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### **ONLY IN THE WORLD-HERALD** **National travel still in schools' budgets**

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Thirty-seven metro-area **school** board members and administrators traveled across the country to attend a national conference in San Francisco earlier this month. The **Omaha** metro area's representation at the National **School** Boards Association conference dropped this year as districts looked to trim costs. Last year, when the conference was closer to home, in Chicago, 49 **Omaha** area **school** officials attended.

Still, some districts didn't cut back much or at all.

The Millard **Public Schools** sent eight people to the San Francisco conference, the same as last year. That was the largest number sent by any district in Douglas and Sarpy Counties.

The Bellevue district sent seven people - one fewer than it sent last year.

The conference is put on each year to help board members and administrators do their jobs better and educate them on national education issues.

"It's the only national training opportunity that we get as **school** board members," said Dave Anderson, Millard **school** board president.

In total, eight of the 11 **school** districts in the two counties sent people to San Francisco. Because not all districts had tallied the cost of the trip, the total expense to the districts was not available.

John Hansen, Bellevue **school** board president, said that because there are hundreds of sessions at the conference, it's beneficial to send numerous board members and **school** officials, so they may split up and go to different workshops. His district had not totaled the cost of the trip, which included a per-person registration fee of about \$700, airfare, hotel and meals.

Anderson said he and other Millard officials get more out of the conference by attending in person.

"It's the fact that you're actually sitting there and listening," he said. "If you're not participating in the discussion, then there's no benefit."

Hosting a training session for other board members upon returning from the conference wouldn't be the same, he said.

Anderson noted the \$16,686 spent on this year's conference was included in the Millard district's budget passed last year. The budget for next **school** year currently does not include funding for the national conference because of the district's budget situation, he said. Millard faces about a \$6.2 million decline in **school** aid for next **school** year.

"Let's make sure that we're looking at every budget-line item," said Anderson, who had his trip to San Francisco paid for through the Nebraska Association of **School** Boards, a nonprofit group. Anderson is an officer with the **school** boards group.

Ralston **Public Schools** opted to send three representatives to this year's conference after sending four last year, said Jerry Riibe, Ralston superintendent.

The district could have sent all six board members but chose not to because of "financial prudence," he said. "You don't need all of them to go to bring back that information."

Board members and **school** officials who go to the conference come back and share what they learned with other board members, he said.

Other districts have scaled back their plans or skipped the conference entirely.

Westside, which sent five people to last year's conference, passed this year because of scheduling conflicts with board members and cost concerns, said Peggy Rupprecht, Westside spokeswoman.

The Douglas County West and Bennington districts also didn't go - their practice in past years as well.

**Omaha Public Schools** sent three board members this year, down from the eight who attended last year's conference. And Papillion-La Vista sent four board members, down from the eight who went last year.

Indeed, overall conference attendance was down nearly 20 percent as districts across the country looked for ways to cut costs.

The conference featured sessions on numerous topics, such as keeping gangs out of **schools**, resolving disagreements between a **school** board and superintendent, and managing energy costs.

Ralston plans to pilot a home-visit program as a result of information district officials learned about at last year's conference.

This summer, about 15 to 20 elementary and middle **school** teachers will visit the students they will have in class in the fall.

"Sometimes you have to spend a little money to get more efficient," Riibe said.

Five Elkhorn board members and Superintendent Steve Baker went to the San Francisco conference. Elkhorn sent five people to the conference last year.

Baker pointed out that some board members have to take time off from their paid jobs to attend a conference for their unpaid, volunteer positions.

"I hate the idea that an impression is being given that this is some perk," Baker said. "This is work."

#### TRAVEL DATA

A total of 37 metro **school** officials went to San Francisco the weekend of April 9-11 for the 71st annual National **School** Boards Association conference. The World-Herald surveyed the 11 **school** districts in Douglas and Sarpy Counties about their plans.

District Attendees Est. cost

Bellevue 7 Not available\*

Bennington 0 \$0

DC West 0 \$0

Gretna 2 \$3,000

South Sarpy 4 \$8,000

**Omaha** 3 Not available\*

Elkhorn 6 Not available\*

Millard 8 \$16,686