



SCHOOL DISTRICT OF MAUSTON

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SUPERINTENDENT OF SCHOOLS - Dr. Christine M. Weymouth

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From: Dr. Christine M. Weymouth, Superintendent of Schools, School District of Mauston

Subject: Speaker's Task Force on Rural Schools: Public Hearing Testimony, Royall School District

Date: Wednesday November 6 2013

Good Afternoon. My name is Christine Weymouth and I am the Superintendent of Schools for the School District of Mauston located in Mauston Wisconsin. I would like to thank Representative Swearingen and other members of the Rural School Task Force for your efforts and interest in learning more about rural schools in Wisconsin. I am very proud to be here and to speak on behalf of all rural educators. It is our time to be heard. I am confident that you will hear a positive and challenging assessment of our hopes and dreams for a world-class child centered education for all students we serve. The dialogue in the State about the needs of rural education is a very good first step in recognizing the culture of rural schools

I will speak to the Mauston educational experience, albeit through the lense of a superintendent who is only in her second year in Mauston.

When I envision the future for students in the Mauston Schools I dream of many things. I see a Board of Education who believes that a strong public education is the most certain means of developing an informed community. They know that public schools, especially rural public schools are the bedrock of a healthy, engaged community. Mauston Schools, one of many rural schools across the fine State of Wisconsin, makes a bold promise to build a quality foundation of learning in a community who wants a bright future so that their young people will be a cut-above in their career, work, and life. The reality that I see is that our schools in Mauston keep getting better but we do so with shrinking resources, increased mandates, and demanding but not impossible, post Act 10 challenges.

Despite how others may see us, rural schools do not see themselves as a second cousin to our suburban and city educators. We are as ambitious about reform and improvements as anyone. We want to transform how education is viewed and we know how to do it. I liken it to my own childhood growing up in Michigan. My family had very little. I do not remember wanting or needing more than I had. But I know now as an adult when I look back our family did not have the resources, wealth, property and income that my friends families had. My family had heart and compassion but not these other things. It is similar with rural schools. We are fine when we look around our own community and see what difficulties lay in front of us. We really don't know what we don't have yet we know that our students must compete with admission into the same colleges and post secondary institutions as school districts that have expanding resources.

Please know we signed up for these challenges, but when you line us up alongside our educational peers we pale by comparison in our ability to invest, our ability to combat high risk factors in families, and our ability overall to create instructionally rich learning experiences for our students. In rural schools we don't have a museum down the street or a Capitol building in our town. As a rule, we don't benefit from having higher education institutions near us and large business and industry as partners. We don't have the same convenient access points, and it costs us more in resources (time and money) to benefit educationally from these rich historical references. Because we are geographically one hour from both LaCrosse and Madison we are not a destination school district and we struggle with attracting the most talented of educators not to mention the difficulties we experience each year in securing high demand hard- to- fill teaching positions. We support our private parochial school in our community by providing Federal Title services in Reading and Math, school counseling, special education services such as speech and language, occupational and physical therapy, and adaptive physical education, and transportation for the students that attend that school.

Yet, our schools continue to expect students to perform and they do. We are not high performing YET but we want to improve and we are finding new ways to prioritize to get the most important things done right. But I do feel that rural schools in general are 'outside' of the discussion on reforming education in America. I would say that rural education is looked down upon, often viewed as isolated and often expected to be okay with less. I can say this because I have lived and worked in non-rural communities.

I am a bit unique in that I have been the Superintendent of Schools in Mauston for the past 14 months and prior to that I am pretty much a suburban girl with just over 24 years of public school administrative experience in metro suburban school districts in

the Twin Cities. I have worked in school districts that have talented students, high quality teachers, support staff and school principals who have high expectations of themselves and others. I will say that I find the Mauston rural school experience to be reflect these characteristics as well. I give great testament to what I have seen in the short 14 months that I have spent in the Mauston community.

In Mauston I have seen adults who give donations from their pocket books and their heart like no other school district that I have been a part of. I have seen teachers who work extremely long hours so that their students have a shot at excellence. These staff advocate for their students and create positive, supportive, and respectful classroom environments so that their students will flourish. I visit schools and classrooms regularly and I can tell you that the students in Mauston have the same dreams for their future as their counterparts in suburban Minneapolis. I know firsthand after my 14 months that Mauston Schools may not have access and the financial wherewithal in resources and program offerings that other districts may have, but I also know that this does not dissuade our teachers and our parents from championing for student success. Students themselves are quite remarkable in communities such as ours. One month ago we had a young female student donate \$1200 to a scholarship fund because she sold her Championship Lamb. I thought this was remarkable yet many commented to me that this is not an unusual representation of giving in our community.

