



## TESTIMONY TO THE SPEAKER'S TASK FORCE ON RURAL SCHOOLS

Representative Swearingen, Representative Clark and Members of the Rural Task Force:

Thank you for the opportunity to speak with you today about the challenges facing rural school districts throughout the state and more importantly, to suggest potential solutions that address these challenges. I am Jerry Fiene, Executive Director of the Wisconsin Rural Schools Alliance, an organization representing administrators, board of education members, teachers and community leaders from rural districts throughout the state.

Over the past several months, I have walked with you on rural school tours, listened with you to excellent and passionate testimony from rural leaders and took note of your insightful questions and comments. I am encouraged to conclude that you are sincerely searching for solutions to the very serious challenges facing rural schools in every corner of our state. Approximately 60% of the school districts in Wisconsin are rural and they are the lifeblood of their rural communities, often serving as the center for a community's social and cultural activities. There is a direct correlation between the quality and economic health of the rural school district and the economic well-being of the community it serves. Strengthening and preserving our rural school districts reinforces our values, heritage and economy.

### Need

Historically, rural school districts have offered excellent educational opportunities to their students resulting in high achievement and graduation rates. Small, rural school districts have many advantages providing personal attention to all students and developing excellent and innovative school/community partnerships. However, 20 years of revenue limits and current school funding formulas, even with modifications over time, have taken a dramatic toll on nearly every rural school district in Wisconsin. Declining enrollments over the past 10 years in rural school districts, many by more than 20%, combined with annual per student revenue limit adjustments that have not kept pace with inflation have resulted in dramatic reductions in educational opportunities for our rural youth. Although fewer students does allow for a certain level of cost savings, in most rural districts the lack of economies of scale, sparsity which requires high per pupil transportation costs and inflationary driven fixed costs prevent these districts from proportionately reducing costs to match flat or declining revenue limits. They have no control over inflation, buildings cannot be closed, class sections cannot be reduced, administration and staffing has already been compressed and is at a minimum, transportation cannot be further reduced, building maintenance and replacement of aging equipment has already been delayed, utilities and insurance premiums must be paid. The only option other than a referendum to exceed the revenue limit is to reduce or eliminate opportunities for students. I am certain you have heard from rural districts in your regions that there has been an erosion of foreign language courses, advanced placement classes, art, music, guidance and library services, career and technical education offerings, reading specialists and student activities.

Some rural school districts have been successful in saving educational opportunities and programs by passing one or more referenda to exceed the revenue limit but many more have failed. In fact, the very existence of many rural school districts has become dependent on passing another referendum every several years. In the past 15 years, there have been 956 such referenda and 442 have been successful. Looking deeper into the referenda data reveals that 73% of the revenue limit referenda were held in rural school districts. However, many referenda to exceed the revenue limits in non-rural districts were actually to fund additional costs of operating new schools or start new programs. If you just look at the referenda that are to maintain existing programs, more than 80% were in rural school districts. It is well documented that poverty has significantly increased in rural Wisconsin over the past 10 years and that is a factor that not only impacts the cost of educating children, but also impacts a district's ability to pass a referendum. A second factor affecting the ability to successfully pass a referendum may be the property value behind each student. Ninety-seven rural school districts have held 3 or more referenda to exceed the revenue limit and 65 have held at least 4 referenda to exceed. Some of these districts have passed every one they attempted and some of these districts have passed none. Several districts have had more than 9 referenda with some passing 8 and others passing only 1. It obviously makes a huge difference for students retaining or losing educational opportunities depending on where they happen to live.

#### Funding Formula

All of the information I have shared illustrates the fact that our current school funding mechanisms do not provide equitable educational opportunities for students across the state and the children living in rural Wisconsin are negatively affected the most. An educational standard that was established by the Wisconsin State Supreme Court in 2000 stated, "Wisconsin students have a fundamental right to an equal opportunity to a sound basic education." I do not believe this standard is being met given the effects of our current funding formulas and I urge the Task Force to recommend a remedy by supporting major school finance reform such as the Fair Funding for our Future Plan submitted by State Superintendent Tony Evers or a Public School Funding Reform bill currently being proposed in the legislature. These plans address many of the issues that have created inequities for rural schools by establishing a minimum state support for every student, accounting for poverty and sparsity, addressing inadequate revenue limit authority and providing predictable and sustainable funding for future years.

#### Technology

I also believe that the one aspect of education in the twenty first century that has the greatest potential to transform education and be an equalizer of opportunity for rural youth is the effective application of technology.

