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Unified School District of Antigo

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WRITTEN TESTIMONY ON WISCONSIN RURAL SCHOOLS TO THE SPEAKER'S TASK FORCE ON RURAL SCHOOLS

**Mary Jo Filbrandt
Director of Business Services
Unified School District of Antigo
January 8, 2014**

Good Afternoon,

On behalf of Dr. Don Childs, our Interim District Administrator, who is unavailable today, our School Board, our administration and staff, we welcome you to the Antigo School District. I am Mary Jo Filbrandt, the Director of Business Services for the last 27 years. I hope you enjoyed the tour of the High School. It is a wonderful facility and we are very proud of it. After many failed referendums, it was built with a unique lease-purchase arrangement and opened when revenue caps were instituted. Thus, our saga began. Our District is not unlike many rural districts in Northern Wisconsin that you have heard from previously; we have declining enrollment, a large geographic area with high transportation costs, high percentages of free and reduced students, and low teacher salaries.

This is a conservative community and we have prided ourselves in making ends meet. The average median income is \$38,526 compared to the state average of \$50,143. The unemployment rate for Langlade County is still at 7.6%. Many of the parents in the District have multiple part-time jobs.

However, those in our community who are able to share their resources, have been extremely generous with donating funding for various projects including this theater to fully funding the Clara R. McKenna Aquatic Center next door to this school. Their generosity has also kept our co-curricular programs intact.

The District's enrollment has declined from 3,200 in the early 90's to 2,470 today. In the packet before you is a map showing our District of 540 square miles and the location of our rural schools

with an average of 3 students per square mile. Transportation costs exceed 7% of our General Fund budget. Student populations at our outlying schools range from 81 to 132 students. The high level of poverty of our students offers challenges; however, we try to use programs like SAGE, Title I and the 21st Century Community Learning Center to make a difference for our students. We only hope that these programs have continued funding in the future.

Our revenue cap base per pupil is \$9,200 compared to the State average of \$9,870. If there was more equity in the per pupil amount, we would be able to meet the instructional needs of this District more adequately.

In the last 10 years the expenses of the District have been reduced by millions of dollars and we have found new ways to generate revenues; such as:

- Reduced 88 Employees
- Reduced 10 Bus Routes
- Reduced Employee Benefits
- Reduced Maintenance Projects
- Eliminated SAGE at 3 Schools
- Increased Student Fees
- Reduced the School Year by 5 Days
- Closed 5 Schools
- Implemented an 8-period day at the Middle and High School
- Added the Medicaid Reimbursement Program
- Aggressively Applied for Grants

We saw a record loss of teachers and administrators this past year. We are losing tenured teachers that are now able to go to other districts and negotiate for higher wages and benefits. Antigo is becoming a training ground for starting teachers who seem to move on to higher paying positions.

You may have heard many stories around the state about how Act 10 freed up significant dollars for school districts especially in regards to Health Insurance. Our District had been well ahead of the game with implementation of the first school district HSA plan in the State, back in 2004, which allowed us to obtain significant savings pre-Act 10. Since then we have continued to transfer

the burden of health insurance increases to our employees. An average teacher's salary in 2010-11 of \$47,000 has now effectively been reduced to \$42,000 with the staff paying a portion of their retirement and every year an increased share of health insurance.

With all the new initiatives like Educator Effectiveness, Smarter Balanced Assessments, Response to Intervention, and implementing more instructional technology, we lack the administrative support and additional resources needed to properly apply them. Our principals and administrators wear many hats, especially when trying to add the professional development and strategies needed to effectively implement these important initiatives. Our ability to add staff is non-existent.

For the last 6 years, the District has attempted to consolidate their 7 elementary schools into one new building next to our high school for increased operating efficiencies; but, even more importantly, to provide equitable services to our students. Currently, only 4 of our 7 schools are SAGE. Title I services are also only available at the same 4 of the 7 schools. Students with special needs are bussed to schools in town from their rural schools in order to provide services that we can't afford to have in each building. Referendums attempting to consolidate our elementary schools into one were run and failed in 2006, 2011 and 2012; in addition, 3 operating referendums also failed during this time period. Both the financial inability of our community to pay more and the wishes of our community to keep their rural schools intact have prevented us from stabilizing the District financially. Our School Board is struggling with the insurmountable challenge of the community's desire to keep our rural elementary schools open yet meeting the ever-increasing costs of the District.

The Antigo School District endeavors to have our students graduating from high school having had the same opportunities as students throughout the state. I don't believe that this is happening now given the current School Finance Formula. From my own personal experience, having 4 children who have graduated from Antigo High School and gone on to college, they competed with students from the southern part of the state that came to college with up to 30 credits and several advanced classes in Math and Science. Yet, we continue to reduce opportunities at our high school level in order to balance our budget.

An increased number of our students are choosing a post-secondary path that doesn't include a 4-year degree. With about 35% of our students choosing vocational or technical college, we have a need to have a strong High School Technical Education Program. This year we lost 2 Tech Ed teachers and struggled with recruitment. Other districts are paying top dollar for these teachers and we are unable to compete.

While the District poverty rate is at 58%, some of our elementary schools have rates that are in the 60-79% range. This creates difficulties in the education of students, particularly when we are trying to do more with instructional technology from home to support students. Even in the face of adversity, West Elementary School with a 70% poverty rate, has received the New Wisconsin Promise Award for eight years. Dedicated and competent teachers make this happen. We are uncertain as to how we can retain this level of experienced teaching when these teachers retire.

In your packet there is written testimony from Dr. Childs, Interim District Administrator, that addresses technology access in Northern Wisconsin. I would like to go into that area briefly. We recently investigated access for our city and rural schools. What we found was that the city schools had 100 mega-bits per second (Mbps) and the rural schools had 1.5 Mbps. Up until last spring we had no other options but to accept the slower speeds for our rural schools. At that time a local company made some options available and we enhanced our system so that our rural schools now have 50 Mbps. A great improvement; but, nowhere near equitable access! This will all become alarmingly real next year when we are expected to implement computerized Smarter Balanced Assessments. Our only alternative is to bus rural students to a city school for the testing sessions. That will pose logistical issues as well as go against best practice for administering assessments. We will have little choice in the matter in order to complete the testing.

Northern Wisconsin is a great place to live, work and raise children. However, our economic base simply cannot support an excellent educational system unless financial equity across the state is achieved. The biennium state budget that was approved this July has been a great help for our District. I hope support for education continues and strong consideration is given to bring equity to rural school districts so we can provide the highest level of opportunity to Northern Wisconsin students.

Small, rural schools can certainly be viewed as an advantage to educating students. However, they are not economically feasible when programs have to be cut or the quality of teachers is affected by the dollars available for recruiting the best teachers.

I appreciate the opportunity to speak to this committee. Please keep Northern Wisconsin and all you have heard during these meetings in mind as you work diligently to fund our schools in an equitable manner, a manner that is different from the current system. I thank you for your visit to the Northwoods.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script, appearing to read "Mary Jo Filbrandt".

Mary Jo Filbrandt
Director of Business Services