When we wish to put on a Veterans Day program in November for the community and the students, we don't have a communications director or a planning coordinator to do the work. In this way, I speak for all rural schools when I say that our school principals do this work because it matters that they do. In rural America I have seen the community give back to its students and its seniors. When a grant needs to be written I don't have a hand full of grant writers to turn to. I write the grant and my staff

does so as well. I have learned how to apply and earn competitive grants as does any educator in rural settings. We have high speed internet access in all of Mauston's schools and that is because we have budgeted responsibly over the years. We invest in technology. We have SMARTBoards in every classroom, we have iPads, Chromebooks and other one to one devices for our students. We have Vernier Resources for our students to use in laboratory settings in Physical Science, Biology and Chemistry.

We have written grants to purchase advanced document cameras and the new and improved student assessment response systems that encourage learning and assessment in a new way. Technology may be the answer to equity but we have to be able to purchase it and replace it, and in small rural communities all of the program features, software, and technological operational infrastructures needed to establish effective school operations, are still necessary but there is less money to support and sustain these features. We rely on General Fund 10 and grants to purchase this necessary technology. We worry about the community infrastructure support for any potential referendum opportunities.

We have Advanced Placement and other world language programming opportunities because we have been intentional about the intellectual and global learning prerequisites necessary for our students to compete. We make sure that our students have a diverse set of community service opportunities before they graduate from high school. We value STEM Education and little by little invest in the resources and materials that support this focus. And we continue to develop and thrive in our offerings for agricultural sciences. Our high school is comprehensive and specific in its course offerings for all students. Jim Dillin, Mauston High School Principal will speak to the pathways that have been developed to help all youth succeed in school and graduate from high school.

Arguably, some of the most dedicated and passionate educators that I have met teach and lead in Mauston. Our story is perhaps not unique but it is the center of our world. We wish to be the school district of choice in our region because we have so much to offer. Mauston has embraced the need to personalize the learning for students.

Make no mistake, rural schools are tackling the complex challenges before us step by step. One of the ways we respond is to complement our more traditional educational programming, Mauston Schools support an iLEAD Charter School and a Mauston Virtual School as extended choices for students and families. The iLEAD Charter School is an instrumentality of the Mauston School District. Our iLEAD Charter School is designed to be a public school option for students located in Mauston High School. Our iLEAD Charter School is a school of innovation and technology and it focuses on entrepreneurship and leadership in a project-based learning environment. It is an option for students in Mauston and surrounding school districts in the region.

There are currently 40 students enrolled. 25% of the students are open enrolled and the majority of those 25% are from home-school environments. It does our school district, other school districts and the iLEAD Charter School no good to be in competition with one another for students. What is important is that we have a charter school that can offer an educational product that meets the needs of some of our learners in the area. Case in point, to what our iLEAD Charter School offers: a Chicago area family researching school options in the State of Wisconsin ~ found us. They were willing to move and relocate to Mauston but could not sell their home. They are still interested in us and intend to join us once their home in Illinois sells. Our charter school is small and is instructionally holistic, and therefore is a magnet-if-you-will for home school students and families as

they consider secondary schooling options for their children. It has its own Governance Council and the iLEAD Charter School and the Mauston Schools share staff who are committed to the students and the relationship they share with other school district resources and services at Mauston High School, such as school counseling, band, nursing, food service, and transportation. My recommendation ~ keep Wisconsin Public School Charter Schools an instrumentality of the school districts in which they are housed and increase the amount of grants and grant opportunities that support public charter schools so that rural schools can develop charter schools learning environment as another way to personalize learning for students.

In an attempt to keep Mauston students attending school in Mauston, we are offering another new learning opportunity this year for students and families ~ our new Mauston Virtual School. This new virtual school choice is available to all Mauston students in K-12. We are partnering with the Jefferson Eastern Dane Interactive Network (fondly know as JEDI) to offer this virtual educational option. So far this year, we have 10 students enrolled in our virtual school. If we were not a member of this consortium of seven other public school districts in the state we would have lost those students to home schooling or other virtual school agencies. It costs Mauston Schools approximately \$10,000 to be a member each year to offer our own virtual school experience.

Make no mistake we have done these things with few resources and no new money for new programming such as our Virtual School, the technology, or new compensation teacher models that are better for teachers and students.

The School District of Mauston encompasses 324 square miles in the heart of Lemonweir Valley in South Central Wisconsin and includes townships Germantown, Kildare, Lemonweir, Lindina, Lisbon,

Lyndon, Marion, Plymouth, Seven Mile Creek, Summit, Village of Lyndon Station and the City of Mauston. The city of Mauston is the county seat of Juneau County and is located an hour north of Madison. Our 4K-12 student enrollment is approximately 1,446 students. 89 students open enroll into Mauston from other non-resident school districts. The district has 240 employees. We house two elementary schools with a total student enrollment of 590 (a grade 3-5 building and a 4K-2 building) located in the community and one country school in Lyndon Station a K-5 grade school for the students who reside in Lyndon Station. We have a middle school and it serves 300 students. Mauston High School has approximately 460 students with a new high school that was built in 2001.

