

THE SPEAKER'S TASK FORCE ON RURAL SCHOOLS



REPORT FROM THE VICE-CHAIR: FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS



MAY 2014

The Speaker's Task Force on Rural Schools

Report from the Vice-Chair:

Findings and Recommendations

Co-authored by the legislative offices of:

Representative Fred Clark – 81st Assembly District
Representative Chris Danou – 92nd Assembly District
Representative Sony Pope – 80th Assembly District
Representative Mandy Wright – 85th Assembly District

May 7th, 2014

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Speaker's Task Force on Rural Schools

For most of the last decade public schools in Wisconsin have faced the challenge of educating children while dealing with costs that have increased faster than revenues. Many school districts, especially those in rural low income and urban low income areas, have had to contend with inequitable distribution of funding as a result of choices that past legislatures and governors have made in distributing state school aids. The situation for many of Wisconsin's 424 public school districts has become especially acute since the historic revenue cuts made in the 2011-2013 state budget, and subsequent actions in the 2013-2014 legislative session to divert both funding and students to taxpayer-funded private schools.

These statewide factors have compounded the unique and long-standing challenges faced by rural schools throughout Wisconsin. While rural schools provide high quality education and contribute significantly to economic vitality and the quality of life in small communities, rural schools also face unique challenges. Factors such as high costs for student transportation, special needs for technology, lack of access to broadband internet, and the challenge of recruiting and retaining excellent teachers are just a few of the factors that create special burdens for rural schools. One indication of the inequity of current state support for rural schools is the fact that of the 956 operating referendums public schools have placed on ballots since 1998, 73% have been for rural schools.

After years of reductions and budget cuts, many rural school districts are at a crisis point. Without additional relief many districts will need to eliminate more programs, close schools, or in some cases dissolve entirely.

In September 2013, at the request of legislators representing rural schools, Assembly Speaker Robin Vos convened an Assembly Task Force on Rural Schools. The twelve-member Task Force was chaired by Rep. Rob Swearingen (R-Rhineland) and Vice-Chair, Rep. Fred Clark (D-Baraboo). The Task Force held five field hearings with associated school tours in rural districts throughout Wisconsin, as well as one hearing in Madison. The Task Force received invited testimony from 39 school leaders and received public testimony from many others. The Wisconsin Legislative Council provided staff support to the Task Force and the testimony received by the task force can be found on the Legislative Council's webpage: <http://legis.wisconsin.gov/committee/rstf/Pages/default.aspx>

The Speaker's charge to the Task Force included an emphasis on finding operating efficiencies, opportunities for collaborative activities, and strategies to help schools achieve financial stability. Task Force members learned during the course of field hearings that, in fact, Wisconsin's rural schools have been learning to do more with less for many years and most have already employed all the means at their disposal to reduce costs and increase efficiencies.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY (CONT.)

The testimony of rural school leaders to our Task Force was consistent and compelling. With ever-rising costs and flat to declining revenues, many rural schools are living on the edge of viability from year to year. Rural communities have a strong sense of identity and pride in their schools and they want them to survive and thrive.

The Wisconsin State Constitution calls for “*the support and maintenance of common schools, in each school district*”. Our constitution also directs the legislature to “*provide by law for the establishment of district schools, which shall be as nearly uniform as practicable*”. The Task Force has learned that school districts throughout Wisconsin face starkly different circumstances and that many rural schools simply lack the resources to provide an educational opportunity that is comparable with that of wealthier, suburban districts. Without legislative action and additional state support for rural schools it is clear that Wisconsin will only fall further behind in meeting our constitutional obligations and the essential task of providing a sound education for all of our children.

