

Representative Swearingen, Representative Clark and Members of the Rural Schools Task Force, good afternoon!

I am Karen Wendorf-Heldt and it is my privilege to serve as the Agency Administrator for Cooperative Educational Service Agency (CESA) #9 in Tomahawk. I thank you for the opportunity to speak with you today. It is truly an honor.

Several weeks ago, I had the opportunity to meet with Representative Czaja to converse with her about CESA 9—who we are and what we do. It was her suggestion that I come to share with all of you as well. It is certainly my hope that you will find my testimony today helpful to you as you continue *your* very important thinking and work as members of this task force.

Certainly you have heard lots of testimony regarding the challenges facing rural school districts across our great state. Revenue limits, declining enrollments, increasing transportation costs, and other factors have combined to exert incredible stress on rural school districts resulting in increasingly significant impacts on educational programming for students. Yet, I am confident that, as a task force, you also understand how critical rural schools are to the vitality of rural communities and rural economies. You have certainly heard many suggestions for solutions to help address these challenges. I want you to know today that CESA 9 stands as a ready partner in those solutions.

Let me start by giving you just a little bit of history and information about CESAs in general before I zero in on CESA 9 specifics. In 1963, our state legislature created regional service agencies to replace the county superintendent system that had existed for over a hundred years prior to that. It's easy for me to remember this tidbit of history as another significant life event for me occurred in 1963—I was born! Yes, that's right. CESAs and I both celebrated our big 50th birthdays in 2013!

The purpose of Wisconsin CESAs is spelled out quite clearly in Wisconsin Statute 116.01: *The cooperative educational service agencies are designed to serve the educational needs in all areas of Wisconsin by serving as a link both between school districts and between school districts and the state. Cooperative educational service agencies may provide leadership, coordination and education services to school districts, University of Wisconsin System institutions and technical colleges. Cooperative educational service agencies may facilitate communications and cooperation among all public and private schools, agencies and organizations that provide services to pupils.*

When I read that for the first time, I was struck by how many times the words serve, serving, and service were repeated throughout that brief paragraph. And, indeed, CESAs are in the business of serving. We exist for no other reason except to serve our districts. We have no taxing authority and receive only about \$20,000 annually from the state. The rest of our annual operating budget comes from grants for special projects and from our districts as they choose to purchase the services they need.

Perhaps you have seen or heard of Simon Sinek's golden circle. (Slide 1) I was first introduced to Simon Sinek through a TED (Technology, Entertainment, Design) talk--
http://www.ted.com/talks/simon_sinek_how_great_leaders_inspire_action.html

Sinek contends that *conventional* organizations design their work from the outside in—that is they decide *what* work they will do and then *how* they will go about doing that work—usually all before they think too deeply about *why* they do that work.

In contrast, Sinek makes the case that *remarkable* organizations—ones that have the most significant impact, design *their* work from the inside out. First, they define their compelling purpose for existing—their *why* and, only after that, do they determine *how* to do their work and *what* work is to be done!

Let's back up even a bit more and start with *who* we serve at CESA 9. Our primary customers are the 22 school districts in north central Wisconsin. Our service reach encompasses approximately 5,669 square miles in an area from DC Everest to Mosinee to Stratford to Edgar to Prentice to Lac du Flambeau to North Lakeland to Phelps to Antigo and Elcho. UW-Marathon County, Northcentral Technical College and Nicolet Technical College are also in our service area. We are governed by an 11-member Board of Control comprised of seated board members from, at any time, half of our 22 districts.

Our compelling purpose for being is, as our logo indicates, to provide “quality service improving education” both to *students and to the adults who serve those students* in our region of the state. Recently I asked some of our staff why we do what we do at CESA 9. Here's what *they* said...

