WISCONSIN DEPARTMENT OF PUBLIC INSTRUCTION

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Testimony-State Superintendent Tony Evers
Speaker's Task Force on Rural Schools
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I want to thank Chairman Swearingen and members of the committee for inviting me to be here today to discuss with you the issues facing rural schools. I appreciate the work you are doing and want to thank you for focusing on this important topic and visiting some of the rural schools in our great state.

For many years now, the Department of Public Instruction has had a Rural Advisory Council as part of our initiative to focus on both the challenges and achievements of our rural schools. This Council is made up of community members, tribes, K-12 and higher education, advocates, business, health care, and the legislature. I was with this group just last week and talked with them about the opportunity you were providing me today. As a result of that discussion, I want to stress that I am here today testifying not only for myself, but on their behalf as well, to share with you their perspectives.

More than half of Wisconsin school districts have fewer than 1,000 students. Many are dealing with issues of increasing poverty levels and declining enrollment, which means they receive less state aid to educate their students. At the same time, these school districts often have higher than average costs to educate students.

Why do they receive less state aid? It is because of the way our state school funding formula works. That formula is meant to equalize how much state aid we give to school districts by looking at how much property value is behind every student and it does a great job of doing that. But guess what? It is a double whammy for declining enrollment school districts, many of whom are rural. They lose money because they have fewer students to count for aid purposes. And, as they lose students, these districts actually look richer because there is more property value behind the remainder of their students, and the formula provides them less money.

At the same time, we have a number of rural districts that look incredibly property-rich. In large part, this is due to tourism and vacation homes. However, the incomes of the people who live in these districts year round are low. Our formula does nothing to address this, leaving ludicrous examples of rural districts like Birchwood that have 75 percent of their students on free and reduced price lunch but receive almost no state aid.

This is why we must do something to fix how we fund schools in this state. We need a way to allocate resources that takes into account the income levels of the families in a particular community – not just the community's property wealth. We need a system that provides a minimum amount of state aid for all children, regardless of where they live and go to school.

As you may know, I have proposed, and the Rural Advisory Council has endorsed, a comprehensive school finance reform plan to address these inequities. I encourage you to take a look that plan, but the Department of Public Instruction stands ready to work together with you to meaningfully address the needs of our rural schools.

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There are other unique challenges rural school districts face that the state has recognized and tried to address through unique categorical aid programs.

Transportation aid has been modified by the legislature over the last few sessions to provide additional aid for school districts transporting students for longer distances and an additional aid program was created in the last budget to fund high-cost pupil transportation. These are all great efforts, and I thank you for approving them. However, the state is still woefully underfunding the transportation costs rural school districts must bear.

Wisconsin's small and rural districts are hardest hit by increasing transportation costs. There were over 80 districts with pupil transportation costs per member above 150 percent of the state average, making their total transportation costs above that 150 percent level nearly $10 million per year. Wisconsin has made a good start by providing $5 million per year to address these costs, but more needs to be done so instructional dollars are not used to pay for transportation to and from school.

Like rising transportation costs, rising special education costs have also essentially reduced the spending authority of some school districts for regular education. Due to revenue caps and frozen state special education funding, districts are increasingly forced to use regular education funds to pay for special education, a fact that is especially detrimental to small, rural schools. Wisconsin has not increased special education aid for three consecutive budgets, an inequity that needs to be addressed in 2015-17.

One way the state has tried to address the unique needs of a rural school district is through Sparsity Aid. This program was actually first conceived by the Rural Advisory Council, after which it was put in DPI's 2007-09 biennial budget request and then passed by legislature. It provides up to $300 per student for school districts that meet the following three criteria:

1. School district membership is no more than 725 members.
2. District membership is less than 10 members per square mile of the district's geographic area.
3. At least 20 percent of school district's membership qualifies for free or reduced-price lunch (FRL) under the National School Lunch Program.

Sparsity Aid is one way the state provides flexible funding that allows districts to put the resources where local needs dictate, and it is the only state aid appropriation geared exclusively to rural school districts. It is currently prorated at 79 percent.

Funding issues exacerbate other challenges of rural districts. Education in the classroom is changing rapidly due to technology. Yet rural school districts are often unable to take advantage of many of these opportunities in the same way their urban and suburban counterparts are and are increasingly being left behind.

Today, many of our schools and libraries have significantly less bandwidth than they need. This issue will become even more critical as more services utilize the Internet. Sufficient broadband – from whatever source – at affordable cost is essential to ensuring the success of digital learning in Wisconsin.

The Rural Advisory Council firmly believes Wisconsin schools, libraries, and communities should have a system that is ubiquitous, affordable, and always available at school and home to facilitate 24/7

learning. Enabling this infrastructure allows more attention to be focused on how we use the technology, rather than how we get adequate access.

Having a technology grid is most important to rural school districts that need access to learning opportunities that will only be available through technology. You can't offer online education, video interfaces, or blended learning with dialup or only a few megabytes per second. They need gigabytes per second. They need a grid for their communities to advance economic development if their schools and communities are to thrive.

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, we need great teachers in all of our classrooms. We have a lot of exceptional teachers in our rural school districts but recruiting a new generation of teachers and retaining teachers in our rural areas is a significant challenge.

Unfortunately, there are also fewer teachers in our rural schools today. When looking at data based on U.S. Census codes, Wisconsin rural areas and towns show teaching staff declines significantly over the past several years. Between 2008-09 and 2012-13, rural areas in Wisconsin lost nearly 700 teachers.

With fewer teachers and greater demands, teachers in rural districts are often covering more bases. It is not unusual for a rural high school teacher to have five or six preps. To address these issues, I have worked to provide significant flexibility for those who want to get a teaching license based on equivalent life experiences. It is also now possible to add teaching licenses simply by taking a test. Moreover, I have approved a number of alternative teacher education programs to address high needs areas and am always willing to look at more.

But flexibility will only get us so far. We need a state level dialogue about how we can recruit and retain the best teachers to serve kids in rural areas. What can we do when an urban or suburban district can pay teachers significantly higher wages, or can offer significantly more generous benefits or fewer preps?

What can we do to attract our best and brightest teachers to live and work in rural Wisconsin? How can we ensure that we meet our constitutional obligation to provide a quality education to all children in Wisconsin, regardless of their zip code, when we struggle to recruit and retain educators in large parts of our state? The Rural Advisory Council considers this issue of paramount concern, and we encourage this Taskforce to take it on, as well.

We must work together to ensure that our rural kids have the same advantages as their suburban and urban counterparts. The work you are doing here today is important and I would like to help in any way I can. The Rural Advisory Council would like to extend the offer to meet jointly with this Taskforce if possible. We believe there is a lot we can learn from each other as we search for needed solutions to the issues facing rural Wisconsin schools.

Thank you for the opportunity to meet with you this afternoon, and I would be happy to answer any questions you may have for me at this time.