



Educational Communications Board

2021 – 2023 Biennial Report



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To: The Honorable Tony Evers, Governor of Wisconsin
Members of the Wisconsin State Legislature
People 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, along with public safety communications to the people of Wisconsin. In a formal partnership with the University of Wisconsin System Board of Regents, ECB operates the [PBS Wisconsin](#) and [Wisconsin Public Radio \(WPR\)](#) networks statewide, and provides support for the K-12 services of [PBS Wisconsin Education](#). The agency also serves as the master control for Milwaukee PBS (licensed to Milwaukee Area Technical College) on a contractual basis.

Additionally, [ECB](#) operates and maintains the statewide network of 28 [National Weather Service](#) transmitters and provides the primary broadcast relay for the state's Emergency Alert and AMBER Alert systems. In total, ECB is the steward of 65 Federal Communications Commission (FCC) licenses for public radio, public television, satellite uplink and downlink, All-Hazards Radio, Educational Broadband Service and other telecommunications facilities that serve our state.

1. 2021 – 2023 Agency Performance

- [Wisconsin Public Radio](#) – The weekly broadcast audience dropped slightly, mirroring national listening trends but still within 90% of goal. Membership revenue achieved 96% of goal while overall radio membership numbers exceeded goal.
- [PBS Wisconsin](#) – Monthly broadcast viewership remained consistent at 99% of goal. Membership numbers slightly exceeded goal. Aggregated monthly engagements across all delivery platforms achieved 102% of goal.
- [PBS Wisconsin Education](#) – Online K-12 instructional media sessions maintained a monthly average of 63,702 which is reflective of students returning to classrooms and spending less time individually with online instructional media.
- [Network reliability](#) – remained steady at 99.8%. ECB's safety and security practices along with our robust backup systems ensure the ongoing health of our networks and the staff that maintains them.

Public Broadcasting

ECB's primary focus within public broadcasting is the network transmission of radio and TV. This work includes the construction and maintenance of broadcast towers, transmitters, translators, the broadcast interconnect, and operation of the television network master control. It also includes expansion of

service area through signal improvements and new station licensing, and compliance with state and federal regulations.

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.

Over the 2021-2023 biennium, PBS Wisconsin and WPR continued their strong traditions of producing content that celebrates the stories of people from every corner of our great state. Together, they added to the ongoing series [Wisconsin Life](#), a statewide storytelling project that is now in its ninth season. Both services celebrated the post-pandemic revival of classical music among Wisconsin's youth by spreading the joy of student musicians with the Wisconsin School Music Association [High School State Honors concerts](#). "[The Final Forte](#)" at the Overture Center in Madison annually features the Madison Symphony Orchestra and four finalists from the Bolz Young Artist Competition.

Both services also co-presented the "[Wisconsin Remembers](#)" exhibit — a partnership with the Wisconsin Veterans Museum which was on display in the State Capitol Building, the [Highground Veterans Memorial](#) and locations around the state. The traveling exhibit features a photo for each of the 1,161 Wisconsinites officially listed on the Vietnam Veterans Memorial in Washington, D.C.

On television, PBS Wisconsin continued its gardening series, [Let's Grow Stuff](#), and featured local food and farming in new episodes of [Around the Farm Table](#). Renowned Wisconsin author Jerry Apps returned with a new broadcast special, [Food and Memories](#).

PBS Wisconsin expanded its journalistic coverage of rural issues while building on the success of its youth media programming, including PBS NewsHour Student Reporting Labs. Staff collaborated with and mentored high school students in Black River Falls, Minocqua, Appleton, and Wauwatosa to elevate their perspectives for our local audiences. [Student producers](#) from the Appleton Area School District created mini-documentaries on local history topics as part of the [Hometown Stories: Appleton](#) project.

The [Garden and Landscape Expo](#) and [The Great Wisconsin Quilt Show](#) returned after COVID. The Garden and Landscape Expo last year had 10,784 attendees, 109 educational classes, 170 vendor booths, and more than 200 community volunteers. The Great Wisconsin Quilt Show was one of the largest quilting events in the country, with 15,400 attendees, 622 quilts on display, 182 educational classes, 250 vendor booths, and more than 460 community volunteers.

