



Strong Schools, Strong Communities

TO: Rural Legislators
FROM: Wisconsin Rural Schools Alliance
RE: Comments on Assembly Substitute Amendment 1 to Senate Bill 286
(LRB s0371/1)
DATE: March 18, 2014

The Wisconsin Rural Schools Alliance is a statewide organization representing administrators, board of education members, teachers and community leaders from throughout the state educating over 100,000 students. Our organization **opposes** the modified version of accountability legislation reflected in Assembly Substitute Amendment 1 to Senate Bill 286. This version would force low-performing rural public schools, as defined in the bill, to be closed permanently or converted to a charter school. Both options are particularly problematic for small, rural school districts.

We have many unanswered questions about what it means to “permanently close” a school in a small, rural school district.

- Many small, rural school districts have only one school building that houses three schools (an elementary school, a middle school and a high school). What exactly does it mean to “permanently close” “close” a school in such a small, rural district?
- How long is “permanent?”
- Will the locally elected school board ever regain control over the school?
- The principal and a significant number of staff members are often shared between elementary, middle and high schools in rural districts. How does this impact sanctions such as replacing the principal or dismissing and rehiring staff?

These questions need to be answered before this bill is passed.

We also have many questions about converting a small rural school to a charter school.

- What is the “sanctions” option if there is no entity, or at least no reasonably qualified entity, that wants to operate the “failing” rural school as a charter school? Is the only option then to close the school?
- Assume a district has one elementary, one middle, and one high school. If the sanctions kick in and the ONLY school that exists at a given level in the District is a charter, how would that work in light of 118.40(6), which states, “No pupil may be required to attend a charter school without his or her approval, if the pupil is an adult, or the approval of his or her parents or legal guardian, if the pupil is a minor.” Is open enrollment a sufficient

alternative or must the school district continue to operate a separate school option for students that do not wish to attend a charter school? At what cost? Who pays to keep the “traditional” school option available?

- The substitute amendment does not answer the question of *how long* a converted public-to-charter school (under the sanctions) must operate as a charter. Is one five-year contract sufficient? If not, how long is sufficient?
- What happens if there is a forced public school-to-charter school conversion and the “new” charter fails the “accountability test” in year three and becomes subject to sanctions? The substitute amendment doesn’t say.
- A school that is identified as struggling but is not yet subject to sanctions might want to hire a strong principal to try to turn things around. But what principal would take on that challenge knowing that if he or she is not successful within a year or two, the school will either be closed or converted to a charter and he or she will be out of a job?
- If a small rural school district converts its “failing” school to a charter school, the substitute amendment specifies that it must “reward staff who increase pupil academic achievement or high school graduation rates.” By law, the charter school contract must specify the amount to be paid to the charter school during each year of the contract. (See s. 118.40 (3) (b), Stats.)
 - If this means *monetary* rewards are to be provided, where will the funding come from to provide such monetary rewards, given that the charter school’s funding level is fixed under the contract? What cuts in other areas of the school district’s programs would have to be made so these monetary rewards could be provided? Or, if the idea is to take money away from lower performing teachers how are you going to get anybody to remain in that school or district if they can go elsewhere and not be subject to reductions?
- If a small rural school district converts its “failing” school to a charter school, the substitute amendment specifies that all teachers who have been assigned to the school must be dismissed and must reapply in order to be rehired. Further, any teacher who scores in the lowest 20 percent statewide under the educator effectiveness (teacher evaluation) program may not be rehired. There is likely no way for a district or the DPI to determine whether a teacher has scored in the lowest 20 percent because teachers teach in different license categories and with different certifications. In rural school districts there are often just one or two teachers with a given certification. It is also not clear that this “lowest 20 percent statewide” measurement accomplishes the desired goal of separating out the teachers that contribute most to student performance with enough specificity or granularity to be useful.

Public schools are already subject to an accountability system that includes school and district report cards that provide pertinent information about the academic performance of students in those public schools and districts to parents and taxpayers. What the public school community has consistently asked for, and what parents and taxpayers deserve, is similar information about the performance of students who receive taxpayer-funded vouchers to attend private and religious schools.

Bringing private voucher schools into an accountability framework should have been a relatively simple, straightforward task. Rural school advocates have consistently asked for a bill that would allow an “apples-to-apples” comparison to be made of the performance of students in private voucher schools with students in public schools under the care, control and management of school boards. The substitute does not provide this.

Instead the substitute amendment allows private voucher schools to choose which test they wish to be graded on. If the private voucher school submits test results on all their pupils on the test that school chooses then the voucher school would receive a percentile rank of pupil scores rather than a grade. Public schools, including rural schools, get no such choice. Public schools are given neither the choice to use an alternative test nor the option to have a percentile rank of pupil scores on the test of the school’s choosing rather than a grade.

The Wisconsin Rural Schools Alliance embraces the need for a comprehensive accountability system that is designed to assist all publicly funded schools to identify areas of needed improvement in order to benefit all children throughout our state. We encourage your continued efforts to address the challenges of creating such a system that will equitably apply to all publically funded schools. However, we cannot support the current ASA 1 to SB286.

Sincerely,

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