- So students can be healthy and successful
- To bring services to schools and kids
- To allow for and support high levels of student learning
- To empower those who are directly involved with children
- To connect the dots to provide quality educational opportunities to meet individual learning needs
- To provide services to districts and ultimately students in a cost-effective manner that districts cannot do for themselves with current resources
- To provide services to kids, to ensure quality educators, to save time, money, and resources
- To have a positive impact on student and adult learning; to make a difference, to make it easier for our schools to do what they do

Those are very compelling reasons for us to exist and to commit passionately to our work. Collectively, they are the fuel that drives our work at CESA 9 in service to our districts. In a nutshell, our core purpose at CESA 9 and across CESAs statewide, is to help make it possible for schools to accomplish *their* core missions of educating *all* students to high levels so each can reach his/her fullest potential and contribute productively in our democracy.

How then do we, at CESA 9, do this work? First, we do our work by **getting to know the customers we serve**—our districts. In our office, we have a designated space which we have lovingly dubbed “the situation room.” In that room, which Representative Czaja might remember is decked out in the color scheme that surely must have dominated the set of the Brady Bunch television series, we have poster boards up for each of our districts and the UW and technical colleges. On those poster boards our leadership team routinely records important information about our districts as we learn it to help us

design services and plan for support on their behalf. We meet regularly with superintendents, principals, curriculum leaders, technology coordinators, special education directors, Title One personnel, early childhood personnel, and of course, with teachers, to keep a pulse on what's happening in our districts and to understand what support they need to be successful. Knowledge about our school districts' unique needs allows us to customize services for them.

Second, we do our work by **helping our customers get to know us** as and the ways in which we can provide momentum, support and leverage for their work locally. I will tell you that I spent my entire educational career within the boundaries of CESA 9—as a teacher, principal and curriculum coordinator in Merrill for 22 years and then as the Director of Education in Wausau for four years before coming to CESA 9 three years ago. It wasn't until I sat in that chair, once occupied by my predecessor, Jerry Fiene, who has worked tirelessly to champion the cause and challenges of rural schools, that I fully understood the full range of services that would have been available to me. I wish I knew then what I know now about how CESA 9 could have supported my work as an educator. It would have helped me be more efficient and more effective in teaching and leading. Part of our important work then is communicating to all of our stakeholders the ways that we can support and advance their efforts through cooperative services. We use several venues to communicate what we can do—a shared service catalog, newsletters, flyers, calendars of events, meetings, school and district visits, word of mouth, and of course, our web page: www.cesa9.k12.wi.us. We recently ventured in to the social media world and are reaching out through Twitter (@cesa9). We hope to have a Facebook page established very soon.

The third answer to “how” we do our work at CESA 9 is through mindful, **continuous improvement of current services** (refining our best practices, if you will) and the timely **design of new, innovative services**—creating our next best practices! At the same time we are keeping an ear to district happenings and needs, we are also keeping a constant pulse on what is happening in Madison—legislatively and through the Department of Public Instruction—so that we can be ready with the information and implementation support that our districts will need as statewide initiatives unfold. Because we know our districts well, we strive to be a voice on their behalf so that as statewide initiatives are considered, policy makers are informed about implications for our districts and we can influence development moving forward.

Now that you understand *why* we do what we do and *how* we go about doing our work at CESA 9, let me share briefly with you some specific examples of *what* services we provide for our districts.

A key way we support all of our districts and especially our rural school districts is in the area of **staffing**. Rural districts, particularly because of their size, often cannot support full time staff in specialty areas such as speech and language therapists, physical therapists, occupational therapists, school psychologists, school social workers and others doing like-type roles. We will take their respective needs, put them together to hire full time staff, and send them out to our districts to meet their needs.

We also share **equipment** such as the portable planetarium called Star Lab and materials for students who are visually impaired. We support our districts by coordinating bidding and ordering of **bulk purchases** of paper—getting them the best in volume discounts. We can provide **grant writing services**.

We also provide access to all of our districts to CESA Purchasing through our CESA Statewide Network—enabling them to realize significant savings and stretch their limited dollars as far as possible.

