

Testimony to Speaker's Task Force on Rural Schools 2/26/2014

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One of my favorite family photos is of a little 1907 country schoolhouse in central Kansas. My grandfather, Samuel Petrie, in suit and tie, stands on the far left of boys in dusty overalls, vests, and jackets, and girls in their best dresses. Grandpa Petrie's countenance is serious, almost grim. He wears the no-nonsense look of pseudo-control every young teacher desperately strives to develop. His solemn demeanor is reinforced by his students' serious stares into the camera. It is not until you look more closely that you notice a farm cultivator perched on top of the school. It was placed there by devilish youngsters as a midnight Halloween prank, and it was still proudly riding the roofline when this photo was taken the following spring. Everybody there knew that their Halloween trick was being captured on film for all time, and everybody, even Grandpa Petrie, was inwardly grinning. They may not have realized that this photo would spark stories and speculation for generations to come, but they knew that it was a record of their family--one school, one teacher, one group of high-spirited students who made up a rural educational community shortly after the turn of the 20th century.

Twenty one years after that picture was taken, my father attended Shady Lane, a one-room sturdy brick Wisconsin school house that he walked a half mile to and from, "uphill both ways." In 1935 he told his eighth grade teacher that his next door neighbor Roy wanted to go out

with her. Roy and Linda married shortly after that, and at ninety five she still lives just down the road from that school on their farmstead today. In the late 1940's and early 50's my brothers also attended Shady Lane. I couldn't wait to make that twice-daily walk with them, but sadly, before that could happen, Shady Lane, like many country schools, was closed due to budget issues and consolidation. It was eventually sold and converted to a barn that now houses hay and cattle rather than kids. My younger brother and I were bussed to Marshfield to receive our education. We were among the first to be picked up each morning at 6:45 a.m., so it took us over an hour to get to a school just four miles from home. At Grant Elementary I discovered that there was a pecking order of four classes of kids—doctors' kids, city kids, country kids, and farm kids. I was at the bottom of the heap as a farm kid, and I remained at the bottom all the way through high school. Farm kids didn't play sports, because there wasn't after-practice bussing, and we had chores to do. We didn't attend many of the games or dances either. We weren't exactly second class citizens, and we got a good enough education; some of us even went on to college. But in a high school of almost thirteen hundred students, I sure didn't feel like I was a special part of that one-room school community to which I had looked so forward.

I went on to the University of Wisconsin-Stevens Point, and despite again being just one of thousands of faces, I did well. I was fortunate to have several professors who took an interest in me and offered me encouragement and good advice. Although I had double majors in English and Communication and planned to go into broadcast journalism, my advisor suggested I complete an education degree as well, "to have something to fall back on." Much to my surprise, I fell in love with education during my student teaching, and when I was offered a job at Rhinelander High School, I jumped at the chance, even though it was a much larger school than where I had hoped to work.

My first two years were miserable. I had no idea what I was doing. Despite working my tail off, the kids gave me a hard time, the other teachers were caught up in their own lives, and the administrators stayed behind closed doors. After school one particularly horrible day, I was racing around, trying to get the school newspaper finished by deadline when a student I didn't even know said, "Why bother? It's just a piece of junk nobody reads anyway." I burst into tears and said, "Who are you? I don't even know your name, and you're talking to me like this?? If you have all the answers, Mister, why don't you join this newspaper staff and help me turn it into something kids *will* read, instead of standing here getting in my way. Either help me fix it, or shut up about it." Imagine my surprise when he turned up in journalism the next semester to help me fix it.

By then I had started to figure something out. Even though there were over sixteen hundred students in the school, I never had more than thirty at one time in my classes. And thirty kids could be shaped into a caring community, a sort of one-room-school for fifty minutes at a time. We could develop an identity, a sense of family. Every semester the journalism class designed its own t-shirt to wear on distribution day and during ad sales. Usually the shirts incorporated my nickname "Mach" in their design: "Mach's Mob," "All Mach's Children." My other classes didn't have t-shirts, but we fostered that same spirit of community, whether it was Sophomore English, Poetry, Oral Interpretation, Public Speaking, Creative Writing—it didn't matter. We cared about each other. We worked toward common goals. I extended class activities into the community whenever possible, and authentic learning took on a life of its own. I was pretty sure I was on to something, and it only took me twenty seven years to figure it out.

