

November 6, 2013

TO: Representative Rob Swearingen, Chair
Representative Fred Clark, Vice-Chair
Representative Mary Czaja
Representative Warren Petryk
Representative Ed Brooks
Representative Mary Williams
Representative Jeffrey Mursau
Representative Michael Schraa
Representative Steve Nass
Representative Chris Danou
Representative Sondy Pope
Representative Mandy Wright

FROM: Carrie Buss, Vice President and Acting Chair of the Mauston School Board and Parent of 3 Public School Kids

RE: Speaker's Task Force on Rural Schools: Public Hearing Testimony, Elroy and Mauston, Wisconsin

Good afternoon. My name is Carrie Buss. I'm the proud mom of 3 kids - a Sophomore son at Mauston High School, and an 8th Grade son and 6th grade daughter at Olson Middle School in Mauston. Being a product of an outstanding Wisconsin Public Education, I'm admittedly an outspoken promoter and advocate for high quality public education. I've served on the Mauston School Board for the past 9 years, and plan to run for my 4th term this spring.

I'd like to thank Mr. Ed Brooks for inviting me to speak today. He knows that I'm passionate about my kids, my community, and our schools. I'm wearing two hats today. My most important hat is the one I wear when I'm talking about, or advocating for my own kids. My second hat is my Mauston School Board Hat. Over the 9 years that I've served on our School Board, I'll admit that the line between the two roles gets fuzzy. When I'm making decisions on the Board, I often don't think about my own children first, but rather think of how making things better or making changes at school benefits the community as a whole, as well as my kids. See, I'm one of those people who really does believe that education is THE most efficient way to improve the lives of my neighbors, to improve my local and state economy and to influence healthy lifestyles.

My husband and I moved from Southeast Wisconsin to Mauston about 15 years ago. We chose Mauston over several other rural communities because of the investment the community made by passing the referendum that built the High School. Unlike most families in Juneau County, we had a choice as to where we raised our family. We chose Mauston; we're happy with our choice and have gotten involved in our community in various ways.

Having heard from all the well educated and well spoken people before me, both here and in Rhinelander, you know very well the issues that are of highest concern to school officials and their districts. What you may not have heard so much about is what parents and local school boards worry about and what we want for our kids out here in the rural districts.

It's funny, because when I was telling my oldest son about what I was doing today, he wanted me to tell you about school lunches. Isn't that typical? He's worried about too small of portions and unknown meats on his plate and I'm thinking about reading, writing, arithmetic and his future.

As a parent, and as my kids have gotten older and closer to high school graduation, I worry about whether our decision to move to a rural school district was the best for our kids. As a parent, it's our job to worry, right? But here's the thing. We talk about how our US kids are competing on a World Stage. We regularly see data comparing our kids to those in Japan, Singapore or China. Those of us raising our kids in a rural school district understand the world stage idea, but who are we kidding...my kids are competing with Wisconsin kids first. In order to get to the "world stage", my kids have to overcome obstacles right here, in Wisconsin.

For example, the school voucher program. Expansion of that program, I believe, will harm small, rural school districts. The pot of money available in the State Budget is only so big. If we create a separate system, a voucher program, drawing money from the educational dollars available in the budget, I see no other way than to believe that there will be less resources available to my district. Don't get me wrong, I don't want to take away educational opportunities for kids, especially those from poorly run districts, like MPS. But concentrate on Fixing Milwaukee, rather than inadvertently causing harm to the rest of the state, those of us out here who are fiscally responsible and results oriented.

I also want you to know that I support the Common Core Standards. My kids have to compete. They need to compete with kids from here and around the world. By adopting the Common Core, our District has had to look hard at our curriculum, making adjustments along the way. It's a good thing. It's good for our kids. I believe, and think that most EDUCATORS would agree, that our curriculum is more rigorous as a result of the Common Core Standards.

My School District isn't as bad off as some. We've gone through years of budget cuts. We are creative. We are organized. We are fiscally responsible for those things that we can control. But the things we cannot control...those are the things we lose sleep over and spend long evenings discussing in meetings.

Please think of Districts, like mine, when you are considering adding to the long list of mandates that we sustain. We are running on a shoe string. Key staff are shared over our 4 public schools, but also our local parochial school. When legislation comes before you requiring more PE, remember our story. We offer PE to every kid, two times per week or more. If it's legislated that we must provide more Physical Education, that time comes from Core Classes. If we have to have more PE during the school day, we'll need more PE teachers. As a parent and as a school board member, I value Physical Education, but not at the expense or loss of time learning Reading, Writing or Arithmetic.

I worry that my kids don't have the same opportunities here that kids from larger school districts have. Do my kids have the benefit of as many high school course offerings as a Madison or Lacrosse school district? Do my kids' teachers have the opportunities to collaborate

with, and learn from, their peers in the same ways that teachers from larger school districts do? Do my kids have as much access to technology as kids from the more metropolitan areas? I don't know the answers to all these questions. But what I do know is that it shouldn't depend on where you live ... all Wisconsin kids deserve a high quality education.

We, as a rural District, want to hire the most qualified people to teach our kids. The problem is, we can't pay them what they expect to earn so they won't come. Or worse, they come for 2-3 years and then take their knowledge to another district who can afford to pay them more. We need to find a way to recruit and retain the most qualified teachers for every position. A major obstacle to our recruiting efforts is our starting salary of \$32602 for a first year teacher. We are low by any standard. If a recent graduate has a choice, they are going to gravitate toward the higher paying positions available in the bigger districts. You might say, "Raise the starting salary to be more competitive in the market place, then." You're right, that would solve our base wage issue, but it would snowball through our salary schedule, and we cannot afford that without drastically cutting student programming and staff.

I believe as a parent, and as Mauston School Board Member, that our District does a terrific job managing the resources we have control over. I believe that the Mauston School District provides opportunities to our kids that are outstanding. I also believe that we have educated some exceptional kids who have gone on to do amazing things.

But I worry. I worry about how the property values in our District declined another \$38 million this year (that's on top of the \$33 million

from last) , and that our levy went up because of it. I worry about whether or not we'll be able to maintain our student programming as we go through yet another round of budget cuts this spring. I worry about our kids, and whether or not we'll have given them what they need to be competitive with graduates from other Wisconsin School Districts, US High School graduates, and students from around the world.

Thank you for the opportunity to stand here and speak to you . As Mr. Brooks knows, I'm all too happy to talk school, and am honored to share my perspective. Thank you.