



School District of Potosi



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Testimony Before the Speaker's Rural Schools Task Force

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Chairman Swearigen, members of the Speaker's Rural Schools Task Force, Representative Tranel, I want to thank you for this opportunity to testify before you today regarding the problems facing rural schools and rural school children in Wisconsin.

My name is Ron Saari. I am the District Administrator in Potosi, WI and I am in my first year in this school district. Potosi has approximately 340 students in grades PK-12th. We are located in South West Wisconsin and our District borders the Mississippi river.

In my 23 years of being an educator, 10 as a building principal and 7 as a superintendent, I have come to understand and know two things: small rural schools are the heart and soul of their communities; and many small rural schools are currently fighting to survive.

With that said, this is also a very exciting time to be in education. There is a lot to be excited about. We have a new body of research that is available from a variety of education researchers that are helping us to be more efficient and effective at improving student achievement results, closing achievement gaps, and meeting the individual needs of each student (instead of teaching to the middle). We are moving from teacher isolation toward increased teacher collaboration. Also, the infusion of technology is transforming how we teach and learn; and it has opened doors of creativity to solve educational challenges. I reference for you the CESA 6 White Paper entitled the Next Generation of Public Education:

http://www.cesa6.org/cms_files/resources/Next%20Generation%20Design%20Paper%206-10.pdf

Video presentation: <http://www.cesa6.org/aboutus/nextgen-presentation.cfm>

Small rural schools have many similarities to larger school districts. They also have many characteristics (good and bad) that make them dissimilar. One particular advantage is that small rural schools are very close knit. Students, families, and staff all know each other. There is a greater sense of togetherness and care for each other. Potosi is a school of choice in the CESA 3 region, with the third highest net gain in students that results in almost 6% of our student body. Approximately 95.7% of our students are involved in extra-curricular activities; which has a positive impact on academic achievement and student discipline, (we have very low office referrals and no expulsions over the last several years). Our attendance rate is 96.6%; and our graduation rate is 98%. It is much harder for any student to "fall through the cracks." These schools, as you can tell, are the heart of their community.

No matter what challenges small rural districts face, we all want to be "full service" school districts. By that I mean we all want to provide a full gamete of programs and services for our students so that they are receiving the same equality of opportunity that students in larger more

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wealthy districts offer. Small rural school district teachers often make sacrifices so their districts can continue to maintain. These include longer work hours because they wear more hats and have many more responsibilities than only classroom teaching. They also have lower salaries and benefits.

Before I get into the specifics regarding our challenges, I first want to thank you for the proposed legislation to remove the 180-day requirement (SB 589 and AB 749, as amended). This will allow small rural school districts increased flexibility and creativity. We also ask that you consider legislation to remove the September 1 start date rule. We understand that locations like WI Dells and Minoqua benefit by keeping their HS student employees on the job through Labor Day. At the same time, that doesn't hold true for many small rural locations. We believe our students would benefit from the ability to begin school earlier. What we are asking for is more flexibility, within our current levels of accountability, so that we can be creative to overcome the challenges we face. One of these challenges is "summer loss," or the loss of skills students experience by being out of the school routine for 12 weeks. Our State assessments take place fairly close to the beginning of our school year (late October/early November) which doesn't provide the amount of time we believe is necessary prior to our students taking these tests. Also remember, many of our students who are involved in fall sports are already coming to school during most of the month of August for practices. We typically have 2 football games prior to the beginning of the school year.

It is obvious that we are doing what has been asked of us. We have used the tools Act 10 has provided us. We have saved considerable dollars by being able to bid out our health insurance. We have been able to increase the length of our school day, incorporate curriculum changes, and implement educational research—all to improve student achievement results. We continue to be more efficient and creative in being prudent stewards of our tax payer's dollars and to provide them with the largest return on their investment that we possibly can. We also believe that there is still more that you can do to help us to increase our small rural schools equality of opportunity.

The concerns that I will address with you today, that small rural schools face, include: technology challenges, declining enrollment, high transportation costs, recruitment/retention of quality staff, increasing student poverty, and a lack of economies of scale (less ability to provide as many educational offerings as larger districts, less or no ability to provide additional support staff positions, less available funds for facility maintenance and repair).

