

Testimony – Superintendent Luke Francois, Ed.D.
Speaker’s Task Force on Rural Schools
Cuba City High School, February 26, 2014

I want to thank Chairman Swearingen and members of the committee for inviting me to be here today to discuss with you issues facing rural schools. I appreciate your willingness to serve on this task force and want to thank you for visiting rural schools in Southwest Wisconsin. In your hands, Wisconsin has an opportunity to solve some of the problems confronting rural schools and their communities.

My name is Luke Francois, Ed.D., and I serve as the Superintendent of Mineral Point Unified School District. With enrollment of 730 students, Mineral Point Schools are one of many schools representing one-half of all schools in Wisconsin with less than 1,000 students. Mineral Point is experiencing declining enrollment and increasing poverty. In translation, the cost to educate students in Mineral Point is increasing while the revenue received to educate students is decreasing.

As this is the last Public Hearing, I struggled to ensure that my message before you today was not going to be redundant. To that end, I will not tell you the following:

- I will not tell you that transportation costs next year will be in excess of \$340,000 for my district and reflect a 9% increase over this year, and that this is largely problematic and will cause the reduction of spending authority in regular education.
- I will not tell you that technology is changing rapidly in education and access to sufficient broadband at an affordable cost are essential to rural schools and that related economic development of a technological grid is needed in our communities.
- I will not tell you that there are fewer teachers available to teach in rural schools and Mineral Point teachers are covering more bases by teaching five or six preps.

- I will not tell you that Licensure restrictions have become prohibitive, especially when you can't fully use the talent available in your own school buildings.
- I will not tell you that fixed costs such as the Local Government Insurance Property Fund (LGIPF), that recently adjusted premiums through an increase of 28.6%, are largely problematic and in turn caused the reduction of spending authority in regular education.
- I will not tell you that sequestration was largely problematic as it caused a reduction to Title 1 Funds from \$79,912 to \$73,043 and a reduction to IDEA flow through funds from \$139,644 to \$128,132 at a time that special education costs are increasing.

By not telling you the aforementioned, I hope you appreciate my attempt to avoid being redundant.

Instead, I would like to share Charles Dickens, *A Tale of Two Cities*: “It was the best of times, it was the worst of times, it was the age of wisdom, it was the age of foolishness, . . . it was the spring of hope, it was the winter of despair, we had everything before us, we had nothing before us . . . “

In my story of two cities, the first city is my place of residence, Middleton. As my alma mater I returned to Middleton in 1999 as a teacher and eventually an administrator at Middleton High School. My lovely wife of 16 years is a National Board Certified Teacher in the English Department and three of our four children attend elementary or middle schools. I know this district well. Within the past three years the Middleton community approved a significant building referendum to rebuild a middle school and renovate other school buildings. This is evidence of a community that supports their school district.

The second city is my place of employment, Mineral Point. Upon arriving at the Mineral Point School District three years ago, the district had already eliminated programs, eliminated or reduced staff, increased

employee contributions, and frozen salaries for two consecutive years. The district faced a significant structural deficit of 1.1 million dollars. I also know this district well. Within the past three years the Mineral Point community also approved a recurring referendum for operations to end the structural deficit. This, too, is evidence of a community that supports their school district.

At Middleton in the District Office, there is a Superintendent, an Assistant Superintendent of Business Services, an Assistant Superintendent for Educational Services, a Director of Teaching and Learning for Secondary Education and another again for Elementary Education, a Director of Curriculum and Assessment, a Director of Technology Services, and a Community Specialist.

At Mineral Point in the District Office I am the Superintendent, the Business Manager, the Curriculum and Instruction Director, the Human Resources Director, the Director of Technology, and the Communications Specialist. The administrative team consists of three principals. The High School Principal also serves as the District Assessment Coordinator, the Middle School Principal also serves as the Athletic Director, and the Elementary Principal also serves as the Director of Pupil Services. The aforementioned team is a reflection of how the Mineral Point District as a whole operates with very limited resources.

In Middleton an English Department has 16 members with multiple teachers teaching a given course allowing for collaboration in professional learning communities around topics such as alignment to the Common Core State Standards.

In Mineral Point the English Department has 2 members. One teacher teaches freshman and juniors the other teachers sophomores and seniors. Each is responsible for aligning their own curriculum in isolation and there is little opportunity to have discussion around shared course content, as there is none.

In Middleton students have a plethora of course offerings that include 15 Advanced Placement courses and 39 courses that can be taken for dual enrollment credit.

In Mineral Point there are 2 courses available for Advanced Placement and no courses available for dual enrollment credit.

In Middleton a student is serviced by a full time Gifted and Talented Teacher dedicated to their elementary school.

In Mineral Point, a full-time elementary kindergarten teacher receives an extra duty contract of \$3,000 to serve as the Gifted and Talented Coordinator for the District.

In Middleton there are boots on the ground for technology support in each building.

In Mineral Point the person that used to support technology in two buildings was replaced through outsourcing services to a company that provides Mineral Point technology consultation with boots on the ground arriving approximately twice per week for a half day.

In Middleton a full time school nurse, school police liaison, social worker, English Language Learners (ELL) teacher, technology teacher, and Family and Consumer Education (FCE) teacher services the high school.

In Mineral Point the nurse and police liaison positions are part time and there is no social worker, ELL teacher, technology teacher, nor FCE teacher at the High School.