We are a medium sized school district with a Free Reduced Student Population of 60%. Our annual Fund 10 Budget is 16.4 million and in the last 6 years the school district has reduced \$2.6 million from its budget. A sample of some instructional budget reductions include staffing eliminations in reading, library and media, 11 teaching positions and 10 instructional support staff and the elimination of 4 bus routes. Four year old early learning classrooms are scheduled to accommodate our budget and the rising costs of transportation, not to meet the critical needs of families and our youngest learners.

We wish to compete technologically and make the necessary instructional technology enhancements that will keep students engaged in 21st Century classroom learning. There are no new revenues for this type of classroom learning. There is no new revenue for the maintenance for new roofs and aging heating and cooling systems in our schools. We have no new money for necessary security systems for our schools. Two of our elementary schools in Mauston have no security systems to speak of and will require additional spending to secure these buildings. Currently we rely heavily on federal funding to account for new resources and materials in Literacy and

numeracy. 86% of district expenses are in salaries and benefits for professional staff and support staff. Mauston is committed to the growth of its professional teachers. In order to progress and work with teachers rural schools need a more secure and permanent and responsive way to compensate its professionals. The school funding for all schools is broken and you have heard testimony to this. We property poor and income poor in Juneau County and we struggle with families that are highly transient.

We know that the single most impactful measure to increase student achievement is the quality of the classroom teacher. We are dedicated to making our new teacher evaluation programs work and we are interested in professionalizing teacher compensation to reflect continuous growth in our staff. We know that a system of evaluation will focus on teachers self-assessing their own development and teachers supporting other teachers in a full range of colleague review. Because of this learning, we will find new ways to account for student learning and advancement. We embrace this new way of thinking and wish for new ways to incentivize compensation. We are very much committed to developing organizational systems that will place our teachers and administrators at the center of being their own best stewards for professional growth. We are brave and know that we hold the future in our hands and we are not afraid to be held accountable and teach to higher standards. It is probably fair to say that most of this will require a new way of thinking and funding public schools and there is great uncertainty about how we will afford these new and reformed ways of doing business. In our school district we do not mind the mandate for Educator Effectiveness that is in part funded. What we prefer is to work from a set of defined standards with the option to develop our own model of teacher effectiveness where we can design our own effective teacher practice measures that reflect the cultural and socio-economic characteristics of our communities.

During your Rural Schools travels you have heard testimony that addresses the fiscal hurdles we face with selecting and retaining highly qualified teachers. You have heard some of this: teachers in rural communities have lower average salaries, transportation costs continue to climb in small and rural school districts, special education costs in nursing and technology are not eligible for reimbursement and in general special education costs continue to climb with federal and state categorical aids not increasing at the same rate as costs, and complex revenue limits restrict the amount of state general equalization aids and property tax revenue a school district may receive.

Make no mistake, rural schools want to tackle these complex educational preponderances. In rural Wisconsin we face needing to restructure many of our existing facilities because of a slightly declining enrollment. Mauston is proud of our well kept facilities. We know that it is imperative that the resources of the District be used so that all buildings and grounds are safe, clean, healthy, and attractive places that stimulate learning and encourage physical activity, technological learning laboratories, and provide essential gathering places for our citizens. We know that our schools are investments for the Mauston Community for both the present and future generations. That is why we are currently undergoing a formal facility review to determine how the District can be more financially and instructionally effective in the useful life of our facilities.

We must be innovative and intentional about how we approach educational decision making in the sustainable future. We know that in rural school environments, the schools are the pride of the community. The buildings, fields, and facilities are where a lifetime of memories are made. As I mentioned, in Mauston our facilities will be examined in order to know whether we consolidate and close schools and/or upgrade to keep the life of our schools intact. Either way, we will need to take action and

this may or may not result in asking our community to support our decisions and share in the majority of the costs in the future to upgrade school facilities.

Mauston is a SAGE school district and as a result we are fortunate to have the ability to keep class sizes small at our youngest grades. If SAGE goes away our classroom sizes double and learning is deeply impacted in a property poor, income poor community student learning is impacted greatly.

In closing, rural schools want courageous skillful educators to come to our community to live and work. We want to be held accountable for innovative rigorous and relevant instruction and we want to be part of the collective reform conversation. In Wisconsin and Mauston, education has long been a strong engine of our State's economic growth. We have depended on a well educated workforce, shaped by strong public schools, many of them rural, to lay the foundation for our prosperity.

Thank you for interest in helping lead Wisconsin schools as world-class educational institutions. I look forward to any questions you may have.