Technology Challenges:

- a.) In Potosi, we currently have 25MB per second (or Broadband speed) and this costs \$1,325 per month. E-rate covers 66% of it and the District pays \$438 per month (\$5,256 annually). This service is very slow and we hope to be able to afford moving to a 100MB per second line via TDS Telecom which will cost an additional \$1,675 per month (or a total of \$3,000 each month) and after e-rate the District's cost will be approximately \$990 per month (\$11,880 annually). The demand for this overtime is going to continue to increase and our school will end up needing higher speeds which comes at higher costs. Our high stakes test, the WKCE and Smarter Balanced, are computer and internet driven. If a student hits the "next" button, will a delay occur like it so often happens today? With our current speed and the number of students taking the test in our district at the same time, our internet speed will be very slow.
- b.) This year our District hired a full time IT person to assist us with our technology needs. Can you believe that? In the year 2014 we hired our first technology person. Not

because we wanted to, but because we needed to. Previously we used a part-time sub contractor who only dealt with the network. As you are aware, technology is changing so fast and to keep up with what is coming out and getting legislated down to schools from the State takes time and money. We currently use computers, smart-boards/projectors, document cameras, iPads, iTouch, and laptops. All of these items need to be maintained and cycled for replacement.

For example: Potosi currently has 200 computers. On a 5 year replacement plan, we would be purchasing approximately 40 computers per year. At approximately \$1,000 per computer, we would need to budget around \$40,000. We have 100 iPads in the District. If we were to cycle these out over 5 years, 20 iPads at \$600 each for the midrange iPad (32 GB) would cost \$12,000 annually. We currently have 40 smart-boards/projectors at approximately \$2,100 per setup. Replacing 8 per year (5 year cycle, even though these are recommended for a 3 year cycle) would be around \$18,000 annually. All of the above total approximately \$70,000 annually (approximately 2% of our budget) just to keep up with replacement of our hardware and not including our student management software, server and operating system licensing, server/backup hardware, wireless access upgrades, and other software licensing/subscriptions. Our total technology budget is approximately 5% of our total operating budget.

- c.) In rural areas such as Potosi, our students have less access to the internet than students in more populated areas of the State because companies do not want to build towers where it is not profitable (in rural areas). As we continue to incorporate technology into our practices of teaching and learning, student access to the internet at home is becoming more and more necessary. One of the next big things we are going to be incorporating is the “flipped classroom, or flipped learning.” This involves students participating in instruction and learning from their home. We envision instruction taking place at home during inclement weather days. We also envision students participating in recorded instruction in the evening from their home computing device. As we continue to move away from hard copy text books, we see ourselves investing in e-books. These can only happen if our student’s homes have access to inexpensive, fast, broadband internet access; and can afford to pay for this service. Most of our small rural school districts have free and reduced lunch percentages of 30-60%. Many of these families cannot afford the cost of investing in broad band internet for their children’s education.

Declining Enrollment:

As you are aware, declining enrollment is a significant issue for small rural areas. The declining enrollment negatively impacts a school district’s revenue even though it isn’t able to directly cut costs parallel to the revenue loss. Busses, lights, heat, etc. still occur at the same rate even though we have fewer students and lower revenue. The ability to cut staff is dependent on the number of students in the classroom, because the enrollment decline is dispersed throughout all of the grades and isn’t centralized in anyone grade level or area, districts are not able to arbitrarily reduce staff proportional to the enrollment. In the HS, we only have one instructor for most subjects and areas. If one were to cut the social studies teacher, a school would no longer be able offer this required course. To us, that is the definition of a small rural school district. We are so small; we literally cannot cut another person. The same is true for industrial arts, Family and Consumer Education, as well as Business and Agriculture. To be creative in these areas we find districts sharing teachers. However, because of time for teachers lost traveling to and from districts, it is not the most cost effective and efficient method to use. This is partly due to the fact that every district’s situation and needs vary from their neighbors and may vary from

year to year. Technology can help us with some of these challenges; such as encouraging affordable virtual and on-line classes.

High Transportation Costs:

The Potosi School District spent almost \$300,000 in transportation costs last year. This equates to over \$800 per student per year. The K-12 District average in WI is \$500 per student. Therefore, Potosi spends 37% more per student on transportation than the typical WI school district. Our transportation aide is approximately \$17,000 (approximately 6% of our total transportation costs). Transportation equates to approximately 8% of our total budget.

