



Chris Danou's Capitol Report

Assembly Republicans Put Partisan Politics Ahead of Responsible Legislation

Last week, the Wisconsin State Assembly held our final days of the 2015-2016 legislative session. Not only is it disappointing that we ended so much earlier than our scheduled May 18th deadline, but it was also sad to see the Republican majority play partisan politics with so many things that aren't partisan at all.

As your State Representative, I represent 57,000 people in Buffalo, Trempealeau and Jackson counties in Madison. I hear from constituents who are Democrats and Republicans alike that have similar concerns about things in our community. These concerns range from the poor quality of our roads, withering away of local control and the future of public education. I view all of these issues, as well as the many others people share with me, as community issues that impact all of us, not just people who vote for one party or the other.

For the past few years, I've consistently heard from so many school administrators, parents and teachers about the issues facing rural schools in our community. They've made their concerns known, and have provided suggestions to improve public education in the short-term so we are prepared for the long-term. While I fully understand Rome wasn't built in a day and some things will take lots of time, energy and money, there are some relatively simple and inexpensive things we can do to help the situation in the meantime that will put us on the right track.

One issue that is becoming more prevalent is attracting teachers to rural areas. We need quality teachers just as much as more populated parts of the state, so it's important for us to find ways to attract and retain teachers in our rural communities. There are existing programs that help attract and retain teachers to Milwaukee Public Schools, so it seemed to me we could take that same concept and apply it to rural school districts in our area and across Wisconsin. As a result, I authored Assembly Bill 878 (AB 878) to help attract and retain teachers to rural school districts.

Specifically, AB 878 creates a grant program to be administered by the Higher Education Arts Board (HEAB) to encourage eligible teachers to teach in eligible school districts through financial assistance in the form of a grant. This financial grant would be used solely for the purpose of helping teachers pay down their student loan debt, and they would only be allowed to receive the grant for up to five years. They would be eligible for a \$1,000 grant their first year and \$2,000 per year for the remaining four years. Eligible teachers must be employed in a school district that has ten or fewer students per square mile with only four teachers being eligible per district. Under this criteria, about 200 school districts and 800 teachers around the state would qualify. The cost for the first year would be \$800,000, and would go up to \$1.6 million for the second, third and fourth years, and total \$2.4 million in the fifth year.

The overall cost for AB 878 is minimal, especially considering the state budget is about \$70 billion for a two-year period. To me, this seems like a common-sense approach that not only has a nominal cost, but would also help rural school districts attract and retain needed teachers. Without Republican support and a shorter than usual session, AB 878 is now nothing more than one example of many good and necessary bills that won't become law.

Our children deserve the best education possible, and AB 878 would have made our rural schools more competitive in attracting and retaining quality teachers for a very small price. Unfortunately, legislative Republicans in Madison chose to put partisan politics over public education for children in rural areas, and placed our good faith efforts to improve one very important segment of public education on the back burner.