In 1997, Wisconsin Act 27 created the Technology for Education Achievement in Wisconsin (TEACH) Board to assist public school districts in expanding and upgrading the educational technology needed to take advantage of the Internet and to train teachers and others in the use of educational technology. The Board combined GPR, State Bonding, Universal Service Funding and federal revenue to expend an average of \$55 million per year in 4 distinct components. It was a highly successful project that wired all of our schools, provided block grants for educational technology expenditures, provided professional development and technical assistance and provided high speed Internet connections to school districts, libraries, technical colleges, as well as full-motion video networks. TEACH was fully funded for 6 years

and the component providing connections at subsidized rates is the only part remaining in existence today. It was considered at that time that the other components accomplished their objectives and of course they did, but we all know that technology does not stand still and in 2013, we are again far behind where we could or should be. A 2001-2002 Joint Legislative Audit Report that further describes this beneficial program is linked to this testimony. ([TEACH Review.pdf](#))

Although the ending of TEACH created a hole in districts' technology budgets, they kept making upgrades and providing professional development the best they could to take advantage of the technologies available at the time. However, the federal Title IID technology funding also soon disappeared and the cumulative effects of revenue limits placed a severe strain on technology budgets preventing rural districts from taking advantage of the latest advancements in technology.

We encourage the Rural Task Force to recommend creating a TEACH II Program modeled after the original TEACH Program with some components directed specifically to rural school districts and others designed to move all districts forward in modern day applications and pedagogies designed to prepare our youth for their future. Properly designed, TEACH II would:

- Transform education and empower parents and students with more choices;
- Provide equity of options to high-quality digital curriculum and modality choices; and
- Provide personalized learning experiences for all students with multiple learning paths that lead to college and career readiness.

TEACH II could be designed with four pillars. Pillar 1 would focus on statewide broadband access. We simply must increase affordable high speed access to our schools, communities and homes in order to harness the power of technology and accommodate digital learning options available today. But the current TEACH program often provides just one broadband circuit to a school district. This needs to be expanded to provide affordable broadband to ALL of our school buildings. This Pillar would also have significant impact on rural economic development and needs to be accomplished through public/private partnerships.

Pillar 2 would provide block grants to rural school districts based on enrollment, sparsity and poverty. All rural districts need resources to support technology, but their needs are not the same because of difficult choices they have had to make in recent years. Some of the potential targets for these block grants would be adding or upgrading wireless networks, servers, hardware and devices needed for one-to-one instruction; contracted service for technology support, distance education network solutions using today's technology, software, personal learning tools and content as well as access to online coursework.

Pillar 3 would invest in a state-led digital learning effort. Over the past 5 years, 25 states have provided funding for state-led programs including Michigan, Illinois, Nebraska, North Dakota, Montana and Iowa. In Wisconsin, we have a legislatively-created, state-led effort in the [Wisconsin Digital Learning Collaborative](#) but their efforts are being carried out without any state financial support. Some of the many benefits of this pillar would be to allow for statewide procurement of integrated personalized learning resources which would drive down costs for all school districts and digital learning consortia in the state. It could cover the fixed costs, maintenance costs, licensing costs and development costs for

digital curriculum, integrated software and learning repositories. The overarching benefit would be equitable access with total local control.

Pillar 4 would provide statewide professional development to all school districts through a statewide delivery model. Professional development is an absolutely necessary component of transforming education and again, this is an area that many districts have reduced in order to save student programs. Areas of professional development would include administrative planning, implementation and evaluation of digital learning initiatives, as well as district technology planning support through the DPI. Another component could assist rural, isolated districts in implementing Teacher Effectiveness programs. The bulk of the professional development would be directed at classroom teachers and include components specific to personalized learning such as pedagogy, classroom management and use of digital resources.

One of many resources that further describe the potential benefits of TEACH II is the document [INACOL-Transforming-K-12-Rural-Education-through-Blended-Learning](#).

#### Sparsity/Transportation

You have heard significant testimony on the high transportation costs shouldered by rural school districts as a result of sparsity. Districts that are spending between \$700 and \$1,500 per student on transportation obviously have less funds to put into the classroom. The annual transportation cost for 75 rural districts with less than 3.6 students per square mile exceeds the average transportation cost for the remaining districts by 55%. That amounts to \$225,000 more cost for a district with just 750 students. The current sparsity aid and transportation aid available to school districts still covers less than 10% of the total cost. It is a travesty that the current sparsity aid program excludes remote school districts with an enrollment above 750 students even though they have some of the highest sparsity levels in the state. We urge you to recommend removing the enrollment cap and appropriating additional funds to increase the current support and to cover the additional costs of adding new districts in order to prevent penalizing the school districts currently in the program.

In addition, there are some unique cooperative programs being developed between consortia of school districts and technical colleges that involve students being transported during the school day. These types of innovative programs to increase opportunities for students should also be supported by Transportation Aids.

#### Staff Recruitment and Retention

The dramatic increase of part-time classroom teachers, librarians, specialists and administrators along with suppressed salary schedules raises the very real issue of attracting and retaining high-quality staff in rural school districts. Rural districts are reporting a significant decrease in applications for vacancies. Even if certified educators are found to fill positions that are in high demand, they are often lost in a few years to districts in more populated areas that are able to offer higher salaries and benefits. Since Act 10, the disparities in compensation between rural and non-rural districts are increasing and signing bonuses are being offered to candidates in certification areas that are in high demand by larger districts with more resources. When budget reductions force districts to reduce positions to less than full-time, these educators will search for new positions.

