



**Testimony of Betsy Kippers, WEAC President
and Ronald Martin, WEAC Vice President
before the Assembly Speaker's Taskforce on Rural Schools
December 17, 2013**

Thank you to Rep. Swearingen for the invitation to testify before you today. I am Betsy Kippers, a physical education teacher from Racine. I currently serve as the President of the Wisconsin Education Association Council, the largest union of educators with members who work in your neighborhood public schools and technical colleges. On behalf of WEAC, I am pleased to be here with you today to share with you the challenges and opportunities with our rural schools and ideas about how these could be addressed by you as policymakers.

Over the past several months, I have had the opportunity to visit schools all across the state from Washburn to Glidden, Bayfield to Bloomer and Prairie Farm to Ridgeland. Incredible things are happening in our neighborhood public schools, both in our urban centers and rural regions. I want to share with you just a few of the many highlights from my travels to schools in rural Wisconsin.

A visit to Prairie Farm Schools, the heart of this small Barron County village, awed me with the natural opportunities students had in the outdoors, with archery lessons for students in physical education and a 60-member ice fishing team. Another meeting with members in Bayfield opened my eyes to the lengths teachers are going to so their students have rigorous coursework that prepares them for the jobs of tomorrow. WEAC member and Wisconsin High School Teacher of the Year Rick Erickson creates hands-on physics kits with demonstrations that wow students and get them interested in science – which he shares across the Northwoods with other teachers. He takes teaching to another level by training high school physics students and other teachers in those rural schools on using the equipment to boost science rigor.

Opportunities like these – and so many more -- are made possible by dedicated educators, devoted parents and communities that are committed to their neighborhood public schools. Just like in Prairie View, rural schools are the heart of these communities. After all, rural communities depend on their schools to serve in many capacities beyond educating children. Rural school districts are often the largest employer in the area and rural schools serve as the social, recreational and cultural centers of their communities as well.

Betsy Kippers, President

Both our rural and urban schools are facing challenges. More and more of our children are growing up in poverty. Parents struggle with unemployment. Children come to schools hungry. We know that what happens outside of school affects what happens inside the classroom. Educators help children cope with these realities and realize their full potential. To be successful, we must reinvest in our public schools that serve all.

A few years ago, State Superintendent Tony Evers offered us a pathway to a fair and sustainable school funding system. The "Fair Funding for Our Future" plan reforms Wisconsin's school funding system by:

- Restoring reasonable growth in revenue limits;
- Building toward restoring the state's two-thirds funding commitment;
- Guaranteeing a minimum amount of state general equalization aid for every student;
- Directing all state aid right to school districts; and
- Accounting for family income and student poverty instead of relying solely on local property values.

School districts and the children they serve stand to benefit from these proposed changes. But the Fair Funding for Our Future plan does more than this. It makes technical changes that strengthen rural, declining enrollment and negatively aided districts by increasing the secondary cost ceiling and special adjustment aid level. Thanks to Rep. Pope for reintroducing the plan and circulating it for co-sponsorship. Thanks also to taskforce members Rep. Clark and Rep. Wright for joining her in the effort. It is worth another look.

As you look for ways to strengthen rural communities and schools, technology needs must be addressed. If our children are to excel in a fast-changing, global society, we must harness the technology resources they need to function in a digital age.

Although we have made some progress in bringing computers and the Internet to students and staff, greater access is needed for technology to become a reliable tool for teaching and learning. The reality is that the availability and quality of technology is dismally inadequate in most classrooms. With enhanced access and adequacy of technology, rural and small town schools would be able to use video conferencing and the Web to provide courses in subjects where a local teacher is not available. Technology can also have a significant effect on the quality of the work experience for classroom teachers. Newer teachers are especially enthusiastic about the possibilities. When used appropriately, technology can be an engaging, assistive-learning tool, particularly since students in lower income rural areas have less access to technology outside of school.

Ensuring students have access to technology in their neighborhood public schools is important to preparing them for the jobs of tomorrow. Wisconsin and states around the country are recognizing the benefits of STEM education and the application of those skill sets in today's global economy. Of course STEM education is not just study in the independent subjects of science, technology, engineering and math, but also opportunities to apply STEM learning to other disciplines. Our communities and local economies stand to benefit from the innovative, creative and critical thinking of STEM-conversant graduates.

Rural school teachers are hungry to provide the latest in education technology to their students – to raise the bar for all students. In Park Falls, the biggest “new thing” is the schoolwide technology program, which Library Media Specialist Michele Byholm is implementing. While scores of schools are going without specialists to keep technology moving for students, Park Falls is fortunate to still have Michele. However, time to implement the technology is a big problem. And teacher training time for the new technology? Nearly non-existent. How can teachers use technology seamlessly and effectively in their classrooms without training? We know there's a big push for technology, and we applaud that. Our students in all areas of the state need up-to-date materials to get ready for college and career. However, we're seeing all too often districts like Park Falls, which implemented a three-year technology plan in only 18 months. There's a challenge when technology comes without training, and it's especially apparent in Wisconsin rural schools today.

That's why our members across the state use their collective voice through WEAC to bring you the message that expanded professional development is critical to the success of integrating technology effectively with instruction. Both those entering the profession, as well as experienced educators, should have access to high-quality professional development in technology to make the most of learning opportunities for our children.