It is the recommendation of this report that the legislature act without delay to address the acute challenges facing rural schools throughout Wisconsin. In particular, legislative action will be essential to address the following issues:

- ❖ Inequitable and Inadequate Funding
- ❖ Additional Costs of Low Student Densities (Sparsity) and High Cost of Transportation
- ❖ Needs for Technology Investments and Access to Broadband Internet in Rural Areas
- ❖ Stabilizing Declining Enrollment and Avoiding Policies that Contribute to Declining Enrollment
- ❖ Recruiting and Retaining High Quality Teachers in Rural Communities

The pages that follow outline the unique attributes of Wisconsin’s rural school districts, summarize the testimony presented by rural school leaders from throughout the state, and highlight the needs identified as a result of the Task Force’s work. Legislative proposals that have been or will be introduced by members of the Task Force addressing those needs are also summarized.

The Legislature and the Governor must act quickly to address the crisis in Wisconsin’s rural schools. The cost of our state’s failure to sustain rural schools in Wisconsin will result in reduced educational opportunities and academic performance for our students, fewer career and achievement opportunities for young adults, and lost economic activity in small towns in which public schools may be the single largest employer. The costs of these outcomes will be far higher than the investment required to maintain strong, high-performing public schools in Wisconsin’s rural communities.

RURAL SCHOOL DISTRICTS IN WISCONSIN

“We are working with a school funding formula that is antiquated and has had so many band aids put on it that we can’t control the bleeding caused by what are unforeseen implications of changes to this formula...As much as categorical aids are needed and appreciated, categorical aids alone will not generate the real dollars needed to make up for the shortfalls in the current school funding formula.” - Ben Niehaus: District Administrator, Goodman-Armstrong Creek and Florence County

INADEQUATE AND INEQUITABLE FUNDING

50%+...	of school districts in Wisconsin are rural – http://sfs.dpi.wi.gov/sfs_sparsity
80%...	of rural school districts have <u>at least 33%</u> of pupils who qualify for free and reduced lunch, a significantly higher rate than in non-rural districts – http://sfs.dpi.wi.gov/sfs_sparsity
73%...	of the 956 revenue limit referenda over the past 15 years were held in rural school districts - <i>Jerry Fiene – Executive Director, WI Rural Schools Alliance</i>
80%...	of referenda issued to maintain current programming were held in rural districts - <i>Jerry Fiene – Executive Director, WI Rural Schools Alliance</i>
22...	rural school districts received less than \$250 per pupil in general aid in 2012-13 - <i>Dr. Todd Kleinhans, District Administrator, Lakeland Union High School District</i>
44 of the 49...	school districts in Wisconsin that have lower revenue limits in 2013 than they had in 2003 are rural districts – <i>Wisconsin Taxpayers Alliance</i>

OUTDATED TECHNOLOGY AND POOR ACCESS TO BROADBAND

<2%...	of all K-12 pupils have accessed online courses through the Wisconsin Digital Learning Collaborative, – <i>Dawn Nordine – Executive Director, Wisconsin Virtual School</i>
60%...	of the 230 districts that have accessed the Wisconsin Digital Learning Collaborative in 2012-13 were rural schools – <i>Dawn Nordine – Executive Director, Wisconsin Virtual School</i>
\$26 million...	earmarked for broadband expansion in rural Wisconsin was returned to the Federal Government in 2011. - <i>Donald Childs – Interim Superintendent, Unified School District of Antigo</i>

DECLINING ENROLLMENT

60%...	of school districts have been in declining enrollment for more than a decade - <i>John Forester - SAA</i>
32,000...	pupils were lost in rural school districts due to declining enrollment from 1997-2014 – <i>"Projecting Statewide Public School Enrollment in Wisconsin." Applied Population Laboratory Winter.23 (2014): 1-2. Print.</i>
23,000...	additional pupils are projected to be lost in rural districts due to declining enrollment by 2023 – <i>"Projecting Statewide Public School Enrollment in Wisconsin." Applied Population Laboratory Winter.23 (2014): 1-2. Print.</i>

RURAL SCHOOL DISTRICTS IN WISCONSIN (CONT.)

