



**Educational
Communications
Board**

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Executive Director

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**2019 – 2021
Biennial Report**

To: The Honorable Tony Evers, Governor of Wisconsin
Members of the Wisconsin State Legislature
Citizens of the State of Wisconsin

The [Educational Communications Board \(ECB\)](#) is an independent state agency overseen by a [Board of Directors](#), statutory and appointed. ECB is charged with the responsibility of planning, developing, constructing and operating non-commercial radio and television broadcasting systems for the presentation of educational, informational and public service programming, and public safety communications for the people of Wisconsin. ECB also provides support for public media's K-12 initiatives.

In partnership with the University of Wisconsin-Madison, ECB operates the [Wisconsin Public Radio](#) (WPR) and [PBS Wisconsin](#) networks, ensuring the distribution of public media and [education services](#) to a statewide audience. The agency's responsibilities are focused primarily on the technical infrastructure and delivery of these broadcast services.

ECB also operates and maintains the statewide network of 28 [National Weather Service](#) transmitters, and provides the technical "backbone" for the Emergency Alert and Amber Alert systems. In total, ECB is the steward of 64 Federal Communications Commission (FCC) licenses for public radio, public television, satellite uplink and downlink, All-Hazards Radio, Educational Broadband Service and other telecommunications facilities which serve Wisconsin. More information about [ECB's public safety responsibilities](#) can be found on the agency's website.

1. 2019-2021 Agency Performance

The last biennium has been an extraordinary time. The COVID-19 pandemic, the 2020 election cycle, racial unrest, and broadband issues stretched our budget *and* heightened the public's need for the trustworthy state and local information we provide.

- [Wisconsin Public Radio](#) experienced a 10% decline in weekly audience due to the decrease in drive-time listening after people began working from home. However, more than 110% of its membership revenue goal was achieved.
- [PBS Wisconsin](#) achieved 106% of its viewership goal and 102.5% of its member goal.
- [PBS Wisconsin Education](#) proved its value during the pandemic when it exceeded its goal for instructional media sessions at 150%.

- [Network reliability](#) remained steady at 99.8% due to ECB’s robust Continuity of Operations Plan (COOP) activities that ensured all services stayed on the air and employees were healthy and safe.

Public Broadcasting

ECB’s specific functions related to public broadcasting are focused on guaranteeing efficient and reliable transmission to state residents via a fiber-based broadcast interconnect system and transmitters located throughout Wisconsin. ECB is responsible for delivering WPR and PBS Wisconsin’s state-centered content, and bringing the outside world to Wisconsin through affiliations with [NPR](#) and [PBS](#).

Throughout the pandemic, Wisconsinites have been desperate for [information about COVID-19](#) symptoms, testing and precautions. WPR and PBS Wisconsin’s broadcast and digital services provide up-to-date information to promote public health and safety alongside crucial information about programs for families and businesses affected by the economic downturn.

During the 2020 election cycle, WPR and PBS Wisconsin offered voters access to candidates and elected officials at the local, regional and state levels. When questions about in-person and absentee voting surfaced during the primary and general elections, these services provided the most current information on air and online. As part of its commitment to keeping vital information free to all, WPR offered its debate coverage to commercial and competing broadcasters free of charge.

With reporters and studios in seven cities around the state, WPR is uniquely positioned to provide statewide news and information to its audiences. WPR’s [WHYsconsin](#) project, which answers public queries about issues in the news, received more than 2,100 questions in the first few months of the pandemic alone. Every one of them received a response. This continuing project won the [“Best Use of Community Listening in a Crisis”](#) award from Hearken in 2020. Read more about WPR’s locally created content in their latest [report to the Corporation for Public Broadcasting](#).

In 2020, PBS Wisconsin launched a new [news web page](#), pulling together local news assets, election coverage, Wisconsin Public Radio reporting and relevant national PBS content. Organized thematically and geographically, the news page provides a cohesive, comprehensive experience that helps our audience stay informed about issues that matter to them.

COVID safety protocols altered the way PBS Wisconsin produced video, but did not stop content development. A partnership with American Players Theater produced [Out of the Woods: A Life Play Reading Series](#). Wisconsin’s Class of 2020 high school seniors were featured in a [special graduation tribute](#). PBS Wisconsin began important conversations on issues affecting Wisconsin’s Black

communities in a new series, [Why Race Matters](#). More information about PBS Wisconsin's service to the state can be found in their [annual report to the Corporation for Public Broadcasting](#).

Beginning in March 2020, ECB delivered 12 hours of standards-based PreK-12 programming over-the-air each weekday through PBS Wisconsin. The [At-Home Learning](#) broadcast service provided educational content for Wisconsin households that don't have access to high-quality internet services.

PBS Wisconsin Education provides Wisconsin-focused educational media designed for the state's teachers and students. During just the first few months of the pandemic, the digital platforms reported the following:

- 244% increase in traffic to [PBS LearningMedia](#);
- 350% increase in traffic to the [PBS Wisconsin Kids 24/7](#) page;
- 113% increase in traffic to all [PBS Wisconsin Education](#) sites; and a
- 184% increase in traffic to [Wisconsin Biographies](#).

