



School Administrators Alliance

Representing the Interests of Wisconsin School Children

Testimony Before the Speaker's Rural Schools Task Force

December 17, 2013

Chairman Swearingen, members of the Speaker's Rural Schools Task Force, I want to thank you for this opportunity to testify before you today on the problems facing rural schools and rural school children in Wisconsin.

My name is John Forester. I am the Director of Government Relations for the School Administrators Alliance (SAA). In that capacity, I represent virtually all of the public school superintendents, principals, assistant principals, business officials and directors of pupil services in the state of Wisconsin.

Your task force charge of studying and finding solutions to the many problems facing Wisconsin's rural schools is challenging and extremely important. Not only do rural schools educate to college and career readiness as many as two in five Wisconsin students, but rural schools are also the heart and soul of the rural community. Today, rural school districts are facing a variety of vexing problems that threaten the survival of many rural school districts including high transportation costs, technology deficiencies, declining enrollment, recruitment/retention of quality staff, growing student poverty and a lack of economies of scale.

Today, I will focus my remarks on transportation costs, technology needs, declining enrollment and two SAA legislative efforts which seek to enhance rural school district organizational and calendar flexibility. I will also share a few thoughts on the topic of mandate relief.

Transportation

School districts required by state law to furnish transportation services to public and private school pupils enrolled in regular education programs are eligible to receive categorical aid. In this environment of rising transportation costs, the current annual pupil transportation appropriation of \$23,703,600.00 represents less than 6 percent of school district transportation costs statewide (currently about \$420 million annually).

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I want to take this opportunity to thank all of the Task Force members that helped push through the creation of the High Cost Transportation Aid program in the 2013-15 state budget. The SAA worked with Senator Luther Olsen on the idea in the spring and summer of 2012 and encouraged State Superintendent Evers to include it in his departmental budget request. This new appropriation will help dozens of school districts with high transportation costs. However, even with the annual addition of \$5 million in high cost transportation aid, annual cost reimbursement will still be less than 7 percent.

The current aid and reimbursement levels have a disproportionately negative impact on geographically large, and sparsely populated school districts. Individual district transportation costs vary widely, from little more than \$50 per student in some suburban Milwaukee districts to nearly \$1,500 per student in some rural districts. Pupil transportation costs not reimbursed by state categorical aid are paid from per-pupil resources under the revenue cap, the same pot of resources that pays for instructional opportunities. To my knowledge, there is no mechanism in our school financial system that accounts for this disparity between districts. This poses quite the dilemma for rural school officials: you can pay for transportation services required by the state, or you can pay for teaching and learning opportunities.

The SAA has long supported increasing the current level of state categorical aid funding for pupil transportation. The SAA also supports the continuation and expansion of the new High Cost Transportation Aid program.

School Technology

The same technological tools and resources that have transformed our personal, professional and civic lives must be part of the learning experiences intended to prepare today's students for college and careers. For years, policymakers have prescribed greater use of technology to cure resource-strapped rural school districts. And rural school districts have made great strides in the use of technology. However, a lack of quality access to affordable bandwidth, infrastructure development, devices and out-of-school internet connectivity for students has created a huge inequity among students in rural, urban and suburban districts.

In the mid-1990s, an SAA study committee on school technology worked with the Thompson Administration to help create the Technology for Educational Achievement (TEACH) Wisconsin program. For more than a decade, largely through competitive and block grants, TEACH provided support for school investments in educational technology and telecommunications. Districts all over Wisconsin used TEACH grants to wire schools, create distance learning opportunities, place hardware in student hands and train educators in cutting-edge instructional technology. In the early 2000s, TEACH annual expenditures totaled more than \$60 million. Today, the \$35 million

block grant program is gone and the remaining TEACH Wisconsin budget funds are used primarily for vitally important bandwidth subsidies.

It is my belief that since the downsizing of TEACH occurred 6 or 7 years ago, Wisconsin has fallen behind other states in school technology. In short, 15 years ago Wisconsin got it right. Therefore, it should come as no surprise that the SAA supports creation of a new school technology initiative, a "TEACH II" if you will, to support district bandwidth needs, system infrastructure, distance learning upgrades, hardware, software and IT support.