HIGH COSTS OF TRANSPORTATION

6%...	of Wisconsin school districts' transportation costs are covered by the current annual pupil transportation appropriation. Even with the annual addition of \$5 million in high cost transportation aid, annual reimbursement will still be less than 7% - <i>John Forester - SAA</i>
Only 51%...	of rural school districts qualify for High Cost Transportation Categorical Aid - http://sfs.dpi.wi.gov/sfs_aid_info_all_types
93...	of Wisconsin's 424 school districts have less than 4 pupils per square mile. - http://sfs.dpi.wi.gov/sfs_sparsity

TEACHER RECRUITMENT AND RETENTION

700...	teachers left employment at rural school districts between 2008-09 and 2012-13 - <i>Tony Evers – WI State Superintendent</i>
2.8%...	fewer junior and senior undergraduates enrolled in teacher training programs in 2012 than in 2010 - <i>Beck, Molly. "Number of Teachers in Training Down Statewide." Wisconsin State Journal [Madison] 1 Dec. 2013: 1-2. Print.</i>
Only 39%...	of UW education school graduates in 2012 say they plan to teach as long as they are able or until retirement. In 2009 that number was <u>85%</u> - <i>Jerry Fiene – Executive Director, WI Rural Schools Alliance</i>

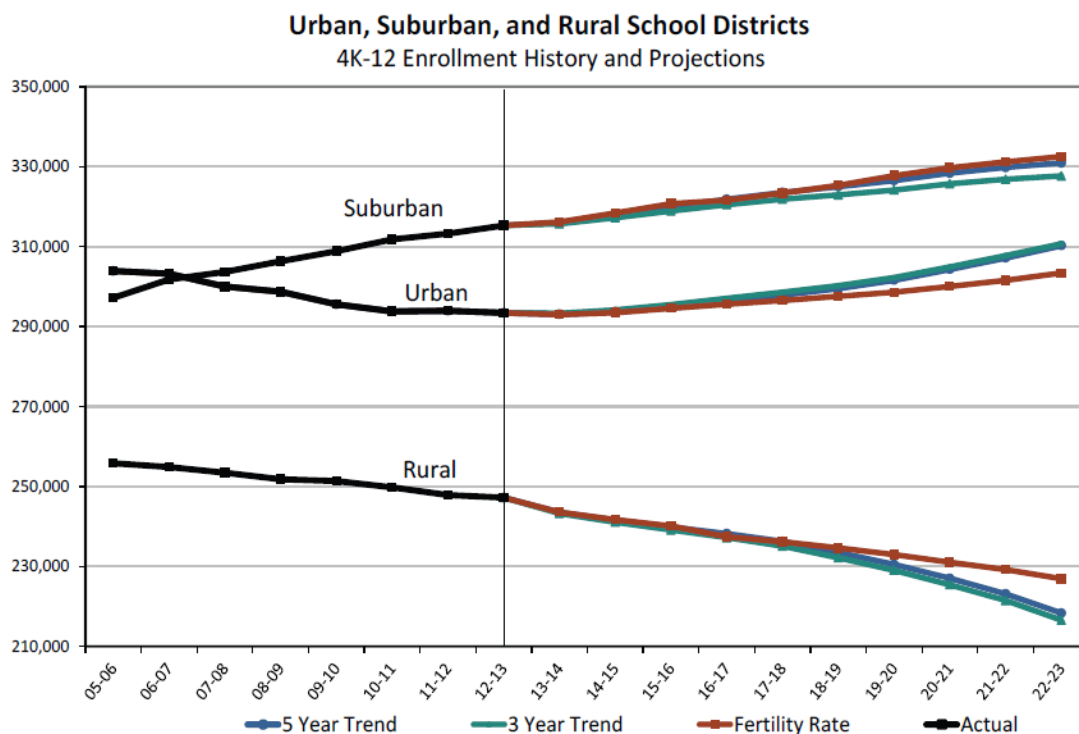


Figure 3 Enrollment trends and projections by type of area

"Projecting Statewide Public School Enrollment in Wisconsin." Applied Population Laboratory Winter.23 (2014): 1-2. Print.