When Northwoods Community Secondary School, a project-based charter school in Rhinelander embracing these same ideas, was slotted to open in 2003, I applied for and landed a

position there. That first year was as horrible, or worse, than my first year of teaching in 1977. Our staff of eight likened it to building an airplane at the same time as learning how to fly. There was just one other school in Wisconsin doing similar work, and it had only been in existence for a year. We were on our own, but we valued what we were doing, so we persevered. However, we met with plenty of local resistance. In large part this happened because at the same time we were getting started, thanks to federal and state charter grant money, the rest of the Rhinelander School District was facing disastrous budget cuts. Four elementary schools were closed, forcing consolidation and bussing of K-5 students. These elementary schools had had long and successful histories, and their closings put an end in four different neighborhoods to the very sense of community NCSS was striving to create. Every year, more and more budget cuts had to be made. From 2002 to date, 11.5 million dollars have been cut to balance the budget. With every new proposed reduction at every school board meeting, critics chorused, “Don’t take the money from *our* schools. Close the charter!” Ironically, at the same time this was happening, schools from all over the state were visiting NCSS and developing their own charter schools based on the NCSS model. Fortunately, the Rhinelander School Board continued to support the existence of NCSS, and despite reductions in staff and its relocation to the high school, it is in its tenth successful year educating children grades 6-12. If and how long funding will continue to be available remains to be seen. But for now, it is the 21st century version of my grandfather’s, my father’s, and brothers’ one room school that I seem to have spent my lifetime seeking.

In 2010 after thirty four years of teaching, I retired from the School District of Rhinelander. In addition to continuing as an adjunct professor at Nicolet College, I began my second career as an educational consultant. Nearly every school I have worked with is rural—Birchwood, Mercer, Butternut, Park Falls, Land O Lakes, Minocqua, Eagle River, Marathon,

Maple Grove, Hortonville, Little Chute, Shiocton, and Albany. Every one is facing the same economic woes as Rhinelander—high property values coupled with high poverty, costly transportation, revenue caps, declining enrollment, and threats of consolidation. The current funding formula does nothing to alleviate these problems. On paper, many of these districts, like Rhinelander, are property rich, with expensive summer homes owned by summer residents. But the reality is that almost half the students in the Rhinelander district are on free or reduced lunch, and the median household annual income is just under \$35,000, compared to the \$52,000 state average. How is it possible then that we receive only 17% in state aid, when our neighbors Antigo and Merrill, who have similar free and reduced lunch numbers and similar median incomes, receive respectively 66% and 69% in state aid? Clearly this funding formula needs to be changed. Funding should reflect local circumstances and needs and use an aid formula based on actual cost of “doing business” and local capacity to pay. Revenue limits per student and sparsity aid policies must also be revised to accommodate the needs of districts like Rhinelander that have nothing left to cut and no way to pay for the continued existence of their schools.

Consolidation is not the answer. As schools get larger, educational results generally worsen. The academic, social and communal advantages of smaller schools are lost. Schools are a crucial part of every rural community, the very fiber of each town’s identity. State policy should support small-scale community-based schools that achieve local and state standards of quality education. Further, every effort should be made to support successful Wisconsin charter schools which often allow small towns to keep their schools open. One way to facilitate charters is to have governance boards that are able to work with more than one school through use of high definition video conferencing (HDVC). This allows for virtual training and meeting attendance that is otherwise limited by travel and time. Similarly, rural school districts can benefit greatly

from the use of HDVC by sharing classes, staff, and resources while saving money. Historically HDVC has not been successfully implemented in our rural schools because of cost, the absence of a universal technical system, and training. These factors have been addressed by the Wisconsin Innovative Schools Network which now has a group of rural schools that demonstrates the potential of this technology. WISN has identified these schools as laboratory schools that are ready to become low-cost training centers for other rural schools. As a WISN regional coordinator, I strongly encourage collaboration between these lab schools and this Task Force.

Finally, to every degree possible, local districts should be given local control. Freedom to determine their own calendars and policies would allow rural schools to revisit year ‘round school, four day weeks, and other cost-saving measures that are currently off the table. Inequities in Wisconsin schools have clearly proven that one size does not fit all, and rural schools are painful evidence of that fact.

I’m not sure what I’m doing here today. I am not a political person. In fact, I often describe myself as a political atheist—someone who believes that a working political system doesn’t exist. I hope I’m wrong about that. However, I think we have an obligation to do more than complain about the things we don’t like—we have an obligation to change them. As I told that student many years ago, “Either help me fix it, or shut up about it.” That student, by the way, was Rep. Rob Swearingen, chair of this Task Force on Rural Schools. He and I both know that these issues are not going away, that we have a moral obligation to fix them. I hope that every member of this committee is equally committed to preserving the educational system of rural Wisconsin. Wisconsin’s students, the very future of Wisconsin, are counting on you.

