

January 28, 2014

TO Rep. Rob Swearingen, Chair  
Rep. Fred Clark, Vice Chair  
Rep. Mary Czaja  
Rep. Warren Petryk  
Rep. Ed Brooks  
Rep. Mary Williams  
Rep. Jeffrey Mursau  
Rep. Michael Schraa  
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Rep. Chris Danou  
Rep. SONDY POPE  
Rep. Mandy Wright

FROM Paul Vine, Ed.D., District Administrator, Independence School District

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

Good afternoon, I am Paul Vine, District Administrator of the Independence School District. This is my 36<sup>th</sup> year in education serving as District Administrator for the past 19 years in three different Wisconsin school districts.

The Independence School District is in Trempealeau and Buffalo counties in western Wisconsin. The school district covers 94 square miles. The 4K-12 enrollment is approximately 375 students, of which 21 open enroll into the district from other non-resident districts. In 2013-14 approximately 30% of our students are minority, of which many qualify for ELL services. Approximately 61% of our students qualify for free and reduced lunch. The total operating budget for the 2013-14 school year is approximately \$5,740,000. The district employs 52 employees and located in a K-12 school which was constructed in 1998.

## **Challenges:**

**Transportation aid:** One of the highest costs for rural schools is transporting students. The Independence School district spends of over \$275,000 transporting approximately 200 students to and from school, at an average annual cost of \$775 per pupil. In 2012-13 the district received \$14,720 in pupil transportation aid or approximately 5% of all transportation costs. As you know transporting students in sparsely populated areas is significantly more costly than in larger suburban areas.

I strongly recommend increasing the current level of state categorical aid funding for pupil transportation as well as continuation and expansion of the new state transportation aid program aids a districts transportation costs in excess of 150% of the statewide per pupil average.

**School Technology:** Currently the Independence School District has approximately 300 desktop computer for student and staff use. Approximately 260 of these desktop computers were purchased with TEACH funds prior to 2006. In other words the majority of our hardware is over seven (7) years old. We are grateful to the Gundersen Lutheran Clinic in LaCrosse, who in the past year has donated 60 four-year old computers to the district. In addition, the USDA donated another twenty (20), four year old desktop computers go the district.

In the mid 1990's the Thompson administration created the Technology for Education Achievement (TEACH) Wisconsin program. These grants provided many rural districts the ability to invest and improve technology and telecommunications. During that time many schools used these funds to wire schools, place hardware in student's hands and train educators. I support the creation of a new technology initiative, "TEACH II" program that would help support district bandwidth needs, system infrastructure, distance learning upgrades hardware and software.

**Broadband access:** The district had been using the original servers and switches installed in 1998 when the K-12 building was constructed. This past summer the board authorized spending of \$75,000 to replace these switches and servers as well as another \$25,000 to install updated wireless access points. Students and staff can now utilize wireless devices without fear of constantly being "kicked" off the internet.

If schools are expected to implement Smarter Balanced Assessment and do it all web based many schools are not ready for this switch. Please consider more funding for schools to acquire the infrastructure and bandwidth necessary.

**Retaining Quality staff:** Many school districts are faced with annual staff turnover in all areas. In 2012 Independence saw ten (10) of the thirty-five (35) certified teachers take new positions in the Menomonie, Eau Claire, LaCrosse area school districts. Their reasons varied from reduced driving distances to increases in pay by as much as \$10,000 per position. We are often hiring new young teachers, investing resources and time in staff development only to see them leave after one to three years.

We are working hard to retain staff by creating a new performance based pay scale that will be competitive. In addition, we are exploring the option to implement an in-house day care for staff members to utilize. However, I would encourage the legislature to create 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:** Declining enrollment has been and continues to be a significant problem for many Wisconsin school districts, (especially rural districts). Recent research placed the number of districts in decline at or about sixty percent.

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 75 percent 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-year, 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 Independence and many other small rural schools they have provided the template to for curriculum renewal as well as challenging our students to more rigorous expectations. These are not the curriculum but a way for small rural schools to see how they measure up to other students and districts.

**More support for ELL population:** The English Language Learning population in Independence has almost doubled in the past three years. As stated previously approximately 31 percent, or about 82 of our 375 students qualify as minority students. Many of these students have difficulty with the English language and qualify as English Language Learners or ELL. This barrier negatively impacts their ability to be successful on standardized assessments. We currently employ a full-time ELL teacher and receive no additional aid for this position. As a result we have again utilized limited resources that could have been used to reduce class size or purchase much needed updated technology.

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.

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.