SUMMARY OF RURAL SCHOOLS ISSUES

INADEQUATE AND INEQUITABLE FUNDING

Summary

As long as state aid to public schools is based strictly on a per capita basis, rural schools will continue to be at a disadvantage in providing a quality education to their students.

The unique geographic nature of rural school districts and communities adds additional costs to things like transportation and accessing adequate broadband. When these additional costs are coupled with declining enrollment and successive decreases in state aid, rural school districts are forced to turn to rural property taxpayers with referendums in an effort to keep the doors open and keep vital programs available to students.

Any discussion of school aids has to consider that \$544,000,000 of tax payer dollars per biennial budget go to non-public schools, \$130 million of which are reserved for independent “2r” charter schools. These are financial resources that are no longer available for public schools, and are in many cases appropriated as a first draw from General School Aids, reducing the aid received by every school district.

Testimony

“More than half of Wisconsin school districts have fewer than 1,000 students. Many are dealing with issues of increasing poverty levels and declining enrollment, which means they receive less state aid to educate their students. At the same time, these school districts often have higher than average costs to educate students. Why do they receive less state aid? It is because of the way our state school funding formula works. That formula is meant to equalize how much state aid we give to school districts by looking at how much property value is behind every student and it does a great job of doing that. But guess what... it is a double whammy for declining enrollment school districts, many of whom are rural. They lose money because they have fewer students to count for aid purposes. And, as they lose students, these districts actually look richer because there is more property value behind the remainder of their students, and the formula provides them less money.” - **Tony Evers: WI State Superintendent**

“The expansion of the Milwaukee Charter Schools will have an impact on the equalization aid formula, which will negatively impact school districts across our state.” – **Wally Leipart: Merrill Area Superintendent**

“Fair Funding for our Future makes technical changes that strengthen rural, declining enrollment and negatively aided districts by increasing the secondary cost ceiling and special adjustment aid level.” - **Betsy Kippers, WEAC President**

“In FY13, 20 rural resort and lake area districts were denied state support due to their property ‘wealth’...These districts are not eligible to receive any state equalized aid.” - **Todd Kleinhans: Lakeland Union High District Administrator**

“It is well recognized by many, including legislators, that our equalized aid formula which uses property values as the “equalizing factor” in determining the ability of school district residents to pay school property taxes, is broken.” - *Steven Sedlmayr: Alma Superintendent*

“It makes a difference as to where you go to school-we have separate and unequal schools in Wisconsin. The amount of money spent per child on education in public schools varies. Despite the funding formula being constitutionally sound it is evident to me that the funding formula is fundamentally broken.” – *Luke Francois: Mineral Pt. Unified School District Superintendent*

“We need a way to allocate resources that takes into account the income levels of the families in a particular community – not just the community’s property wealth. We need a system that provides a minimum amount of state aid for all children, regardless of where they live and go to school.” – *Tony Evers: WI State Superintendent*

Recommendations

- ✓ **Incorporate all of the elements of Fair Funding for Our Future proposal in the 2015-2016 State Budget.**

2013-2014 Introduced Legislation

Public School Funding Reform – This proposal makes long-needed reforms to our school funding formula, guarantees state aid to every public pupil, accounts for the needs and incomes of school families and not just the wealth of property owners, establishes appropriate and responsive levy limits, and puts Wisconsin on the path to restoring its historical 2/3rds funding of public school. This proposal will also reduce property taxes by directing long needed increases in state aids to schools.

SUMMARY OF RURAL SCHOOL ISSUES (CONT.)

OUTDATED TECHNOLOGY AND POOR ACCESS TO BROADBAND

Summary

Broadband access needs to be equitable for all students regardless of where they go to school. High speed internet access is an especially serious need in rural schools; however, many rural school districts have an outdated technical infrastructure. Many Wisconsin school districts purchase digital programming through a variety of outlets, but consolidating these efforts could be much more cost effective for districts and result in better quality programming and more programming options.

