** You will spend far less time reconciling if you maintain your accounts monthly while information is still fresh.
- **Create reconciliation tools for payroll and A/P.** Confirming figures prior to payment can increase your efficiency – and credibility. (Spreadsheets are great tools for this.) Don't forget to reconcile payroll benefits and deductions – if you don't mess at the end of the year when trying to tie out your liabilities!
- **Keep a clean balance sheet.** Our financial software automatically debits and credits the balance sheet as needed when a revenue or expense is entered. Print out a Trial Balance Report to verify that your balance sheet is carrying only relevant balances. Often, a change to an expense or revenue is made to correct an error on the balance sheet. If left for the end of the year, that change can result in an unexpected surplus or deficit.

Have the Right Tools and Systems in Place

Having the right tools can mean the difference between staying on top of your responsibilities and getting swallowed up by them.

“Take notes on big items that you are unfamiliar with. I made a binder with notes divided under multiple categories: Monthly, Quarterly, Annually, Payroll, Audit, Board Meetings and Miscellaneous. It allowed me to have something to look at if I was unsure of something. I always keep it up-to-date with new items that are continuously added to my plate.”

Wendy Perkins, Business Manager of the Randall Consolidated and Wheatland J1 School Districts



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- **Spreadsheets are key** to tracking day-to-day activities as well as monthly and yearly items, instead of having to dig everywhere to find them. Our business manager maintains a spreadsheet on individual employee insurance premiums to help keep her school's budget accurate.

"The one organizational tool I would not want to work without is spreadsheet knowledge. I use spreadsheets daily for budgeting and costing purposes. If you don't already have a working knowledge of them, sign up for a class. It will change your life!"



Sarah Swanson, Director of Finance, Peshtigo School District

- **Consider investing in a compensation budgeting model.** This tool organizes, calculates and consolidates all salary and benefit data, which then can easily be imported into your budgeting software. Considering that 70–85% of a school district's budget is salary and benefits, it makes sense to use a tool specific to this task.
- **Online purchase orders make it easy to enter and keep track of purchases.** We have secretaries, principals and teachers entering in the requisitions and codes themselves. They are only allowed codes that we grant them, so there is very little error.
- **Explore electronic solutions** to such business office responsibilities as time cards, sub calling, revenue tracking and procurement card processing. It may take time to set up on the front end, but these tools can save you exponentially more time later.
- **Bookmark the DPI School Finance Homepage,** <http://sfs.dpi.wi.gov/>. This website houses key financial data and reports both district-specific and statewide. Timelines are available as well as information on key calculations such as the revenue limit and equalization aid.
- **Reasonable and predictable timelines create efficiencies** for payroll, A/P and requisition processing. When you make a due date, keep to it: If timesheets are due on the 10th for the payroll on the 15th, process those that are submitted on the 10th. Very rare exceptions may occur, but tracking these down or continually allowing exceptions slows down the process and wastes valuable time.
- When someone asks for help on a task and time is at a premium, it's often easier to say, "I'll just take care of it." Doing so just adds another item to your to-do list, temporarily and sometimes permanently. Instead, **take the time to fully train the new owner of that task**, and be on standby if further assistance is needed. Time spent up front may be inconvenient initially but worth it over the long term.

Ask for a Second Opinion

Gaining another person's perspective often provides new insight into not only *how* you perform certain tasks, but also *why*.

- **Having a mentor, even if only on certain business manager responsibilities, is invaluable.** Getting trusted and candid feedback can save you a lot of anxiety – not to mention hours of spinning your wheels.
- **Find your trusted resources and rely on them** – auditors, attorneys and advisors are all there to help. Don't waste time looking for an answer that, when you find it, you aren't sure is accurate. Call the expert and know for sure.
- **Take a look at previous years' audits.** They can identify potential trouble spots for future audits that you can prepare for now.



"Previous years' journal entries provided by your district auditor can be incredibly valuable. Corrections to past mistakes are given to you in black and white. What a valuable learning tool!"

Ashley Kley, Administrative Assistant / Bookkeeper, School District of Colfax

- **Give yourself time to learn.** It may take years to feel comfortable with your list of job duties – especially those that are performed only once a year. Be patient with yourself. I don't know of a field where you will find more helpful people. Every call I've made has found someone on the other end who is willing to help – whether it's a call to DPI, a fellow business official or someone at Baird.
- Sometimes the person who has the most efficient process is you! Make sure you're communicating with your peers. Remember, you're all on the same team.

One final note – it may seem counterintuitive, but in the school business office, "summer break" is the busiest time of year. Audits, budgets, annual meetings and state reporting are all upon us, and you may feel that there is no end in sight. Hang in there – it isn't this busy all year, and it will get better. Implement what you can, be patient with what you can't, ask for help when needed – and know you have a support group in WASBO behind you.