



TESTIMONY TO JOINT FINANCE COMMITTEE APRIL 8, 2013

Thank you for this opportunity to share our perspective on the impact of AB40 on rural school districts throughout the state. I am Jerry Fiene, Executive Director of the Wisconsin Rural Schools Alliance, a statewide organization of rural school districts, technical colleges, universities, CESAs, public libraries, businesses and individuals focused on sustaining and strengthening rural school districts and rural communities throughout the state.

The proposed 2013-15 budget which includes no increase to the per pupil revenue limit will place many rural school districts at risk. Nearly all rural districts have experienced declining enrollment in the last ten years, many by more than 20%. There are 49 school districts in our state that have a lower revenue limit in 2013 than they had in 2003 and 44 of those are rural. These districts and many more with minimal increases over the past ten years have already made budget reductions that have cut deeply into student opportunities by eliminating or reducing foreign language courses, advanced placement classes, career and technical education offerings, art, music, guidance and library services. In addition, building maintenance is being delayed and aging equipment and technology has not been updated.

How can these rural districts possibly do more? They have no control over inflation, single class sections cannot be reduced, no more buildings can be closed, administration is already compressed and at a minimum, insurance and utilities must be paid. Transportation costs, which for many districts are between \$700 - \$900 per student, cannot be further reduced. The revenue limit absolutely must be increased to maintain the investment in student instruction or the opportunity gap for our rural youth will just increase.

A dependence on referenda to exceed the revenue limit by increasing property taxes is not sustainable. Attached to this testimony are two statewide maps, one from 2003 and one from 2011, that illustrate the level of poverty as measured by the percent of students on free and reduced price lunch. You will clearly see that there has been a dramatic increase in poverty for those areas of our state that are primarily rural. This has educational, as well as funding implications for the majority of rural school districts.

Expanding private school vouchers affects every school district in the state. This budget does not adequately fund education in rural school districts and then worsens the problem by draining additional resources to fund an expanded private school voucher program that has not proven to improve student achievement compared to public schools.

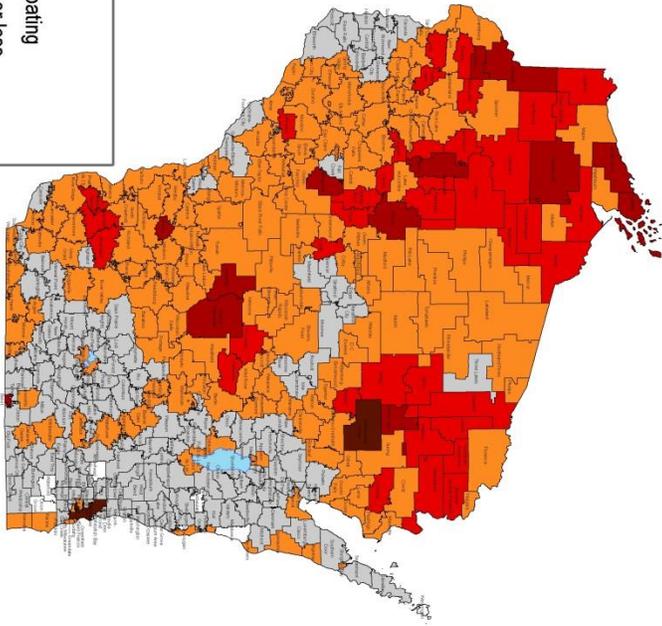
Wisconsin school districts are already among the leaders in the nation when it comes to establishing charter schools and there are some exemplary charter schools in rural school districts. They can be sources of educational innovation, improving educational opportunities and reducing costs. The language in this budget affecting school district instrumentality charter schools becomes a deterrent for school districts to create new charters while encouraging the establishment of independent charters which again will transfer aid away from students in rural school districts.

All proposals regarding private school vouchers, special education vouchers and independent charters are such major policy decisions that they absolutely need to be removed from the budget and debated in detail. We encourage you to focus your efforts in the budget debate on ways to adequately support the 870,000 public school students in our state.

Thank you,

Jerry Fiene

**Wisconsin Public School Districts
Free or Reduced-Price School Meal Eligibility
2003-2004**

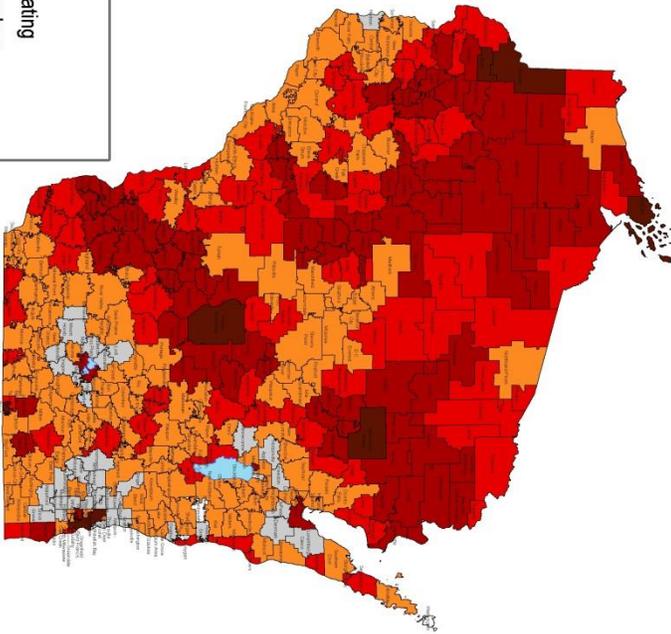


Legend

- Not Participating
- 20 percent or less
- 21 to 40 percent
- 41 to 50 percent
- 51 to 70 percent
- More than 70 percent

Data Source: National School Lunch Program reimbursement claims submitted by school districts to the DPI

**Wisconsin Public School Districts
Free or Reduced-Price School Meal Eligibility
2011-2012**



Legend

- Not Participating
- 20 percent or less
- 21 to 40 percent
- 41 to 50 percent
- 51 to 70 percent
- More than 70 percent

Data Source: National School Lunch Program reimbursement claims submitted by school districts to the DPI