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## **TESTIMONY TO THE SENATE EDUCATION COMMITTEE ON IMPACT OF SENATE BILL 589**

Senator Olsen and the members of the Senate Education Committee:

Thank you for the opportunity to speak to you today about the positive impact of Senate Bill 589 on rural school districts. I am Jerry Fiene, the Executive Director of the Wisconsin Rural Schools Alliance, an organization representing administrators, board of education members, teachers and community leaders from rural school districts throughout the state.

We would like to thank the authors and sponsors for introducing legislation that creates flexibility for school districts as opposed to creating more mandates. The topic of the significant challenges facing rural school districts has received much attention over the past several years and frankly, one of those challenges is sufficient resources to meet state and federal requirements and mandates. This bill not only creates flexibility that has the potential to conserve resources but also provides opportunities for accessing additional resources.

Through our connections with the National Rural Education Association, we have learned of creative and successful organizational schedules in school districts for both the length of school days and the scheduling of those school days that are just not possible to implement in Wisconsin because of our 180 day requirement. Removing that requirement but maintaining the required hours of instruction would open up various options for conserving resources while actually improving achievement. Transportation costs are a major expense for rural districts that drains resources from the classrooms. Reducing district-wide transportation for just a single day would save thousands of dollars. Scheduling fewer days of school during the coldest winter months would again save thousands of dollars in utility costs. Research has shown that long breaks in instruction have a negative effect on achievement and retention. Creating a schedule for the school year that would reduce the length of the traditional summer recess addresses this issue. It is even more important for children in poverty and we have had a dramatic increase in poverty across rural Wisconsin over the past 10 years. Expanding the eligibility for our current summer school aid to interim sessions further allows for creative scheduling to conserve resources and at the same time increase the opportunities for learning.

I have advocated for a long time to allow online classes at the junior and senior high level to be eligible for summer school aid. We are very pleased to see that this provision is included in Senate Bill 589. The quality and rigor of online classes has improved dramatically over the past 10 years. During the same time our rural school districts have been forced to eliminate advanced classes, AP offerings and foreign languages as a result of declining enrollments and diminished resources. These opportunities are all available online and would be a great resource for students to access during the summer session or interim session. However, these opportunities do come with a cost that a rural school district may not be able to afford. Eligibility for state aid on these courses will make them much more affordable and the clear winners will be our rural youth.

Thank you very much for introducing this legislation and we encourage your support for its approval.