



MAY 21, 2014

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CLARK COLUMN: TIME TO TAKE A STAND FOR RURAL SCHOOLS

For rural Wisconsin, public schools are the hub of activity during the day, doubling as community centers, a place to exercise after work and polling stations for elections. Rural schools, with their mascots and sports teams, school plays, and graduations, tie together generations and capture the story of an entire town.

Unfortunately, we are poised to lose a growing number of those rural schools unless our legislature reverses course. In the face of declining enrollment and huge cuts in revenue, rural schools are cutting programs, stretching staff with heavier workloads, closing schools, and surviving on referendums year after year. In the outright war on public schools that the Republican majority in the Wisconsin Legislature has waged since 2011 with its \$1.6 billion in public school funding cuts, our rural schools are becoming the first casualties.

School leaders in Wisconsin were encouraged in 2013 when Assembly Speaker Robin Vos convened a Task Force on Rural Schools. The twelve-member group was chaired by Rep. Rob Swearingen (R-Rhineland). I served as the Vice-Chair.

Seeing first-hand the experience of public schools around the state and hearing testimony from rural school leaders was eye-opening. Inadequate funding adds to long-standing factors such as high transportation costs, high costs for technology, and the extra expense of having student populations spread over large areas. The bottom line is that many of our rural schools lack the resources to provide students with educational opportunities that are anywhere near those of our wealthier, suburban districts. One sign of the un-level playing field for rural schools is how many rural schools have to ask taxpayers for extra funding just to pay teachers and keep the lights on. In fact, of the 956 operating referendums that public school districts have placed on ballots since 1998, 73% have been for rural schools.

After many discussions, and with many points of agreement between us, on May 4th Chairman Swearingen and I elected to release separate reports on our findings from the Task Force. Having differing conclusions on an issue is not a bad thing – it happens every day in town board meetings and in the U.S. Supreme Court. Both reports did agree on a number of positive recommendations.

In fact my colleague Rep. Mandy Wright and I introduced legislation last session to increase sparsity aid, to provide grants for rural teacher loan forgiveness, and to renew investment in school technology –issues proposed in both reports. These proposals unfortunately never got hearings and were never seriously considered by the Republican leadership.

I believe strongly that any discussion of rural schools needs to include a meaningful discussion on how to restore adequate and equitable funding for schools. My report as Vice-Chair illustrates specific provisions for school funding reform that have been long supported by legislators of both parties, including restoring our State’s commitment to 2/3 funding of public schools.

If Rep. Swearingen and I were able to work free of political influence I have no doubt we could produce a single bi-partisan report. It is clear however that outside political influence played a strong in preventing the Task Force from addressing the most significant issues facing rural schools.

As a result, the Chair’s report does not mention the real elephant in the room affecting public schools – the threat to rural schools created by the growth of taxpayer funded voucher schools and independent charter schools. Voucher schools alone currently absorb \$384 million in this budget that would otherwise be available for public schools.

The push to privatize public schools with taxpayer funding comes from a national movement advanced by the now infamous American Legislative Exchange Council, a cadre of wealthy political donors, and an army of lobbyists which includes three former Republican Speakers of the Wisconsin Assembly. As recently as their 2014 convention, Wisconsin Republicans have openly committed to blowing the caps entirely off of the voucher school program in the next state budget.

Statewide voucher schools without limits would be a dream come true for private school lobbyists and the Republican Party power base. Unfortunately, it would also be a certain train wreck for our public schools, and the first cars to go off the tracks will be public schools in our smallest communities. Privatization will be the final shove that may force many rural schools into closing their doors. If we allow that to happen we will be ending a way of life in rural Wisconsin.

As much as I value bi-partisanship, I value the great tradition of public education in Wisconsin even more. I urge voters everywhere this year to ask legislative candidates to name their position on public schools: *“As a candidate do you support growing voucher schools statewide or do you support keeping the doors open in our small town public schools throughout Wisconsin?”* You cannot do both.