Supply and demand will become a greater issue as we move forward. The University of Wisconsin System reports a 2.8% decrease in the number of junior and senior undergraduates enrolled in teacher training programs between 2010 and 2012. A recent post-graduation survey of education graduates indicates the number of respondents planning to teach as long as they are able or until retirement has dropped significantly from 85% in 2009 to 39% last year. Beginning teachers are worried about paying back college loans on a starting salary of \$30,000 or even less in many rural districts when future increases are tied to the rate of inflation. We believe the creation of a loan forgiveness program for educators choosing to work in a rural district could go a long way in closing the attraction and retention gap between rural and non-rural districts. An incentive for them to choose and remain in a rural district for 5 years would increase the likelihood of their continuation in that position for a longer time. We also believe that a review of our teacher certification requirements with the possibility of additional options to make it easier for rural educators to teach 1 or 2 classes in a second certification area would aid in rural teacher retention. Small, rural school districts definitely need more flexibility in addressing their unique staffing needs.

#### Whole Grade Sharing

When we discuss the unique needs and challenges of rural schools, the question invariably is raised about the potential of addressing these needs by consolidating many of our small, rural school districts. The reality is that history and research has well documented the fact that consolidation in and of itself is not the answer. I encourage you to review the volume of research and resources available from the Rural School and Community Trust, a national non-profit organization addressing the crucial relationship between good schools and thriving communities, on their website at [www.ruraledu.org](http://www.ruraledu.org). A stream of studies conducted over a half-century repeatedly concluded that closing schools reduces per-pupil costs very little, if at all. Furthermore, a National Rural Education Task Force issued a report on school consolidation in 2005 that presented an excellent summary of the history of the issue and summarized research on the topic, making many conclusions including . . .

- The educational and financial results of state-mandated school district consolidations do not meet legislative expectations;
- After a school closure, out migration, population decline and neighborhood deterioration are set in motion, support for public education diminishes; and,
- There is no solid foundation for the belief that eliminating school districts will improve education, enhance cost effectiveness or promote equality.

So, are there other organizational options that could be beneficial in addressing the unique needs of small, rural school districts? The state of Iowa, among others, has successfully utilized whole grade sharing as an option to expand opportunities for students. The practice has been in place for the past 20 years as an alternative to consolidation and is currently being used by 70 out of 348 school districts. Whole grade sharing is a voluntary agreement between two school districts to share certain grade levels between them. For example, District A will send their students in grades 9-12 to District B and District B will send their students in grades 6-8 to District A. Both Districts A and B will maintain their Pk-5 elementary schools. In this scenario, both communities maintain schools within their community and maintain their locally elected school board. A contract is developed between the two school boards which establishes the methods to determine the sharing of costs for the shared grade levels, staffing,

transportation and other issues. This contract is for a specific period of time and may be renewed or terminated in the future. The obvious advantage of this arrangement is that student opportunities can be maintained or expanded because of the greater economy of scale at the secondary levels. This practice has been successful because it is a decision that makes sense at the local level and is locally supported and controlled.

We are currently involved in drafting legislation that would make this practice explicitly permissible in Wisconsin. However, this legislation will not have a fiscal note. In Iowa, there is a whole grade sharing aid that provides incentives and covers the cost of transition for the first three years. The aid is .1% of the average per pupil cost statewide. We strongly encourage the Rural Task Force support this proposed legislation and to consider making a recommendation for financial support. We currently provide consolidation aid for district choosing that option. Why shouldn't there also be aid for districts choosing the whole grade sharing option? For more information on whole grade sharing, you may want to review the Iowa Whole Grade Sharing Handbook ([Iowa 2013-14 Whole Grade Sharing Handbook](#)) or the PowerPoint presentation by the superintendent of the Fredericksburg and Sumner, Iowa School Districts presented at the WIRSA Fall Conference ([Whole Grade Sharing](#)).

#### Concluding Personal Thoughts

I have had the great privilege of working in rural schools and communities throughout Wisconsin for 45 years, beginning as a 4<sup>th</sup> grade teacher and serving as a principal in central Wisconsin, a school superintendent in southwest Wisconsin, a CESA administrator in northern Wisconsin and now as the part-time executive director of the Wisconsin Rural Schools Alliance. I should probably be on the sideline by now, but I am passionate about the future of our rural schools, communities and youth. While we know so much more today than we did 45 years ago about how children learn and our teachers and administrators are doing an outstanding job of providing a quality education, diminishing resources are threatening our children's future.

Rural communities are proud of their schools. Rural school boards want to maintain high-achieving schools that provide a wide range of opportunities for their students, which will prepare them to be ready for careers and post-secondary education. Rural administrators, teachers and staff work hard every day to serve every individual child that comes through their doors. They embrace innovation, higher standards and greater accountability, but it takes adequate resources to accomplish the task. Every day, we hear or read about the great things that happen in our rural schools and accomplishments of our rural youth. But, without a strong commitment to public education and an adequate investment in our rural schools, it cannot be sustained. Some say we just do not have the money. I would suggest that the money is there, but it is more about the choices we make and the priorities we set for spending the money we have. I strongly urge this Task Force to boldly set priorities to adequately invest in our rural public schools and communities and to preserve one of the characteristics that makes Wisconsin great.