



**THE FUTURE OF PUBLIC EDUCATION IN RURAL WISCONSIN
TEACH-IN AT THE CAPITOL
June 20, 2013**

Rural school districts are an important part of the fabric of rural Wisconsin and the backbone of Wisconsin's public education system. These rural school districts are also the lifeblood of rural Wisconsin communities from Belmont to Auburndale to Solon Springs and the 250 school districts in between. There is a very direct connection between the quality and economic health of the school district and the economic wellbeing of the community it serves. In addition, the school is often the center for a community's social and cultural activities.

Historically, Wisconsin rural school districts have offered excellent educational opportunities to their students resulting in high achievement and graduation rates. Rural schools have many advantages, providing personal attention to all students with the ability to quickly implement innovative programs. However, the past twenty years of revenue limits and the massive cuts in the last biennium have taken a dramatic toll on these districts and now this budget will place many rural school districts such as Thorp, Oakfield, Mellen and Riverdale that are already struggling at serious risk.

Now we have a budget bill that expands private school vouchers and private school tax breaks statewide with relatively modest increases to public school support. The fact remains that parents statewide already have choices available through public school open enrollment or private school enrollment.

Has there been a demand across rural Wisconsin for the expansion of private school vouchers and state support for parents to send their children to private and parochial schools? ABSOLUTELY NOT! Have local taxpayers indicated that they are willing to increase their taxes in order to expand a private school system that is not transparent and accountable to the public and has not shown to increase student success? ABSOLUTELY NOT! Have citizens statewide suggested that Wisconsin moves away from the investment in public education which has made our state and communities great places to raise our children at the very time we have the resources to make that investment? ABSOLUTELY NOT! Yet, that is exactly what this budget is doing, not because it is wanted or needed, but rather as yielding to an ideology of privatizing education that is heavily funded by interests outside of our state.

A guest column titled, "State Budget Bill is Good for Rural Families," published in the Baraboo News Republic by nine central Wisconsin Republican representatives states that, "School funding will increase by \$150 per student per year over the next two years, while property tax increases will be frozen – a big win for seniors and working families." This is a false statement and obviously, they do not understand the way our current and defective funding mechanism works. While a modest increase in the revenue limit will help scale back massive cuts across the state, the reality is that the first-year increase is \$100 and not \$150. Secondly, many rural school districts like Phillips in the north, Weston in the south and dozens of districts in between will, in reality, have less revenue and will be increasing their property taxes. All low-aided school districts will be increasing property taxes. It is high time we seriously address school funding flaws by moving to a plan that is sensible and sustainable like the FAIR FUNDING FOR OUR FUTURE PLAN that has been proposed by State Superintendent Tony Evers. It is ironic that this news release does not contain one word about the expansion of private vouchers statewide and the impact on local property taxes and rural school districts. These same legislators voted three days after the publication to further limit public access to voucher school information.

Adequate school funding for rural schools must address increased rural poverty and declining enrollments. There has been a dramatic increase in poverty across rural Wisconsin over the past eight years that has significant education implications. In addition, early all rural districts have experienced declining enrollment over the last ten years, many by more than 20%. The fact is that there are 44 rural school districts in the state that have a lower revenue limit in 2013 than they had in 2003. For example, Goodman-Armstrong is 27% less than 10 years ago, Alma is 20% less, Black Hawk is 18% less and Plum City is 12% less.

Fewer students does allow for a certain level of cost savings but in rural districts the lack of economies of scale, sparsity and fixed costs prevent these districts from proportionately reducing costs to match flat or declining revenue limits. Over the years most rural districts have had no choice but to cut deeply into student opportunities by eliminating or reducing foreign language courses, advanced placement classes, career and technical education offerings, art, music, guidance and library services.

Very few rural districts have been able to maintain a reading specialist. Wabeno and Prairie du Chein have less than a half-time librarian, agriculture has been eliminated in North Crawford, foreign language in Southern Door and Rio has been eliminated, as well as business education in Tigerton and family and consumer education in Royall. Support services such as health, food, custodial and teacher aides have also been dramatically reduced. In addition, building maintenance is being delayed, busses are not being replaced as they should be and technology infrastructures have not been updated.

The last biennial budget reduced the revenue limit by an average of \$550 per student in 2011 and rural school districts applied the tools provided to them by changing health insurance plans, requiring employees to pay a much higher percentage of the premium along with half of their WRS contribution, eliminating post-retirement benefits and in many cases like Prairie du Chien, Maple and Kickapoo, reducing staff to part-time so no insurance benefits would be offered to them at all. Most rural school districts froze salaries and some are still frozen two years later. In nearly every rural district, these tools were not enough. In Pepin, the actual revenue reduction was \$763 per student and applying the tools covered only one-third of that amount. Additional deep cuts needed to be made to student opportunities.

Now we have a budget bill that invests significantly more in private schools than our public schools. How can these rural districts possibly adjust? They have no control over inflation, single class sections cannot be reduced, no more buildings can be closed (nearly 100 buildings closed in the past 10 years), administration is already compressed and at a bare minimum, insurance and utilities must be paid.

Transportation costs, which for many districts are between \$700 and \$900 per student, cannot be further reduced. There are 95 districts with less than four students per square mile with many districts such as Chequamegon (741), Hayward (613) and Antigo (541) covering more than 400 square miles. Students in Maple, Rhinelander and many other districts ride a bus for more than an hour in the morning and evening.

Educating the economically disadvantaged, special education and limited English speaking students is also a significant challenge for rural school districts. School staff enthusiastically provide the services to meet the needs of these students. There are no additional funds in this budget to address this need and at the same time, millions of dollars will be syphoned off of school aids for private voucher schools which do not have to accept or educate any of these students.

Rural communities are proud of their schools. Rural school boards want to maintain high-achieving schools that provide a wide range of opportunities for their students which will prepare them to be ready for careers or post-secondary education. Rural administrators, teachers and staff work hard every day to serve every individual child that comes through their doors. We know the status quo is not the answer. Rural schools embrace innovation such as RtI and are willing to implement the higher standards, new teacher and administrator effectiveness systems and new accountability requirements. But it takes adequate resources to accomplish the task.

Every day we hear or read about great things that happen in our rural schools and accomplishments of our rural students, but without a strong commitment to public education and an adequate investment in our rural schools it cannot be sustained.

Note: The specific references to individual school districts included in this document are representative of rural school districts throughout the state. Every district has its own story, but in all cases students opportunities have been lost.

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