

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

**Donald B. Childs, Ph.D.
Interim Superintendent
Unified School District of Antigo**

Members of the Task Force:

Due to scheduling conflicts, I am unable to appear before you on October 23; therefore, I submit, herewith, written testimony regarding what has become one of the largest, looming issues with respect to inequity in educational opportunity for Wisconsin's rural school students.

Technology in Wisconsin has become a severe conundrum. On the one hand, technologies possess the promise of opening new avenues of learning in PK-12 institutions at higher and more sophisticated levels than ever before in history. On the other hand, lack of access to these technologies creates the largest inequity – a digital divide – the state has ever experienced. At the core of this divide lies the presence or absence of adequate bandwidth and speed to accommodate the learning opportunities established and emerging technologies can present.

Wisconsin has had a long history of using available media to bring learning experiences otherwise unavailable to rural students, from public radio to instructional television to real-time distance learning. The educational benefits have been incalculable. Today, unfortunately, economic, political and regulatory barriers prevent reliable, high-speed broadband access to many rural areas, depriving students of the opportunities their counterparts in urban, suburban and other small-to-mid-sized municipalities enjoy as a kind of entitlement.

In Antigo, we have attempted to ameliorate this inequity by installing “high-speed” wireless internet to our rural schools. Unfortunately, even on the best of days, this does not allow simultaneous audio and video streaming, webcasting and virtual field-tripping which our city counterparts enjoy. Even “high-speed” wireless cannot compete with the speeds and bandwidth offered by fiber optic cable; nor is it entirely reliable, being subject to weather-related interruptions, as is any satellite-dependent transmission. Just the implications for rural students of interruptions during state assessments ought to give any responsible adult serious pause.

In other states, power companies, cooperatives and other utilities are authorized to provide fiber optic cable over their utility poles or must allow cable providers access to their utility poles to run fiber to remote areas. This reduces the otherwise-prohibitive cost of running fiber via trenching and tunneling. Currently in most of Wisconsin, the demarcation points of most providers lie far from the reach of local rural schools and public libraries. It is a disservice to

rural communities and children that, early in his tenure, the governor returned some \$26 million earmarked for broadband service to rural Wisconsin to the federal government. Since then, the divide has only grown wider.

A related, secondary issue grows out of powering the technologies in rural schools. Many of these schools were built in the 1960's or before. Electrical service in many of these buildings is entirely inadequate to supporting the servers, routers and switches – let alone the terminal equipment – necessary to bring the technologies into the school buildings.

Recent estimates have pegged Wisconsin's rural schools population at about 40% of the state's school population. Even if the true number were half that, one in five Wisconsin students would be deprived access to one of the most potent extant learning tools for the 21st Century. That is completely unacceptable under any circumstance; but even more so in the context of state employers decrying the fact that they are unable to find workers prepared for the jobs they have available. The drag on our state's economy is debilitating. Wisconsin stands, at present, to lose any economic competitiveness it may have nationally and globally because we are leaving a huge segment of our rural population without the technological resources they need to master the knowledge base and skills required of tomorrow's labor force.

If your task force does nothing else, I implore you, reduce the digital divide by providing for true and reliable high-speed broadband, fiber-based, access and the power to manage it in rural Wisconsin schools.

Thank you for your time and attention.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Donald B. Childs". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a long horizontal stroke at the beginning.

Donald B. Childs, Ph.D
Interim Superintendent
Unified School District of Antigo