Testimony

“An annual survey of our student body conducted over the last four years shows that only 78% of our students have high speed access to the internet.” - *Dr. Todd Kleinhaus: District Administrator, Lakeland Union High School District*

“Due to geography and infrastructure without our district and community, we are required to purchase our internet service from multiple providers.” - *Wally Leipart: Superintendent – Merrill Area Public Schools*

“The same technological tools and resources that have transformed our personal, professional and civic lives must be part of the learning experiences intended to prepare today’s students for college and careers.”- *John Forester: SAA*

“Distant learning opportunities would benefit the rural schools of our state, yet not all districts can invest the funds into a distant learning lab. Local school boards cannot justify spending the funds when only a few students will utilize it annually.” - *Larry Redfeam: President, Benton School Board*

Recommendations

- ✓ **Support the creation of a new technology initiative, “TEACH II” program that would help support district bandwidth needs, system infrastructure, distance learning, and upgrades to hardware and software.**
- ✓ **Create a grant fund for rural districts to purchase updated equipment.**
- ✓ **Provide incentives for rural schools to offer on-line advanced placement courses and other courses that small rural schools find difficult to provide.**

2013-2014 Introduced Legislation

TEACH II expands the current TEACH (Technology for Educational Achievement) program to include: a professional development program to enhance teacher usage of technology in the classroom, a block grant program to address specific district technology needs, and a technology infrastructure program aimed at renovating hardware throughout the state. The bill also provides resources to the Wisconsin Digital Learning Collaborative program which will allow for consortium pricing for education entities that wish to access digital learning resources.

SUMMARY OF RURAL SCHOOL ISSUES (CONT.)

DECLINING ENROLLMENT

Summary

The portion of school districts that experience declining enrollment has hovered around 60% for more than a decade. A district that loses students also loses state aid and suffers a reduced revenue limit. Districts experiencing declining enrollment are much more likely to depend on referendum simply to maintain vital instructional services and keep the doors open.

State aid to school districts is inextricably linked to school enrollment and Wisconsin's rural school districts face extraordinary financial pressures as a result of declining student enrollment. State laws and policies that fund or encourage the expansion of the Parental Choice Program, independent charter schools, or on-line virtual academies contribute to further declining enrollment in public schools and are already reducing the students and the resources available for rural schools. As former Governor Tommy Thompson once stated "We cannot afford two school systems". The growth of multiple public and private school systems in Wisconsin will further the unnecessary financial burdens experienced by our rural schools.

Testimony

"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." *Ronald Saari: Superintendent, School Dist. of Potosi*

Recommendations

- ✓ **The Legislature should avoid and oppose policies that expand the system of private Parental Choice Program schools within Wisconsin's rural school districts.**
- ✓ **The growth of virtual learning opportunities is essential in rural schools. The legislature should ensure that investments and growth in virtual education opportunities occur *within* public schools, and not as a result of public or private schools "poaching" students away from their local public school districts.**
- ✓ **Provide declining enrollment relief by using a 5 year rolling average enrollment count for purposes of calculating state aid.**
- ✓ **Modify the current 100% non-recurring hold harmless adjustment.**

SUMMARY OF RURAL SCHOOL ISSUES (CONT.)

2013-2014 Introduced Legislation

Public School Funding Reform – This proposal makes long-needed reforms to our school funding formula, guarantees state aid to every public pupil, accounts for the needs and incomes of school families and not just the wealth of property owners, establishes appropriate and responsive levy limits, and puts Wisconsin on the path to restoring its historical 2/3rds funding of public school. This proposal will also reduce property taxes by directing long needed increases in state aids to schools.

