

Jerry Fiene  
Executive Director  
1015 21<sup>st</sup> Street  
Prairie du Sac, WI 53578  
(715) 499-4689  
jerryfiene@wirsa.org



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CESA #6

## GUEST EDITORIAL

### NEEDS OF RURAL SCHOOLS IGNORED BY GOVERNOR'S K-12 BUDGET PROPOSAL

Students enrolled in the approximately 250 rural school districts located throughout Wisconsin will continue to see an erosion of educational opportunities under the Governor's 2013-15 budget proposal. Most school districts have been faced with making significant budget reductions as a result of revenue limits in effect since 1993; but rural school districts also face a unique set of circumstances which, if ignored, will threaten their very existence.

Nearly all rural school districts have experienced significant declining enrollments over the past 10 years, many by more than 20%. Since enrollment is a major factor in determining the revenue limit, these districts have had to deal with stagnating or declining revenues. The unique challenge facing rural districts, most of which have few students to begin with, is to find ways to reduce budgets without eliminating critical educational opportunities for their students. They have no control over inflation, buildings cannot be closed, class sections cannot be reduced, administration and staffing is already at a minimum, transportation cannot be further reduced, utilities and insurance must be paid. The per student cost to maintain the basic infrastructure of the district leaves less money available for instruction.

The last biennial budget reduced the per pupil revenue limit by \$550 in the first year. This reduction was intended to be offset by the collective bargaining law which, among other provisions, required teachers to contribute more toward their pensions and insurance. The indications we have received from our membership are that the application of the cost saving provisions of this law did not equal the reductions in the revenue limits. Now a new biennial budget proposal has been submitted without a penny more added to the revenue limit to even cover the cost of inflation.

Another unique circumstance facing rural school districts is the high cost of transportation with many districts spending between \$700 and \$900 per student. Even after the current transportation aids are taken into account, this leaves these districts with significantly less to spend on student instruction than those with minimal per student transportation costs. The Department of Public Instruction budget proposal submitted by Superintendent Tony Evers included enhancements to Sparsity Aid and High Cost Pupil Transportation Aid which would have helped to level the playing field for rural districts, but neither proposal was included in the Governor's budget proposal. Superintendent Evers also forwarded recommendations for school finance reform including a funding factor to address high poverty which would have been favorable for sustaining rural school districts. Most rural school districts have a significantly higher percentage of poverty than the state average. This proposal for finance reform was also disregarded in the Governor's budget.

A survey of our membership revealed many rural districts have already cut deep into student opportunities by eliminating or dramatically reducing foreign languages, advanced placement classes, career and technical education offerings, art, music, guidance services, at-risk and gifted and talented programs and library services. In addition, building maintenance is being delayed and aging equipment and technology is not being updated. This trend needs to be reversed or the opportunity gap for our rural youth will only get wider. One potential solution is to have the state invest in the expansion of bandwidth and the technology infrastructure of rural schools to allow them the ability to increase opportunities for their students through the power and application of technology.

The Governor has included millions of dollars in his budget proposal to expand private voucher schools, offer special education vouchers and increase payments to independent charter schools. Yet, there is a zero increase for rural schools. We applaud Republican Senators Luther Olsen and Mike Ellis who recognized this inequity and have pledged to make a change.

Governor Walker stated in his budget address, "In the end, our goal is simple . . . ensure that every child, regardless of where they are from or what their family income is, has access to a great education." I believe this should be precisely the goal for every child living in rural Wisconsin and attending a rural school.

Please contact your legislators today and ask them, "WHERE IS THE INVESTMENT IN OUR RURAL SCHOOLS AND STUDENTS?"

Jerry Fiene  
Executive Director  
Wisconsin Rural Schools Alliance