Also during this biennium, PBS Wisconsin Education qualified for two competitive grant cycles for [Ready to Learn \(RTL\)](#) from the U.S. Department of Education. RTL resources support families in our state by developing the early learning skills that empower young children for success in school.

Working with our public broadcasting colleagues at Milwaukee PBS and WDSE-TV in Duluth Minnesota, ECB is able to ensure broadcast delivery of its Wisconsin-based programming to the entire state. You can learn more about the work of those broadcast partners here: Milwaukee PBS (<https://www.milwaukeepbs.org/>) and WDSE-TV (<http://www.wdse.org/>)

Network Service

The FCC's mandatory nationwide "repack" of radio frequency spectrum is now complete. This complex project created the bulk of ECB's technical workload for this biennium. In addition to making more spectrum available for broadband, the process also enabled PBS Wisconsin to increase transmitter signal power which expanded service to 200,000 additional viewers. Modern transmitters have now been put into service that reduce energy expenditure and utilize [NextGen TV](#)-ready technology.

On the radio front, ECB and WPR staff have worked in partnership to upgrade audio processing for all WPR stations. New equipment will prepare the radio transmitter facilities for better digital audio delivery, and a new operating protocol will provide a uniform sound for the WPR networks statewide.

Broadband Access

In an effort to assist with the state's broadband challenges, ECB partnered with the [Public Service Commission](#) to develop public service announcements around the FCC's [Emergency Broadband](#)

[Benefit](#). These were produced by WPR and PBS Wisconsin staff, and were made available to all broadcasters in the state through the [Wisconsin Broadcasters Association](#).

ECB Executive Director Marta Bechtol served on the [Governor's Task Force for Broadband Access](#). She continues to collaborate with other state agencies, municipalities and school districts to optimize agency resources in broadband expansion efforts.

2. 2021 – 2023 Major Program Goals and Objectives

Program 1: Instructional Technology

Goal: Realize the Wisconsin Idea by producing, acquiring and delivering high-quality Wisconsin Public Radio (WPR) programming statewide that serves the public's need for educational, civic and cultural discussion of significant issues.

Objective/Activity: Present programming designed to instruct, inform and educate the audience; increase awareness of issues through in-depth news analysis, public affairs and call-in programming; and provide cultural enrichment through music and arts formats not served by commercial media.

Goal: Realize the Wisconsin Idea by producing, acquiring and delivering high-quality PBS Wisconsin educational, informational and entertainment programming.

Objective/Activity: Present programming designed to instruct, inform and educate the audience; increase awareness of issues through public affairs programs and in-depth news analysis; and provide cultural enrichment through history, music and arts programs not served by commercial media.

Goal: Improve and enhance the learning experience for Wisconsin's K-12 teachers and students by providing high-quality, standards-based instructional media that respond to the state's specific educational and content area needs.

Objective/Activity: Produce, acquire and deliver high-quality K-12 media to meet the specific needs of Wisconsin students and teachers using current classroom technologies; and provide user support and outreach services to Wisconsin educators through PBS Wisconsin Education.

Goal: Provide reliable access to WPR and PBS Wisconsin to all citizens of the state. Utilize the reach of the state network for public safety purposes.

Objective/Activity: Build, maintain and operate the broadcast interconnect which delivers signals throughout Wisconsin. Build, maintain and operate the various transmission facilities necessary to operate WPR, PBS Wisconsin and National Weather Service transmitters. Utilize board facilities for Emergency Alert and Amber Alert systems needs as outlined in the Wisconsin Emergency Alert System plan. Where excess capacity exists, make facilities available

to federal agencies such as the Department of Homeland Security and the Coast Guard; and state agencies such as the Department of Transportation, Department of Natural Resources and State Patrol; and local law enforcement agencies. Assure all board facilities function at a high level of reliability necessary for broadcast and public safety purposes.

3. Flexible Scheduling

ECB has had methods in place for accommodating flexible work patterns since the early 1980s. These include: policies for telecommuting and work-at-home procedures; offering employees permanent part-time positions and/or job sharing; and flexible-time work schedules. Given the agency's essential service/emergency alerting responsibilities, it has long seen the value in non-standard scheduling as it relates to optimal agency performance.

The agency's COOP plan went into full effect on March 13, 2020 when the national health emergency was declared. All employees that did not need to be onsite had transitioned to full-time employment from home by March 18. There was virtually no downtime or reduction in service. Video conferencing tools have made telecommuting far easier for staff and supervisors alike. ECB employees report a sense of "participation equity" provided by virtual presence that doesn't exist on phone lines alone.

The agency continues to offer permanent telecommuting options for staff that do not need to be on site in order to work at full productivity; and temporarily as needed, particularly for staff with households in quarantine for COVID illness or exposure.

ECB is celebrating its 50th year as a government agency in 2021. The staff is honored to be an integral part of the ever-changing technology and culture of the State of Wisconsin. We understand that the high quality services we provide play an essential and vital role in the lives of the residents of our state, and we are privileged to serve in this capacity.

I encourage you to spend a few minutes exploring the resources in this report to learn more about the important work of the Educational Communications Board.

Sincerely,



Marta S. Bechtol
Executive Director