Sparsity Aid – This proposal expands Wisconsin’s school Sparsity Aid by removing the student population cap and removing the free-and-reduced lunch threshold requirement. This proposal for sparsity aid reform ensures that ALL schools with a population density of less than 10 pupils per square mile have access to sparsity aid via a sum certain appropriation.

HIGH COSTS OF TRANSPORTATION

Summary

One of the highest costs for rural schools is transporting students. Disproportionately large transportation costs come at the expense of a district’s ability to adequately fund other essential programs or class offerings. Administrators in large rural schools are often forced to close schools in inclement weather more often due to safety and high transportation costs. Many students routinely travel on buses more than an hour in one direction due to the long distances of bus routes and sparse distribution of rural school students.

Testimony

“Independence School district spends over \$275,000 per year transporting roughly 200 students, at an 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.” – *Paul Vine: District Administrator, Independence School District*

“The struggle of rural schools transporting students to school is much greater resulting in fewer resources in the classroom leaving us with the option of cutting routes and increasing ride times or having fewer funds in the classroom. Neither is a good option and I feel that this unfairly penalizes our students based on where they live.” - *Greg Doverspike: District Administrator, School District of Durand*

Recommendations

- ✓ **Continue and expand the funding for High Cost Transportation Aid.**
- ✓ **Consider the creation of tiered qualification for the High Cost Transportation Aid.**
- ✓ **Consider costs of vehicle maintenance in state transportation aid.**
- ✓ **Proportionally support districts which transport students the greatest distance using the current method of distribution.**

SUMMARY OF KEY RURAL SCHOOL ISSUES (CONT.)

TEACHER RECRUITMENT AND RETENTION

Summary

Many teachers seeking first-time employment are reluctant to locate to small rural communities, even when pay scales are comparable. In fact, rural districts pay scales are often significantly lower than suburban and large city districts, making recruiting an even bigger challenge. When a rural district has an opening in a difficult subject area, the candidate pool is often shallow and many times positions go unfilled. In order to attract or retain highly effective teachers, rural districts need to be able to attract new teachers and allow them to make a choice to live and work in a small community.

Testimony

“Today in Wisconsin, school districts are recruiting teachers from other districts. Teachers are leaving smaller rural districts and taking positions in larger districts because they are offered much higher salaries and/or decreased workloads. Rural teachers earn, on average, up to 15% less than the average WI teacher. Both the ability to attract and retain quality teachers is much more difficult in small rural school districts, which can have a negative impact on 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. Any type of incentive to stay with the district that initially hired them would be helpful.” – *Ronald Saari: District Administrator, School District of Potosi*

Recommendations

- ✓ **Rural Teacher Recruitment and Retention legislation**
- ✓ **Rural Teacher Loan Forgiveness**

2013-2014 Introduced Legislation

Rural Teacher Loan Forgiveness – This proposal provides school districts with ten or fewer students per square mile with four scholarships per year to be distributed by school administrations to teachers of their choice. Each scholarship awards \$10,000 in student loan forgiveness to the designated teacher over the course of five years.

SUMMARY OF POLICY PROPOSALS

PUBLIC SCHOOL FUNDING REFORM: 2013 AB 650

The past two budget cycles have placed additional strain on the funding formula by which we provide aid to our public schools. In an effort to advance the dialogue regarding the funding problems public school districts currently experience, some members on the Task Force introduced legislation that would overhaul the public school funding formula. 2013 AB 650 is based largely on the recommendations of Superintendent Tony Evers' 'Fair Funding for Our Future' plan, and makes the following changes to the distribution of general school aid:

