

School District of Benton

Benton School Board

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First of all, thank you to the Speaker's TaskForce on Rural Schools for setting up this series of public hearings and trying to address the topic of school funding and the needs of rural schools in Wisconsin. I believe that having one school funding system for the entire state is difficult to provide equity when the needs of various school districts vary.

Transportation

For example rural schools especially in the northern portion of the state have a greater need for transportation aid. At Benton, being geographically small, this is not an issue but districts like Florence, Crandon, Winter and Phillips to name just a few, transportation is a financial challenge.

Other fixed costs such as heating or snow plowing/removal impact a school district's budget the same whether we have our current enrollment of 250 students or if we added 100 more students. The revenue limit worksheet currently partially assists districts with declining enrollment but over time this does not keep up with the fixed costs of maintaining a building. Districts have reduced the number of school buildings in use which causes animosity amongst communities when a town loses its school. And in our case we only have one school building so we cannot reduce it any lower.

Technology

Rural districts also need assistance with technology needs as well. Broadband access needs to be equal for all students in our state. If the legislature could assure that all students had adequate access it would level the playing field.

Distant learning opportunities also would benefit the rural schools of our state yet not all districts can invest the funds into a distant learning lab. Local school boards cannot justify spending the funds when only a few students will utilize it annually.

Retaining Quality Teachers

Each of the last three years at Benton we have lost at least one quality teacher per year due to the ability of another district within the state being able to pay the teacher more. When we have had an opening in a difficult subject area to fill such as special education, math or Spanish the candidate pool has been very limited and sometimes rural school must employ a candidate under an emergency license, who then in turn has to become certified.

Also, in each of the last three years Benton has had viable candidate(s) turn down an offer because our pay was not comparable to their current position or what they could get at another district. Understandably with Act 10 there is flexibility when offering a salary to a potential teacher however a school board and administrator still need to work within the district's budget and larger districts have the same ability.

Educational Needs

Rural school students have the same educational needs as any other school district in the state. We have fewer students but still have students at various levels of academic abilities including special education and advanced courses.

For example our current junior class has 18 students of which seven are enrolled in Accounting I. Next year the number of students enrolled in Accounting II will be seven or less. At what point does a district decide not to offer a course? Especially when the course cut could be the most important course to a particular student?

We have students taking independent study courses, working with teachers before or after school or on the teacher's prep time. We have students taking online courses through CESA 9's Wisconsin Virtual School. We try to met all of our students' academic needs

Referendums for Operating Costs

In 2006, 2009, 2012 Benton School District successfully ran referendums to exceed the revenue limit for the purpose of operating costs. Our district has been very fortunate that our community not only values public education but can financially support our school. I would like to believe that most communities value public education however everyone cannot afford this added expense.

In 2015 Benton School District will again likely go to referendum to exceed the revenue limit for operating costs. Hopefully it will be for less funding than the 2013 referendum. I feel the state needs to develop a better funding system for rural schools to maintain operations without the need to go to referendums periodically.

If our operating cost referendum would fail we would use our fund balance. The purpose of a fund balance is to pay for onetime expenses and eliminate the practice of short term borrowing.

We do not have any certified staff positions which we could eliminate. We have 1 teacher per grade level at the elementary level and at the high school level we have only one teacher per subject area. We have one administrator, one bookkeeper and one secretary. We are as streamline or barebones as we can get as a district; select whichever term you would prefer.

I do not feel that this is unique to Benton School District but is probably very common amongst rural schools.

Potential Solutions

Rural districts need flexibility in setting the school calendars whether it would be with the start and end days of the school calendar and/or the number of days of instruction. I do not suggest impacting the number of hours of instruction however. Local school districts could save on energy, utilities, transportation, food and custodial services.

A school's fiscal year runs from July 1 to June 30 yet the final Equalization Aid Payment for the year is sent the next July. If these funds could be given to the districts earlier it may prevent some districts from having the need to do short term borrowing as often or at all. This solution should not add any cost to the state.

Allow a teacher to teach a limited number of courses outside of their certified area. In a small, rural high school there may be a need for an additional course in a subject area however the teacher certified in that area may already have their schedule full or be on an overload. Or offer incentives for teachers that become certified in more than one subject area.

Offer incentives to districts who share services with other districts. We share our Spanish Teacher with Southwestern School District of Wisconsin along with our head cook. Our industrial tech teacher is shared through Shullsburg School District. And we are always looking for ways to share more because we want to provide the best education for our students. Exactly the same goal our counterparts in other locations across the state are trying to do.

Reevaluate the state funding system for education. I do not have an easy solution for this nor do I think an easy solution exists. I thank you for addressing the issues of the rural schools in Wisconsin and know that you will do your best to develop some solutions and answers. As with any rural school superintendent, I am willing to assist in any manner possible. Thank you for your time.