In Middleton there are top-notch facilities such as a performing arts center, indoor swimming pool, and central air.

In Mineral Point there is no central air in classrooms causing summer school to be canceled each of the past three years due to extreme heat. The

facilities are aging and contain asbestos under the floor tiles and 60-year-old plumbing with leaks.

In Middleton, the cost per student for transportation is \$447.04.

In Mineral Point, the cost per student for transportation is \$543.71, representing a 21% increase over Middleton.

The impact of Act 46, the additional \$100M in state aid, found Middleton receiving a 6.2% increase over Act 20 aid.

This is significantly more than Mineral Point that received a .7% increase.

At Middleton one school ranking reports per student spending to be \$12,348.

The same report states Mineral Point spends \$9,817 per student.

According to the Wisconsin State Journal, rural school districts from 2000 to 2010, suffered a 7.5 percent enrollment decline, and were penalized by the state's revenue caps, which are tied to enrollments. From 2001 to 2010 rural school districts' revenues rose only 26 percent, compared to 39 percent for non-rural districts.

These comparisons highlight the disparity between rural and non-rural schools and the list could go on and on and on. It makes a difference as to where you go to school – we have separate and unequal schools in Wisconsin. The amount of money spent per child on education in public schools varies. Despite the funding formula being constitutionally sound it is evident to me that the funding formula is fundamentally broken. A student from Mineral Point does not have the same opportunities as a student from Middleton.

The bottom line is that it doesn't make sense to apply statewide regulations to especially small districts. Rural School Districts need as much flexibility as humanly possible to manage their finances and operations. Regulations

that make sense for Milwaukee or Green bay often don't make sense in Mineral Point, Antigo, or Pepin. Communities that desire to keep their small schools should trump statewide rules and regulations.

Many rural school districts do an excellent job of educating students and have pressed forward in innovative ways. For example, Mineral Point received a Wisconsin Technology Institute Grant that provided two mobile telepresence units, one for each of our buildings. Mobile telepresence finds a 60-inch TV mounted to a mobile cart with a HD camera attached that connects entities with an Internet connection to each other in real time. I like to think of telepresence as Skype or Face Time on steroids.

This morning Mineral Point students were taking ACT preparatory class with a teacher located in the Riverdale School District. In the future, we hope to share course content so that schools with two classes of six can make a class of 12. Additionally, Mineral Point must currently offer Spanish 4 and Spanish 5 into one class period due to staffing levels. Perhaps next year we can share the course between two schools; one school teaching Spanish 4 and the other Spanish 5.

Mineral Point also desires to share services such as ELL teachers, social workers, special education services and so forth between schools. The technology will also allow Mineral Point to connect with UW Platteville and Southwest Technical College for youth options, dual enrollment courses, and virtual supervision of our student teachers. The technology could connect with employers within our geographical regions as well to give students' employability skills while in high school to kick-start their careers upon departure.

Too often, however, when one attempts to connect or collaborate via telepresence, no one is able to answer. The technology is often not present in K-12 schools or in higher education institutions, and even if it was, the broadband connection is not strong enough to maintain solid connections. Maintaining a quality set of education and course offerings through blended and virtual education is critical to the success of rural schools.

Mineral Point Teachers are highly qualified to deliver an exceptional education. Four teachers at Mineral Point, or 1 in 15, are National Board Certified, the highest certification available to teachers in their profession. Three teachers at Mineral Point were recently nominated to the Herb Kohl Teaching Fellowship and two are currently being considered for honors at the state level.

To attract, develop, and retain highly effective teachers to Mineral Point a strategic compensation plan tied to educator effectiveness was implemented last year. I have first hand accounts of teachers that moved to Mineral Point rather than accepting a job in a large school district because they desired the ability to advance on a pay scale more quickly based on effectiveness. I also have a teacher that was offered a higher paying job in a neighboring larger district that decided to stay in our rural school district due to performance based pay attached to effectiveness.

In order to attract or retain highly effective teachers, the district has to be able to fund a strategic compensation plan. I have shared with the task force an exhibit that displays our general fund projection summary for the next five years. Mineral Point's revenue is projected to grow between .65% and 1.42% while expenditures are projected to be between 1.52% and 2.97%. Using these conservative estimates our current school year deficit of \$67,338 will continue to grow to a deficit of \$797,369 in as few as five years from now. This will deplete the District's fund balance currently at 19.5% to being totally exhausted after the 2018 school year. Attracting and retaining effective teachers, regardless of the compensation plan, will become most challenging under these circumstances.

This is the repetitive history of our school district and why a recurring referendum was necessary three years ago and will be necessary in the near future unless something changes for rural schools.

What is the solution to the struggles that rural schools face? Perhaps is it additional revenue cap exemptions, like was done for energy efficiency projects, for items such as school safety measures or the integration of technology. Perhaps it is better funding for categorical aids such as

sparsity and transportation aid for rural schools. Perhaps it is expanding the hold harmless agreement for declining enrollment. Perhaps it is the introduction of a poverty factor into the state aid formula. Perhaps it is adopting State Superintendent Evers plan for Fair Funding for Our Future.

What is the solution to the struggles that rural schools face? Recognizing that the problems of rural schools are complex and controversial, simply, it is a financial problem, and the next budget cycle is key to saving rural schools.

Thank you for the opportunity to meet with you this afternoon. I would be happy to answer any questions you may have for me at this time.