



Strong Schools, Strong Communities

TESTIMONY TO THE SENATE EDUCATION COMMITTEE ON SB619

Senator Olsen and Members of the Senate Education Committee:

Thank you for the opportunity to speak to you today about the impact of SB619 on rural school districts. I am Jerry Fiene, Executive Director of the Wisconsin Rural Schools Alliance which represents administrators, board of education members, teachers, and community leaders from throughout the state. Our member school districts educate over 100,000 students.

More than 60% of the school districts in Wisconsin are rural and approximately half of the districts in the state have less than 1,000 students. These schools are the lifeblood of their rural communities, serving as the economic driver, social hub and cultural center for the area. Rural administrators, teachers and staff work hard each day to serve every individual child who comes through their doors. They embrace innovation, higher standard and greater accountability. However, it takes adequate resources to accomplish the task and the financial challenges of rural districts driven by declining enrollments, increasing poverty, sparsity and high transportation costs has been well documented over the past several years.

Allow me to share another characteristic of rural schools. They do not have a full time director of instruction or curriculum coordinator. Possibly, the superintendent is given that responsibility along with serving as the business manager, human resources director, transportation coordinator and elementary principal. Maybe it is given to the high school principal in addition to the roles of assessment coordinator, pupil services director, Title I director and athletic director. Perhaps a master teacher is given one period a day for the responsibility. So, when the Common Core Standards were introduced and adopted more than three years ago, the work of understanding the standards, benchmarking existing curriculum, developing new curriculum, obtaining instructional materials, and examining instructional strategies to ensure that students in every grade level could meet these new and significantly better standards fell on the backs of classroom teachers (the one or maybe two teachers at each grade level, the one or maybe two high school math teachers who were each teaching five or six different courses each day). This hard work by the entire staff resulted in recommendations forwarded to the locally elected school boards. This took training, this took release time, this took

summer time and this took tremendous commitment. Now we are about to say “Let’s start over.”

Where is the logic in this legislation?

This work has not been done without significant cost. It has been necessary for rural school districts to provide additional training and release time or additional compensation for work outside the school day or school year for the vast majority of its staff in order to get the work done. The curriculum and material upgrades have been substantial. School districts are still working on technology upgrades. Resources are very lean in rural school districts resulting in a deluge of referenda to exceed the revenue limit in order to maintain existing programs. There have been over 900 such referenda held and 80% of them have been in rural school districts. Rural taxpayers are digging deeper into their pockets in order to maintain basic and essential programs in their school districts. Millions of dollars have been spent collectively to implement the Common Core Standards and now we are saying “Let’s start over.” **Where is the logic in this legislation?**

The Common Core Standards are significantly more rigorous than our previous standards. Developed by education experts, these standards are internationally benchmarked and aligned to college, work and career expectations that are critical if our rural students are to succeed in a global society. I have yet to have anyone point to a specific one of these standards and explain why it is not a valid standard. Now we are saying “Let’s start the standard’s setting process over and let’s subject that process to partisan politics.” **Where is the logic in this legislation?**

On behalf of rural school districts, administrators, teachers, parents and taxpayers throughout the state, I urge you to reconsider this course of action. Allow us to move forward in implementing the standards and systematically evaluate the results over time to form the basis for revisions where revisions are warranted.

Thank you very much for your time.

Jerry Fiene
Executive Director
Wisconsin Rural Schools Alliance
(715)499-4689
jerryfiene@wirsas.org