I'm sure many will ask, "Why aren't schools repurposing budget funds to invest in such important instructional opportunities?" They are. But, in this time of limited educational resources and continuing policy priorities and requirements, they are unable to do it fast enough to meet the fast pace of technological change. Moreover, some of the problems, notably inadequate broadband, lie beyond the reach of individual school districts to solve.

Declining Enrollment Relief

Wisconsin policy makers have long identified declining enrollment as a significant problem for Wisconsin school districts (especially rural districts). The portion of school districts in declining enrollment has hovered around 60 percent for more than a decade.

Why is declining enrollment such a downward fiscal spiral for school districts? Because, a district that loses students also loses state aid and, under revenue caps, can only turn to the already overburdened property taxpayer to support vital instructional services for local school children.

The SAA has long supported modifying the current 100% non-recurring hold harmless adjustment a district receives in the first year of an enrollment decline by adding the following: 1) a non-recurring adjustment equal to 75% of the first year adjustment in the year after the decline; and 2) a non-recurring adjustment equal to 50% of the first year adjustment in the second year after the decline. We support this multi-year, descending hold harmless because districts find it very difficult to manage the total loss of the hold harmless adjustment aid after year one of the initial enrollment decline.

We understand that this does not "solve" the problem of declining enrollment. Rather, it provides more relief that will give the district more time to plan and adjust to district downsizing. I liken it to a bigger parachute that will allow the district to descend more slowly.

Whole Grade Sharing

In order for small, rural school districts to survive and thrive at providing quality instructional opportunities for every child in every corner of the state, increasingly they must have access to maximum organizational flexibility. The SAA and the Rural Schools Alliance are currently working with the chairs of the Senate and Assembly Education Committees (Senator Luther Olsen and Representative Steve Kestell) on legislation explicitly authorizing whole grade sharing (WGS) in Wisconsin.

Whole grade sharing is a common practice among small rural school districts in Iowa. It refers to an agreement by two or more school boards that provides for the students in one or more grades in any of the districts to attend school in one or more of the other school districts. We hope the WGS legislation will be ready for introduction soon.

180-Day Requirement

The SAA is also working with Senator Olsen and Representative Kestell on legislation removing the 180-day requirement, but maintaining the required hours of instruction. This type of calendar flexibility would allow school districts to implement creative cost saving options and to enhance vital teacher professional development offerings.

Mandate Relief

I am often asked by legislators for a list of mandates that school administrators would like removed from state law. I know there is always frustration when I fail to come up with a lengthy list that my members agree should be removed. And I understand the frustration. But, mandate relief is hard to achieve because these requirements were placed in state law with the best of intentions namely to protect students or to ensure educational opportunities. Over the years, we have been successful at removing some mandates, but it is always difficult to achieve.

That being said, there is one suggestion I can give regarding mandates that will have the full support of SAA members – don't add any mandates. Yet, every session, there are many bills introduced, and some adopted, that ultimately have an adverse impact on the larger objective of educating students to higher levels of student achievement.

Allow me to give you a couple of examples from this session. First of all, there is a proposal circulating that would require school districts to provide elementary students with more physical education instruction. I know that it is being offered with the best of intentions – the health and fitness of our children. However, it is counter productive to focus on student achievement outcomes and then remove instructional resources and time from that objective.

Legislation expanding independent charter schools is a different type of example. Senate Bill 76 (and its companion Assembly Bill 126) is a scaled-down compromise measure while the newly-introduced Assembly Bill 549 is much more expansive and has the potential to add greater numbers of independent charter schools. Both bills are bad for rural school districts. Why? The funding mechanism. Given that the per pupil payments to independent charter schools (currently \$7,925 per pupil) are funded as a draw on the general aids that would otherwise be payable to every school district in the state, these bills will result in a growing aid reduction to public schools. In 2012-13, the reduction in general school aid attributable to independent charters was 1.4 percent statewide on average. And because local school districts are allowed to levy property taxes to cover the reduction in state aid, this may result in an increase in local property taxes.

Mr. Chairman, I want to thank you again for the opportunity to testify on this important topic. I also would like to leave you with this thought: If I were a rural Wisconsin legislator and a member of this task force like you, I would come away from these hearings with the belief that the school children I represent were being short-changed. I hope you will recommend and fight for solutions to the inequities highlighted here today. I offer the resources and expertise of the SAA and its membership to help you in any way we can. Thank you.