PBS Wisconsin Education produced [The Legend of the Lost Emerald](#), a point-and-click online adventure game where players use critical thinking and history skills to accompany PBS Wisconsin's new 60-minute documentary and a virtual reality experience, [Shipwrecks!](#) that explores the depths of the Great Lakes.

PBS Wisconsin Education expanded its education and training programs that support educators, childcare providers and parents. The [Media Literacy Cohort](#) links educators with instructors to learn how to critically evaluate and analyze media, create audio and video for instruction, and build lesson plans

that help students become thoughtful media consumers and creators. Twenty-one Wisconsin educators have now successfully completed their [PBS Media Literacy Certification](#).

As of October 2022, PBS Wisconsin Education became a “Training Sponsor Organization” for the [Wisconsin Registry](#). All Wisconsin childcare providers can access **free** [PBS KIDS self-paced learning courses](#) as part of their professional development. Training in the Registry is required for licensed caregivers and not all courses are free, which makes the PBS KIDS self-paced learning courses a more accessible, equitable resource for licensed providers. At the close of FY 2023, there have been 2,290 PBS KIDS self-paced learning course registrations and 667 training certificates earned.

PBS Wisconsin Education collaborated with Community Action Inc., the Beloit Public Library, and early learning experts on a project called [Ready To Learn \(RTL\) Learning Neighborhoods](#). Now in its second year, the partnership’s vision is to empower and equip parents, caregivers, and communities to create experiences that help young children build literacy, critical thinking, and collaboration skills.

WPR is the only statewide Wisconsin owned and focused broadcast network. With reporters and studios in seven cities around the state, WPR talk shows invited listeners across the state to ask questions of their elected officials, guest experts and interesting people from around the world. Hosts and guests offered useful tips for everything from home renovation, to tomato plants, to reducing food waste on popular segments like “[Home Improvement](#),” “[Garden Talk](#)” and “[Food Friday](#).” Series like “[Wisconsin Life](#)” and “[WHYsconsin](#)” showcased the unique stories and people from Wisconsin.

WPR hosted events like “[Bayfield in Bloom](#)” where gardening experts answered questions from the live audience or callers about trees, shrubs, flowers and vegetables at the Bayfield Lakeside Pavilion.

New podcasts were produced by WPR such as “[Going for Broke](#)” a series centered on the economic experiences of Americans who have lived on the edge, and “[Uprooted](#),” a series that shares the seldom-heard stories of refugees who fled Cuba in 1980 and now call Wisconsin home.

In addition to regular programming and in coordination with the Public Service Commission, ECB leveraged the resources and reach of our TV and radio networks to develop public service announcements for the Federal Communications Commission’s [Affordable Connectivity Program](#). These spots have been shared with commercial broadcasters through the Wisconsin Broadcasters Association and have now helped over 265,000 Wisconsin households sign up for free or low-cost high-speed internet.

Public Safety

ECB provides the state’s primary broadcast relay for the [Emergency Alert System](#) which includes AMBER Alert and the NOAA weather alerts. ECB has operated [PBS WARN](#), the federally mandated over-the-air backup to the Wireless Emergency Alert System, since 2013 and backs up wireless alerting systems throughout Wisconsin. ECB also serves as a conduit for critical non-weather emergency alerts in coordination with other public safety organizations such as the Wisconsin Highway Patrol, Wisconsin Division of Emergency Management and the Department of Military Affairs, the Department of Homeland Security, U. S. Coast Guard, Civil Air Patrol, first responders and 911 centers across the state.

ECB's robust tower system provides important signal points for other agencies including the Wisconsin Division of Emergency Management and the Department of Military Affairs, the Department of Transportation, and the Department of Natural Resources. Federal agencies hosted on ECB facilities include: the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, the Federal Bureau of Investigation, U.S. Coast Guard, and U.S. Customs and Border Patrol.

ECB policy allows for excess tower capacity to be made available to private entities, producing joint benefits of creating program revenue and maximizing communications services to Wisconsin residents. These tenants include county emergency responders as well as the Minnesota Department of Transportation, university research entities, school districts, local hospitals, utility service providers, and local broadband and cellular service providers.

