



School District of Hillsboro
777 School Road • P.O. Box 526 • Hillsboro, WI 54634
Home of the Tigers

Curt Bisarek
Superintendent
608-489-2221 ext. 1502
curt.bisarek@hillsboro.k12.wi.us

Cara Wood
Elementary Principal
608-489-2224 ext. 1602
cara.wood@hillsboro.k12.wi.us

Greg Zimmerman
MS/HS Principal
608-489-2221 ext. 1504
greg.zimmerman@hillsboro.k12.wi.us

Mindy Lankey
Business Manager
608-489-2221 ext. 1503
mindy.lankey@hillsboro.k12.wi.us

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

Good Afternoon. My name is Curt Bisarek and on behalf of the School District of Hillsboro I want to thank Representative Swearingen and the Speaker's Taskforce on Rural Schools for the opportunity to provide our story to you today. I am the product of rural education having attended rural schools in southwest Wisconsin and I am in my 18th year in education. I taught in Argyle and Iowa-Grant and prior to becoming superintendent in Hillsboro, I spent 5 years there as elementary principal. I am a proud advocate for rural schools and greatly appreciate your time today. I do not profess to have answers to the challenges facing rural schools, but I do believe that as a collective group we can make positive changes that will enhance the education we provide. I do want to say that while I am an advocate for rural schools, I do not want to come across as encouraging a division between rural, suburban and urban schools in Wisconsin. We all have one thing in common...to best educate our children and best prepare them for success as citizens of Wisconsin.

To this point, I am sure you have heard much regarding rural schools in Wisconsin. While we share many similar attributes, please remember that each of us as rural schools, and schools in general, are different and unique but we share a common mission of educating our students. My hope is that we can preserve what makes Wisconsin's education system so strong. Finally, I hope that my testimony today will help highlight the challenges and successes of one of Wisconsin's rural schools.

Hillsboro is a community of 1302 people in the "panhandle" of Vernon county. Our district covers 140 square miles and our current enrollment is 502. In 1998, we had 657 students. Worth noting is that we also have a unique population in our district in that we have significant numbers of German Baptist and Amish families who do not enroll their children in public schools. When I arrived in Hillsboro there were more school-aged children within our district not attending our school than were attending. This continues to be true eight years later. While a majority of our students several years ago lived on family farms, this is not the case today and it further highlights the transformation of our rural community.

My wife and I have chosen to live in Hillsboro and are proud of the opportunities our children will have as students of this district but there are certainly challenges given our demographics. Our community contains no YMCA, no Boys and Girls Club, no performing arts center and has limited cultural enrichment options for our students and families. Much of what our community offers is done so through our school making it the recreational, cultural and educational hub. Therefore, I strongly believe that our community needs our school.

We are a property-poor district. This year's data shows that the average district value per member in the state of Wisconsin is \$536,519. Conversely, the Hillsboro School District has a per member value of \$384,323. Our student population also reflects this socioeconomic disparity as we have seen a 70% increase in students receiving free/reduced lunch over the past six years.

This increase has been very noticeable within our schools as we see students with higher social and emotional needs.

While there are various data points we can use to further explain our demographics, I must also point out what is working. Federal Title I money provides a great amount of financial relief. Each year we employ 3 full-time teachers and at least 2 full-time paraprofessionals to work with our elementary students and support their academic growth in reading and math. We are also a district that participates in the state-supported SAGE Program which helps to ensure favorable classroom numbers in grades K-3 to again make sure that we are best meeting the academic needs of our students and making strong connections with these students to help and support those needs. We have actively sought out grants to provide more opportunities for our students. Our most notable grant-writing success is with our 21st Community Learning Center Grant which allows our program (which we call “Plus 1”) to provide students with homework support and enrichment opportunities beyond the school day. Plus 1 is active four days a week with 120 of our 265 elementary school students participating.

On the other hand, we lost our alternative education grant with the 2011-13 state budget which meant the program had to continue with local dollars. As a result of this, eighteen students have been able to earn their high school diplomas through our GED Option 2 program. The reallocation of funds shows our commitment to providing alternative options for our students but it did come as an unanticipated additional expense. A common component of such grants is that there is a sustainability expectation. The challenge for us is that we have very few options for local partners to help assume the recurring and growing cost of such programs. Unfortunately this means that as our grant-based programs expire, they lose their impact or cease to exist.