Recruitment/Retention of Quality Staff:

- a.) Potosi, as most districts across the State, have done everything we can to implement cost saving changes in our school systems since the implementation of Act 10; such as: bidding out the health insurance plans; resulting in a higher deductible \$13,000 per year family plan that saved the Potosi SD approximately \$380,000 annually. Our teacher's fringe benefits on average are currently 26% less than the average WI teacher's fringe benefits, which is a decrease of approximately 34% from 2010.
- b.) Our pool of applicants for open teaching positions is shallow. When we compare with other districts that are larger or closer to an urban area, the number of applicants we receive for an open teaching position is considerably less. For example, we have approximately 30 applicants for a typical open teaching position. Larger districts and districts located closer to urban areas generally received 130-300 applications.
- c.) In our new environment, school districts are recruiting teachers from other districts. We are seeing teachers leave smaller rural districts and taking positions in larger districts because they are offered much higher salaries and/or decreased workloads. Both the ability to attract and retain quality teachers is much more difficult in small rural school districts, which can have a negative impact these districts. The small rural school district ends up investing money in the new employee only to have them leave for a larger wealthier district after 3-5 years. Small rural districts need teachers to take on additional roles, such as to develop curriculum. Instead of having a department, one teacher is the department and writes the entire curriculum. Any type of incentive to stay with the district that initially hired them would be helpful, such as helping to payback a percentage of their college loans, or some other creative idea.
- d.) Our teachers earn on average 15% less than the average WI teacher earns, and this gap as increased by 3% since 2006. The average teacher salary in Potosi is \$42,600, while the State average is \$49,700 (\$7,100 higher). A beginning teacher in Potosi earns \$34,000. The US poverty level for a family of four is \$23,850. We have 5 less FTE teachers in our District now than we had in 2010, a 13% reduction in our total teaching staff. The average school district spends approximately 75-80% of its budget on people (salary and benefits). The Potosi School District spends 64%.

Economies of Scale:

a.) Less Educational Offerings:

Small Districts are not able to provide as many educational offerings as larger districts. Some districts try to make up for that by using distant learning networks and Youth Option classes. One suggestion that we recommend would be for all UW

Centers and tech colleges to assist in coordinating the selling of empty seats (in their freshman level classes) to small rural school districts. This would allow interested students in those districts to take those classes over the computer. Doing this virtually would prevent students from having to travel to those colleges for the class where the travel times take away other classes they could be taking back at their school.

b.) Less Supporting Staff Positions or Specialized Positions:

Larger school districts are able to provide Literacy Coaching positions. These are teachers who are more highly trained who go into the classrooms and model / monitor / coach classroom teachers regarding reading and literacy instruction. Larger districts are also able to provide Technology Integration Coaching positions. These roles are usually teachers who train our teachers (the same way Literacy Coaches work with teachers) to integrate technology into their lessons in meaningful ways. Small rural school districts, like Potosi, are not able to provide that type of support for our teachers, which put us at a disadvantage.

c.) Less Funds for Facility Maintenance and Repair:

Potosi's per student investment in facility maintenance and repair is near the average for K-12 districts across the State. However, because of the poverty factor, it is very difficult to pass a facility referendum for capital projects to maintain, improve, and update our facilities. This is partly because our tax payers are already paying an 11.87 mill rate. The K-12 average is 10.08. The percent of our funding from state aid has decreased from 64% to 54% over the last 5 years. This means that as state aid decreases, our local levy increases.

Because of the additional challenges small rural schools face, as described in my testimony, and due to the legal aspects related to the school funding formula, we suggest a separate categorical aid, that is distributed to small rural school districts, with student populations below "X" students (say for example 700 students), that is earmarked for innovative approaches to improve student achievement. A categorical aid amount of \$ "X" per student (for example \$1,000 per student) to cover all of the additional needs, expenses, and challenges small rural schools face.

I feel that we have a very dedicated staff in Potosi, who works hard to provide the best possible education that we can, within the resources that are available to us. We understand that the State's resources are limited and that we must invest wisely. We have utilized the tools available to us and continue to be creative in meeting our student's needs. Our teachers wear many hats and work much longer hours. The challenges are great, but we must put the needs of our students as the top priority, not only as a small rural school district, but also as a State. These students are our future. They will be taking care of us when we are old. Our investment in them now, and the job that we do with them, is so vitally important. You, our legislature, making a commitment to our creative ideas, will help our small rural schools survive and thrive.

Mr. Chairman, I want to thank you again for the opportunity to testify in front of your Task Force on this very important topic of the difficult challenges small Rural Schools in WI face. I feel honored to be able to do so. As an educational leader, I appreciate your interest and attention to these challenges. As was previously mentioned, our goal is to improve student outcomes and ensure equality of opportunity. We believe that with your help and attention, we will be better able to achieve these outcomes.