The idea of getting Wyoming schoolchildren—and, not coincidentally, their teachers—to begin thinking about and saving for retirement was a light-bulb moment in late 2012 for the manager of the Wyoming Retirement System (WRS) deferred compensation plan.

By then, WRS had been focusing for two or three years on teachers and other school employees—about half of the system’s active workers—by getting education efforts into the state’s 400 individual school buildings. A third retirement educator had been added to make that possible in a state where members are scattered across a huge geographic area.


“They’ve got sixth graders running (investment) portfolios,” said Scott. She recalled turning to another WRS staff member and remarking, “You know, she’s right. If you want to move the dial eventually, you’ve got to do something with kids. Otherwise, ten years from now we’re going to be dealing with the same thing where we get people who are 45 years old calling up for the first time and saying, ‘Should I be doing something for my retirement?’ ”

Targeting both students and teachers made even more sense to Scott. She and her staff surveyed Wyoming school principals about what they thought schoolchildren should know about retirement. “We also did a survey of children’s literature—books about saving and everything out there that has to do with money. None of it’s about retirement; it’s all about saving.”

Scott decided WRS needed its own story to introduce the concept of retirement. WRS collaborated with the Women’s Institute for a Secure Retirement (WISER), with whom WRS had worked in the past. “WISER is a wonderful partner. WISER brought on board some really great talent that basically moved us to completion of our project. We went to the writer and illustrator with our idea, and they really brought it to life.”

The result was a book and companion video called *Sonja Meets Her Future Self* (available at http://retirement.state.wy.us/home/pastfairs.html), which WRS rolled out to its members during Save for Retirement Week in late October 2014.
In the book, sixth-grader Sonja lives with her mom, dad, twin brothers and Grandpa Joe. The story says that Grandpa Joe “tells great stories and teaches Sonja a lot about life. Lately he’d been teaching her about money” and had helped her open a bank account. One day at the skate park, Sonja’s skateboard suddenly soars into the future, where she meets versions of herself at the age of 18, as a middle-aged mother and teacher and, finally, as a 72-year-old retiree. Each of the “future Sonjas” talks about how she followed Grandpa Joe’s advice about saving and retirement. When Sonja returns to the present, she tells Grandpa Joe that someday she’ll be a retired teacher—just like him.

During the 2014 National Save for Retirement Week, Carol Mead, wife of Wyoming Gov. Matt Mead, and WRS educators read the story to elementary school students, and hundreds of them saw the video.

To reach deferred compensation plan participants that week, “We sent out a message every day with a different thing we wanted people to focus on,” Scott said. One day, members were asked to do an “imagine exercise,” in which they would spend time imagining themselves in retirement and then write about it so that someone reading the description could picture what it would be like. Jodi DiCenzo of Behavioral Research Associates introduced WRS to this exercise.

“Research says that for people who are not likely to think ahead or plan, doing that imagine exercise has the capacity to almost double their retirement savings,” Scott said.

Members were asked to e-mail their descriptions of retirement to the WRS office, and those who did were entered in a drawing.

WRS tracked results for that one week. “We had almost 1,500 people in that week do something related to our campaign, and our website usage was up almost 20%,” Scott said.

According to Scott, this campaign would be “easy to replicate, because it’s a simple idea: Write your story, and write it for kids in third to fifth grade. That’s kind of the sweet spot where kids enjoy a simple story, and yet they know enough about how the world works to understand money and saving and purchasing things. It’s something that any other retirement program—especially one dealing with educational institutions—can copy.”

Scott understands all too well that many of the Wyoming system’s 74,000 active members and retirees likely pay little attention to the impressive array of calculators, compounding charts, worksheets and other materials and information available at the WRS website. She knows that, like many other workers, a lot of Wyoming teachers and other public employees don’t begin thinking about retirement until they’re in their 40s.

With its educational efforts, “We’re trying to meet the members where they’re at,” Scott said. “It’s something you have to continually work at. We’re working on redoing some of our older publications, which could be better. I’m very interested in moving toward simpler information that’s more action-oriented and getting away from all the technical stuff. We’ve come to the realization that people don’t really respond to that.”

WRS retirement educators continue to read the Sonja story in schools and conduct many on-site workshops throughout the state, and “we are also using our plan design to impact retirement outcomes,” Scott said.

Endnote

1. Mellody Hobson gave a keynote presentation on financial literacy at the International Foundation’s 60th Annual Employee Benefits Conference in Boston, Massachusetts in 2014.

by | Chris Vogel, CEBS