As a school district, we enjoy great community support. The Hillsboro community continues to be an active supporter of our students as is evidenced by our high turnout for

school-centered activities and offers to provide volunteer work and limited financial support. In the past year our community launched the Hillsboro Excellence in Education fund that raised over \$70,000 to provide funding for scholarships and grants for our classrooms. Additionally, our local Lions Club each year provides food, clothes and gifts for over 130 families in our district each holiday season. There are many other examples I could share to show our community's support. This support accentuates what makes rural Wisconsin so great.

I could continue with the positive attributes of our schools by further discussing the academic, athletic and post-graduate successes of our students, but I want to spend more time talking about where we could use some additional support.

We have a top-notch staff of qualified, passionate and dedicated people who are driven to succeed and again help ensure the success of our students. They have a personal connection with them and work to support them in whatever way possible. However, they are stretched to the point that they can't take on much more without losing effectiveness. The barrage of mandates which includes but is not limited to RtI, PBIS, Common Core, Educator Effectiveness, Smarter Balanced Assessments, PALS assessments, as well as the ever-changing role of technology in our schools has great potential to impact education, but trying to address all of these simultaneously while maintaining excellence in our classrooms has become increasingly difficult. Separately each of these initiatives has good merit but collectively they become overwhelming. When I became superintendent, I met with each employee and the recurring theme was the need for more time to manage the added responsibilities staff was being faced with and yet the initiatives have continued to grow. I ask that the taskforce consider the burden of such initiatives on districts such as ours that do not have specialists who have the time or resources to lead the implementation. For our district we are forced to rely on departments of one or two people or create additional job requirements for our already full-time personnel.

Over the past several years, we have experienced declining enrollment. We often hear that if enrollments are down then it would seem logical that there would be less of a need for some staff. This is definitely not true as the decline is spread across grade-levels and varies from year to year. We still have to offer courses but instead of 18-20 students we are often looking at 12-15 students. In order to provide a variety of course options we continue to run multiple sections to help allow students to develop schedules that will best prepare them for their post-graduate plans. The bottom line is that we still need to offer courses to allow our students to be able to compete with students from larger schools as they apply to enter colleges, tech schools or the workforce. While we have fewer students we have the same responsibility to provide high quality instruction and provide the same opportunities of larger and more affluent districts.

I am fairly certain that a recurring theme in these hearings is that of funding. Our district and board of education has worked very hard to maintain the programming we offer but that is becoming increasingly difficult. Since 2008 the state aid received by our district has decreased by over 20% and our revenue limit has decreased by nearly 4%. Like all schools the majority of our expenses are related to staff salaries and benefits. We have used the flexibility provided by Act 10 to modify insurance by increasing our deductibles and reducing the benefits. Our post-employment benefit has been drastically reduced as well. How much of the declining revenue can we expect our staff to be responsible for and still hope to attract and retain quality personnel? This past year one of our greatest fears was realized as multiple staff members left our district with the attraction of higher salaries and benefits offered by larger schools. In trying to attract new employees our rural school is seeing the applicant pool diminish. How appealing is it to a school counselor applicant with a required Master's Degree to come to Hillsboro for a part-time position offering \$25,000 and no health insurance?

Our Board of Education has been very committed to continuing to provide quality education and is very hesitant to go to referendum. The only referendum we have had in the past 20 years was to update and expand our facilities but the reduction in revenue available is going to push us toward that option. Our demographics show that our community does not have the financial ability to take on much more in terms of taxes.

In closing, I want to ask you to consider a few items. First, please continue to explore options for funding rural schools. I am fully aware that this is not an easy challenge but I hope your tours and visits to our schools has given you a greater understanding of how vital our schools are to the stability of Wisconsin. It is often repeated but so very true...our students are the future of Wisconsin. Secondly, please consider the impact the mandates and initiatives have on our schools. I don't know if any of you are familiar with the work of Jamie Vollmer but I would encourage you to study his list entitled "The Ever Increasing Burden on America's Public Schools" as it puts in perspective what has been added to our obligation as educators. While this might go beyond the purpose of the taskforce, I believe there is value in gaining his perspective. Finally, I ask for your help. Help me continue to allow Hillsboro to be a place where we can fulfill our mission for students to "Learn, Achieve, Succeed." Help me attract and retain high quality professionals to support the academic, social and emotional growth of our children and create a climate where these professionals are valued and regarded for their calling to teach our children. Help me help make Wisconsin great by graduating students ready to succeed.