

**WRITTEN TESTIMONY ON WISCONSIN RURAL SCHOOLS
TO THE SPEAKER'S TASK FORCE ON RURAL SCHOOLS**

**Bruce Quinton
Superintendent of Schools
Pepin Area School District
January 28, 2014**

Good Afternoon,

On behalf of the Board of Education, our administration and staff, we welcome you to the Pepin Area Schools. I am Bruce Quinton, the Superintendent of Schools in Pepin for the last 10 years. I hope you enjoyed the tour of the PreK-12 School Facilities. While not glamorous, it is a wonderful facility that serves it's purpose of educating students in our district in the most cost effective manner for our taxpayers and our community is very proud of it. Taxpayers overwhelmingly passed a building referendum just under twenty years ago and our facility will be paid off in the fall of 2015. Once this final payment is made, Pepin Area Schools will be completely debt free! Our District is not unlike many rural districts in Wisconsin that you have heard from previously; we have declining enrollment, a large geographic area with high transportation costs, elevated percentages of free and reduced students, and low teacher salaries. Our teacher pay is the lowest in the area. Larger schools within an hour of our district are paying almost \$8,000 more for a starting teacher than Pepin. We have done the best we can locally, but Pepin is funded at less than 17% from the state. This means we run the second highest Mill Rate in the

area. If our District were funded by the state at the same percentage as our neighboring districts, we would have the second lowest mill rate in our area. This fact displays our fiscally conservative budgetary practices and that we truly run our district as efficiently as possible.

The average median income in Pepin is \$31,000 compared to the state average of \$50,143. Many of the parents in the District have multiple part-time jobs. Along with this income disparity, Pepin Area Schools is penalized through the equalization aid formula that views Pepin as a wealthy community due to the ratio of students as compared to property values in our district. The equalization aid formula simply fails on a scale this small.

However, our community has been extremely committed to their local school and their responsibility to educate the children who live in our district. This was illustrated in the fall of 2006 when our taxpayers overwhelmingly passed a reoccurring three year, \$250,000 referendum for operation costs to run the district.

The District's enrollment has declined from 316 in 2004 to 239 today. In the packet before you, you will find that even with the community's strong fiscal support for the district, we have still had to reduce staff by 19% over the last ten years. These reductions have meant fewer educational opportunities for our students; such as:

A 30% layoff of our Reading Specialist and the elimination of our Title I aid. This reduction has a direct impact on providing quality Title I services to our most needy students in our district in the lower elementary. This is at the very point in these students' lives where these types of reading and math interventions can have the greatest impact.

Pepin shares elementary music, physics, FACES, library media coordinator, Prekindergarten and technology education teachers with neighboring school districts. We will have to continue to expand on this trend of being forced to provide our students with fewer and fewer opportunities than previous students were offered who have been educated in our district in the past.

Pepin has split classrooms throughout our Elementary School. This year we have, K/1, 4/5, and 5/6 split classrooms.

Pepin has limited teachers' supply budgets. This leads to fewer opportunities for students to extend their understanding of concepts through project-based learning. It also results in teachers spending their own money to provide these opportunities and supplies to their students.

Our district's textbook and curriculum orders are limited to "must replace," rather than "replacement when it is warranted or needed." Many of the materials we use with our students are dated.

A Math Teacher is our district Technology Coordinator and high school Dean of Students.

All sports opportunities are cooperative with a neighboring district. (Volleyball is approved to be cooperative, but is currently still separate at the High School Level).

Our Speech and Language teacher is also the LMC teacher's aide.

We share our School Psychologist with two other districts. This person also acts as our special education director and each district is responsible for 33% of her

contract. She gives our three districts more than 100% of her efforts, but we only have access to limited support that comes with sharing one person three ways.

These reductions have also impacted our support staff as we have had to make the following reductions:

Our custodial staff has been reduced by 25%. We still have the same square footage and grounds to maintain. Projects are put off and we have less capability to be proactive in maintaining the buildings and grounds. This practice reminds me of the old saying, "Pay me now or pay me later." By not being proactive in our buildings and grounds now, it surely means higher costs for the district down the road.

Our transportation department has been reduced by 20%. This means the elimination of one bus route that has led to students riding the bus in the morning and evening for over an hour.

The Buildings and Grounds Supervisor is our Transportation Director and drives both AM and PM routes. His work day begins as early as 5:00 a.m., personally checking bus routes, opening the building, driving his AM route, performing his maintenance duties, and driving a PM route which finishes around 5:00 p.m. He then may get called back into the school in the evening to address an issue that may arise.

While the support services are not directly linked to student learning, anyone who works in a school knows that these people's effort and performance do have an indirect impact on our teacher's ability to teach and student's ability to learn on a daily basis.

With all the new initiatives like Educator Effectiveness, Smarter Balanced Assessments, Response to Intervention, and implementing more instructional

technology, we lack the administrative support and additional resources needed to properly apply them. Our principal and administrator wears many hats, which can be overwhelming, especially when trying to add the professional development and strategies needed to effectively implement these important initiatives in our district.

Our Elementary Principal is our Curriculum and Instruction director and Spanish Teacher.

As District Administrator, I am the only full time administrator in the district. I am the Business manager, and High School Principal. I am truly blessed with great people to work with, but I ultimately end up highly involved in the other areas of school leadership/supervision I have listed because those staff members are performing multiple duties themselves. A perfect example of this was on one of our cold mornings when one of our buses broke down. As I stated earlier, our transportation director drives a route, leaving me to handle the situation.