Another key area of service delivery is **professional development** for educators and educational leaders. We provide high quality, cost effective training and professional development—both at the CESA 9 office and out in the districts. This professional development is intentionally designed to build capacity in educators to utilize research based strategies supporting both statewide initiatives such as educator effectiveness and local district goals. We are increasing our offerings of online opportunities to extend adult learning through the use of Blackboard Collaborate and other technologies to reduce travel costs and increase accessibility to professional development.

We have a wealth of expertise to share within our organization and, when beneficial to our customers, we enthusiastically partner with other external organizations and institutions to provide high quality, student-focused professional development. A recent example of such a partnership is the educational leadership graduate program that we are offering onsite at CESA 9 in collaboration with Viterbo University in La Crosse. Our first cohort started their coursework last summer and the two-year program will lead to a master's degree and principal certification. Prior to this, CESA 9 educators seeking advanced degrees had to travel farther to participate in coursework.

CESA 9 provides services in school improvement, crisis management, assistive technology, special education, early childhood education, curriculum, assessment, instruction, intervention, positive behavioral interventions and support, behavior strategies, driver education, school nursing, PI 34, career and technical education, technology, blended learning, autism support, E-rate application support, educational interpreters, and parent education. We coordinate regional spelling bees and Kohl teacher fellowships and student scholarships. We host an Academic Decathlon each year. And, CESA 9 is home to the Wisconsin Virtual School which provides supplemental, online courses to students not only within the CESA 9 service area, but in about 230 districts across our state. Dawn Nordine, the Executive Director of WVS, will tell you much more about that shortly.

Currently, we are co-designing, with our superintendents, a regional network to build educator capacity to support personalized learning for students in all of our districts. This convening of talents and resources is one of the things we do best at CESA 9—helping our districts tap into the regional talent in and between districts that is so plentiful. What our districts need, we design and deliver! That's our job! That's our passion and our purpose! That's what we do every day, every year—and with great joy while always keeping a relentless focus on customer need and customer satisfaction.

CESA 9 provides all of the quality services I mentioned here and many more at very low cost. We are not out to make a profit on the backs of our local districts who, too often, are making deep cuts to programming for their students. We believe very strongly in the “cooperative” part of our name and work diligently to connect and extend resources to our customers at the lowest cost possible. We pride ourselves in being solutions designers and solutions providers to our districts. They expect no less from us.

I must tell you, however, that even as economically feasible as we build our services to be, our rural school districts are struggling to pull together funding to even be able to take advantage of what we can offer to them. Just last week, I had a conversation with one of our superintendents who found a grant from which he believed his students and district could benefit. The grant would bring to the district significant dollars and open up opportunities for children. He inquired about access to our grant writing services, but the \$4,500 annual fee to be a part of the consortium seemed to be out of reach. Grant writing is one of those areas where districts “chip in” so to speak and we hire a person to pursue grant opportunities, write grants, and evaluate grants on their behalf. Our rural schools *especially* need the appropriate attention that you are giving to their critical situations and they look forward to the recommendations that will come from your collective work as a task force. Again, I want to reiterate that CESA 9 stands ready to lend our time and energy to providing additional solutions and support to them.

I will close by inviting you to get familiar with the services that the CESA in your region of the state provides. Contact information for the other agency administrators is located on page 10 of the CESA 9 Annual Report which you have in your packet. I have also enclosed a flyer entitled “The Power of 12” which describes some of the statewide projects and services that are available to school districts no matter which CESA region they call home. In addition to CESA Purchasing, which I mentioned previously, we can help our districts access support for standards implementation, educator effectiveness, data analysis and technology utilization through Google Apps for Education. We can help them access support for intervention and health through the Wisconsin RtI Center and Wisconsin Safe and Healthy Schools Network. While I am not speaking on behalf of the other 11 CESAs today, I will tell you with great confidence that each of those organizations is doing amazing things to support the specific and unique needs in the districts they serve as well. Collectively, the CESAs work together statewide to further share resources, support educators and serve students!

At this point I will turn it over to Dawn Nordine, who will go on to share with you more about Wisconsin Virtual School and a new collaboration we are working on in partnership with the eSchool Network—the Wisconsin Digital Learning Collaborative.

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