Adequate technology is also critical to education reforms such as the SMARTER Balanced Assessment to provide meaningful data that educators can use to make sure students graduate from high school ready for college and careers. The state is transitioning away from the paper/pencil based WKCE to this new assessment system. In its place will be an online, adaptive summative assessment comprised of multiple choice questions, computer-enhanced items and performance tasks. Interim assessments will also be online and adaptive.

Another education reform dependent on technology is the new Educator Effectiveness System, currently in its pilot phase and scheduled for full-scale implementation next school year. WEAC is passionate about assisting our members in navigating this exciting system in their local schools, and part of what we do is bring rural

teachers together for regional trainings on what's expected and how it can help them become even better teachers. We want to raise the bar not only for students, but for our profession too. This system was designed by and for Wisconsin educators to evaluate teachers and principals through a fair, valid, and reliable process. The Department of Public Instruction has contracted with Teachscape© to provide online infrastructure and support for the implementation of the system. The CESA 6 model relies on OASYS as its web-based observation and appraisal management system for scheduling, managing, completing and reporting all evaluation components. See, not only students – but also teachers – depend on solid technology that is available and consistent.

Yes, on this much we should be able to agree. Adequate technology is vital to our schools. Educators, parents, the business community and policymakers should be able to get behind a push for better integrating technology into our schools.

Technology is a subject we can all clearly see needs to be addressed in our rural schools. Our students and educators simply can't wait.

I'm Ron Martin, a middle school teacher from central Wisconsin and vice president of the Wisconsin Education Association Council.

I also travel frequently around the state – usually finding myself in at least three different school districts every week. I was just in Lake Mills, followed by Stevens Point, and Thursday will go up to the Menominee Indian Reservation School where I'll meet with teachers and tribal leaders about their hopes and vision for the public schools there. Wisconsin has some of the brightest things to celebrate when it comes to our public schools – like high graduation rates, top ACT scores and nationally-recognized top-notch educators. At the same time, we have some tough things to tackle when it comes to education – achievement gaps, skills gaps, increasing childhood poverty and a lack of adequate school funding. I truly believe that none of our challenges can be solved unless we work together. That's why I'm so honored to be here speaking to you today.

I want you to know that, in addition to technology and teacher evaluation, there are many other issues Wisconsin rural school teachers would love to engage you in, including the need to retain highly qualified educators in every single public school classroom. There's often talk about loosening standards for teachers in hard-to-staff regions of the state, but our members believe that every single child deserves an outstanding

teacher. No exceptions. Loosening standards leads to a slippery slope as an exception made in one category can be broadened to another, and another and another. Parents I talk to in rural communities are adamant that their children need the same opportunities as children in larger school districts. They expect a Wisconsin-licensed, subject-matter certified teacher to lead their children down the path toward success.

Here's another issue you'll hear me address any time I'm involved in a conversation about teachers and public schools. Collaboration is the key to moving education forward – educators, parents, communities and policymakers working together to give our kids the schools they deserve. In developing education policy and practice, those closest to the education process should have a seat at the table. Our voices matter. Teachers have a unique perspective when it comes to how schools function and in this case, what rural schools most need to continue their legacy.

I want to close today with a reminder about what that legacy is. Let's never forget that public schools are about keeping a promise to every Wisconsin child. A constitutional promise that no matter who you are, no matter where you come from, no matter your parents' education levels and no matter what income barriers may be in your way – you can learn. You can be inspired. You can change the world.

Here's a story close to my heart, because it's my story. I grew up in one of the great rural schools in Wisconsin. I'm from a little town in northern Wisconsin. I am a proud graduate from Northwood High School. We must keep that dream alive for the thousands of young people who live and go to school in a rural community and share this truth – you can learn, you can be inspired and you can change the world no matter which school you graduate from in Wisconsin.

I personally know what it means to live in poverty. I grew up raised by a single parent in Minong, WI – my mother raised her four children working four and sometimes five jobs just to make ends meet. Our first car was a converted old race car fixed up by a family friend. The front seats were two old kitchen chairs for my mom and my older sister and the back seat was made of two cement blocks with a large piece of wood where I sat with my brothers. It wasn't pretty – but it got us to where we needed to be. Thinking back to my childhood days and the cold nights, I remember heating our home by a wood stove and when it got really cold we turned on the electric stove in our kitchen to keep the pipes from freezing. Often times we huddled around the open door of the stove to keep warm.

So what made the difference in my life? Wisconsin public schools. They are the great equalizer. It didn't matter to Northwood Schools that I came from the other side of the tracks or that we lived in poverty. I was inspired to learn early on and knew that it didn't matter what your socio-economic background was or the color of your skin or what religion you practiced. Just as they did back in the 1970s and 1980s, public schools work and we must reinvest in our rural schools by providing adequate funding and resources so that communities like Minong can continue to keep that promise to every child.

I sincerely appreciate the opportunity to share with you today ideas for strengthening our rural schools and building on the promise of public education. Betsy and I, along with tens of thousands of other Wisconsin teachers, look forward to being partners with you. Thank you.

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