2. 2023 – 2025 Major Program Goals and Objectives

Program 1: Instructional Technology

Goal 1: Broadcast Wisconsin Public Radio (WPR), PBS Wisconsin and Milwaukee PBS to all residents of the state. Utilize the reach these services for public safety purposes.

Objective/Activity:

- Construct, maintain, operate and secure the transmission facilities necessary to broadcast WPR and PBS Wisconsin.
- Engineer, maintain, operate and secure the broadcast interconnect which delivers content to these facilities.
- Construct, maintain and operate the master control center that distributes public television content statewide.
- Utilize public broadcasting infrastructure for Emergency Alert and Amber Alert systems needs as outlined in the Wisconsin Emergency Alert System plan.
- Operate and maintain state and federal National Weather Service transmitters.
- Where excess capacity exists, make facilities available to:
 - Federal agencies such as the Department of Homeland Security and the Coast Guard
 - State agencies such as the Department of Transportation, Department of Natural Resources and State Patrol
 - Local law enforcement agencies
- Assure all facilities function at a high level of reliability necessary for broadcast and public safety purposes.

Goal 2: Improve and enhance the learning experience for Wisconsin's K-12 students, educators and families 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 learners using current technologies.

- Provide user support and outreach services to Wisconsin educators and families through PBS Wisconsin Education.

Goal 3: Realize the Wisconsin Idea by producing, acquiring and delivering high-quality 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.
- Provide cultural enrichment through music and arts formats not served by commercial media.

Goal 4: 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.
- Provide cultural enrichment through history, music and arts programs not served by commercial media.

3. Flexible Scheduling

Given the agency's 24/7 emergency alerting responsibilities, rotating shifts and non-standard scheduling have been part of agency operations for decades. Half of ECB's positions are associated with the operation, maintenance and management of significant infrastructure which require on-site presence.

ECB supports and makes available part-time and limited term employment. Even so, 96% of our staff chose to work full time during the biennium. We also have a growing internship program for talent development.

ECB receives human resources services from DOA HR Region 1. We have adopted their telecommuting guidelines and policies. Employees that are eligible and interested in telecommuting may request it. In the 2021-23 biennium, 16% of ECB employees worked under telecommuting agreements.

ECB is proud of our mission and service to the state. The agency was recently honored by the Wisconsin Department of Justice at the 20th anniversary of AMBER Alert in Wisconsin as an original partner and continuous service provider of the program.

In 2022, we celebrated former Executive Director [Gene Purcell](#) when he was posthumously inducted in the Wisconsin Broadcasters Association Hall of Fame for his career contributions to journalism and state

service. From his early days as a reporter and manager in La Crosse to his agency leadership, Gene shaped nearly all aspects of Wisconsin’s public media.

In 2023, Dr. Jonathan Øverby, host of Wisconsin Public Radio’s [“The Road to Higher Ground”](#) was inducted into Folk Alliance International’s Folk DJ Hall of Fame in May 2022. “The Road to Higher Ground” host and executive producer has spent his life performing, teaching and researching diverse genres of music and promoting music’s ability to bring people together. Adding to the well-deserved accolades, [Dr. Øverby](#) was inducted into the Wisconsin Broadcasters Hall of Fame in 2023.

Awards for programming over the biennium are a testament to the outstanding work the staff at PBS Wisconsin and WPR do every day. WPR received awards from [Milwaukee Press Club Awards](#), [Wisconsin Broadcasters Association](#), the [Regional Edward R. Murrow Awards](#), [American Society of Civil Engineers Wisconsin Section](#), and the [Headliner Awards](#). PBS Wisconsin won awards from the [Milwaukee Press Club](#), [International Serious Play Awards](#), [Midwest Video Poetry Fest](#), [National Educational Telecommunications Association Public Media](#), and the [National Academy of Television Arts & Sciences, Chicago/ Midwest Chapter Emmy Awards](#).

ECB is honored to be an integral part of the ever-changing technology and culture of the State of Wisconsin. 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