

January 28, 2014

TO Rep. Rob Swearingen, Chair
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FROM Louie Ferguson, District Administrator, Arcadia School District

Speaker's Task force on Rural Schools: Public Testimony Pepin High School

Good afternoon, I am Louie Ferguson, District Administrator of the Arcadia School District. This is my 30th year in education serving as a teacher for nine years in the Park Falls School District, which has now consolidated with the Glidden School District to form the Chequamegon School District, six years at the Stanley-Boyd School District as a high school principal for two years and the grade 7-12 assistant principal for four years. Now I am at the Arcadia School

District where I was the high school principal for ten years and I am now in my fifth year as the district administrator.

In all these districts there are common issues, they have not changed a lot in the last 30 years. How do we give our rural school district students the same opportunities in education as students in urban and metropolitan areas? You have heard testimony earlier that addressed some possible solutions, but we need to work together to make these things happen. Giving us this opportunity today is a great step in that direction. The Arcadia School District is in a rather unique situation compared to most districts in the state. Our enrollment has increased in our elementary school over 70% in the last 15 years, but we still have many of the same issues challenging our rural district.

Challenges:

Transportation aid: The Arcadia School District spends over \$550,000 in transportation costs. We receive roughly \$62,000 in aid. We transport approximately 740 students daily.

I agree with other administrators and strongly recommend increasing the current level of state categorical aid funding for pupil transportation.

School Technology: It is my belief that appropriate technology access could be the greatest tool and strategy to allow rural students the same access to educational opportunities as urban students. While urban students can gain Youth Options opportunities because of their ability to physically attend universities and technical colleges in their locations, advancements in technology would provide those rural students to attend virtually. The states of Oklahoma and Minnesota have some great models.

Broadband access: Simply put, broadband access needs to be the same for all students regardless of where they go to school.

Retaining Quality staff: Many rural districts have a high staff turnover rate. We invest time and training in our staff and I would encourage the legislature look at resident signing and longevity bonuses for staff who commit to teaching in rural districts. I would also encourage the legislature to advance legislation that would forgive students loans for teachers teaching in rural areas. This would be an added incentive for young teachers to consider applying and teaching in rural areas.

Declining Enrollment: While declining enrollment is not presently a problem in our district due to our manufacturing base, one plant or factory closing could put us in that situation.

I support the SAA position to modify the current 100 percent non-recurring hold harmless adjustment a district receives in the first year of an enrollment decline by adding the following: 1) a non recurring adjustment equal to 75percent of the first year adjustment in the year after the decline; and 2) a non-recurring adjustment equal to 50 percent of the first year adjustment in the second year after the decline. I support this multi-yea, descending hold-harmless because districts find it very difficult to manage the total loss of the hold harmless adjustment aid after year one of the initial enrollment decline.

Common Core: I encourage you to support the common core state standards. In Arcadia and many other small rural schools the Common Core State Standards have provided the long-awaited consistency for what we expect all students to know and learn. Our districts have already committed countless hours in preparation of adopting these standards to provide a challenging and rigorous pathway to academic success. Using the CCSS as a template will help prepare students for post-secondary education and workforce success in a global society.

More support for ELL population: Right now this may be the biggest challenge or opportunity facing the Arcadia School District and some other small rural school districts. English Language Learners have different needs than we have been faced with in the past due to the various backgrounds and experiences they have entering our school systems. The shortage of certified ELL and bilingual instructors is challenging.

Although the ELL has stabilized our enrollment it has placed a significant burden on teachers on staff and stretched our limited resources. I would advocate for increased funding for schools experiencing significant increases in minority populations.

License and certification relief: It is very challenging for small rural districts to have advanced classes with sufficient numbers to justify having a teacher get certification in advanced classes of science and math. They are very good teachers, but do not necessarily get the certification because their district could not afford to offer the class on a regular basis. I would simply ask that the legislators look at allowing some relief in licensing requirements for hard to fill and single offering classics with districts that offer rationale.

Mr. Chairman and members of the task force, thank you again for the opportunity to testify on this important topic. I would be happy to answer any questions.