As with all our staff, my principal and I work numerous hours on weekends in the building or from home, just to keep up with everything on our plate of responsibility. I can only speak for myself, but I find very little time to be truly proactive or block off any amount of time to truly focus on an individual task.

Our ability to add staff is non-existent. Even if the funding was provided, it would be incredibly difficult, politically, to add administrative staff. It would hard to explain to the local taxpayer why it is necessary to implement such time and man hour consuming mandates, rather than add back educational opportunities for students. It begs the question, are we here to implement unfunded mandates or focus our time and energies on educating children. The unfunded mandated answer is “BOTH!” The question for rural districts is “How?”

Unfunded and/or underfunded mandates are choking out our small and rural school districts that simply do not have the manpower to continue to add more responsibility to staff that are already providing multiple roles to the district. While many of these mandates have good intentions and are good concepts, they are designed for struggling urban school districts and become consumers of limited resources in successful rural districts. This ultimately inhibits our ability to meet the needs of our local students.

I know you have heard the phrase, one size does not fit all, but this is truly the case in rural schools. We are continuously bombarded with programs that are devised to solve big school problems and we simply do not have the resources to implement them with fidelity. Couple this with per pupil increases to the revenue limit that are less than the increase in inflation, which leaves rural schools with fewer funds than needed to continue to fund the programs that are in place and nowhere to go to fund additional mandates made by the state and/or federal government. I cannot stress this one point enough, if you are going to enact additional mandates, you must provide the funding to go with the mandate that is equal to the cost of implementing the mandate. Rural schools simply do not have any more wiggle room to pull these off, let alone effectively provide for all the mandates that are currently in place.

The Pepin Area School District strives to offer graduates the same opportunities as seniors throughout the state. I don't believe that this is happening given the current School Finance Formula. Students from our district are forced to compete with students from suburban communities that come to college with up to 30 credits and several advanced classes in Math and Science. Yet, rural districts are forced to reduce opportunities at our high school level in order to balance our budget.

An increased number of our students are choosing a post-secondary path that doesn't include a 4-year degree. With about 30% of our students choosing vocational or technical college, we have a need to have a strong High School Technical Education Program. Ten years ago we had a full time technology education teacher, who offered six classes to our students. Today we share this position with a neighboring district and only offer three classes a semester. While sharing these types of positions has allowed us to offer at least a little bit to our students, we are not providing an appropriate number of educational opportunities to students who are not looking to pursue a four year college option upon graduation. Additionally, we struggle with recruitment and retention of these types of hard to fill teaching positions. We have had five different technology education teachers over the last ten years. We lost one to retirement. Another one left for a district that was able to offer this teacher's spouse a teaching position. The first and fourth teachers chose to leave teaching and enter the private sector where they would make significantly more salary than a career in teaching could ever hope. This summer we only had two applicants for our technology education teaching position. We are currently working with a talented resident under emergency certification and are looking to support this person and grow our own local talent.

Access to technology is another concern for rural districts. Until just recently our district only had 1 mega-bit per second (Mbps) of internet access. Two years ago we attempted to increase this to 10 mega-bits per second. This endeavor took almost nine months of working with our local provider to become reality. As we speak, we are investigating the cost to increase our bandwidth even more. These are great strides for improvement locally; but, nowhere near equitable access to our suburban and urban counterparts! I fear that this inequity will become alarmingly

real next year when we are expected to implement computerized Smarter Balanced Assessments.

Rural Wisconsin is a great place to live, work and raise children. However, our economic base simply cannot support an excellent educational system for the children of rural communities unless financial equity, additional fiscal support and mandated relief across the state are achieved. The biennium state budget that was approved this July was helpful and appreciated as compared to the last biennium budget and what was being proposed by the governor's office. While appreciative of the work done by a number of legislators to ensure that we received some level of increase per pupil this biennium, this increase was less than the inflationary increase we experienced. With the number of unfunded mandates added to our responsibilities, this means school districts across the state still needed to figure out how to do more with less. This has been a common theme since revenue limits were put in place back in the 90's. Public schools in rural Wisconsin will not survive if there is not some way to provide adequate funding for our rural districts. I hope strong consideration is given to bring equity to rural school districts so we can provide the highest level of opportunity to rural Wisconsin students.

Small, rural schools can certainly be viewed as an advantage to educating students. Pepin Area Schools exceeded expectations on our first two state report cards. Our students report that they are well prepared for the rigors of college. However, rural schools are not economically feasible when programs have to be cut or the quality of teachers is affected by the dollars available for recruiting the best teachers.

With 239 students in our district, I am sure some would logically think that we should simply consolidate. The most logical district to consolidate with is a 30 minute drive from our community. Would students participate in extracurricular

activities when parents would have to drive one hour round trip to pick up their children from practice? How long of a bus ride would that be for our students in the morning and afternoon? What time would students need to get on the bus in the morning? What time would they arrive home? The fact of the matter is Pepin is a small, but necessary school for the children of our area. Our school is strongly supported by our local taxpayers. I have never heard taxpayers demand we consider consolidation even though our local taxes are more than double compared to our neighboring districts. In fact, it has been quite the opposite in Pepin, as our community sees the school as its heart and soul and will fight to the end to keep a school in our community to educate our children.

I appreciate the opportunity to speak to this committee. Please keep rural Wisconsin and all you have heard during these meetings in mind as you work diligently to fund our schools in an equitable manner, a manner that is different from the current system and a manner that makes rural schools sustainable into the future.

Sincerely,

Bruce Quinton, Superintendent of Schools
Pepin Area School District