- **Factors in student poverty:** the current funding formula does not make any adjustments for household poverty despite the fact that poverty has been shown to greatly affect the educational outcome of students. 2013 AB 650 makes a 30% increase in aid for students in low income families.
- **Sets a guarantee of \$3,000 per pupil in state aid:** there are now 20 school districts that receive no equalization aid, placing them outside of the funding formula. Taxpayers in every district will benefit from providing a minimum amount of equalization aid for every student.
- **Shifts the School Levy Credit and First Dollar Credit into equalized aid:** both of these credits are currently counted toward school aid, but in reality are used as accounting gimmicks that mask the true costs of public education.
- **Puts Wisconsin on the path to restoring 2/3^{rds} funding:** the 2/3^{rds} funding guarantee was once a fundamental of Wisconsin's educational commitment, ensuring local property taxpayers aren't over-burdened with the costs of their local schools.
- **Provides a \$275 per pupil revenue limit increase in the 2014-2015 school year.**
- **Restores reasonable school levy growth:** links levy limit growth to the Consumer Price Index giving local districts the ability to keep up with economic changes

SUMMARY OF POLICY PROPOSALS (CONT.)

SPARSITY AID (2013 AB 834)

For much of rural Wisconsin, public schools are a cornerstone of the community. The economic stability and identity of many of our small towns depend on the services and opportunities offered by these schools.

In the 2011-2013 State Budget, total revenue for Wisconsin's public schools was reduced by over \$1.6 billion dollars. These historic funding reductions were nowhere near offset by the marginal increases in funding in the current budget cycle. As a result, many public schools have been forced into making difficult budget decisions. For many rural school districts those tough decisions have often involved eliminating programs, forgoing badly needed investments, and closing rural school buildings.

In the 2007 budget, the categorical aid program known as *sparsity aid* was created to help offset the unique financial burdens facing rural schools, especially including the high costs of rural transportation, declining enrollment, and the added challenge of recruiting qualified staff to live and work in small communities. The sparsity aid formula helped address these needs with categorical per-pupil appropriation to school districts with no more than 725 pupils, no more than 10 students per square mile, and at least 20% of students eligible for free and reduced lunch.

Despite the benefits that the current sparsity aid program provides, it is increasingly clear that *all* rural districts, regardless of population and income status, face the same types of funding disparities. For rural districts, the additional expenses they are forced to spend for transportation, technology, and other high costs translates directly to reduced resources in the classroom, creating an unfair disadvantage for rural schools

2013 AB 834 removes the student population limit in the current sparsity aid formula to extend eligibility to all districts that meet the current sparsity standard of less than 10 pupils per square mile. Additionally, the bill eliminates the 20% FRL pupil eligibility. And the bill sets the aid available at \$300 per year. While districts of any size would be eligible for sparsity aid under the bill, the bill creates a cap of \$750,000 on the maximum amount of sparsity aid a district can receive. The funding is provided as a sum certain appropriation (just as aids to voucher schools) so full funding will be guaranteed to schools that qualify based on the aid criteria.

SUMMARY OF POLICY PROPOSALS (CONT.)

RURAL TEACHER LOAN FORGIVENESS (2013 AB 817)

Wisconsin's rural schools are the lifeblood of their communities. With dwindling resources it is a significant challenge for rural districts to attract and retain quality teachers that will invest in the district and the community, especially when larger districts can offer significantly more attractive wages and benefits. This is a simple bill that will give our rural school administrators a tool to offset the significant college loans that are incurred by teachers to qualify to teach in our public schools and continuously improve.

Similar to the Hospital Assessment Supplementary Loan Assistance Program (HASLAP), which provides up to \$50,000 in grants to rural physicians, the Rural Teacher Loan Forgiveness bill offers four scholarships for each district that qualifies by having ten or fewer students per square mile in their district. Paid out over five years, this \$10,000 loan forgiveness scholarship is awarded by the district administration to the teachers of their choice and administered by HEAB. Increments for payment are \$1,000 in the first year, \$2,000 in each the second, third, and fourth years, and \$3,000 in the fifth and final year of eligibility.

Members of the Rural Schools Task Force have heard repeated testimony on the struggles of rural schools pertaining to funding, teacher attraction and retention, and cross certification of high-demand subject areas. This bill will provide much needed assistance to those schools in all three areas so they can continue to provide a great education for all children in our schools and keep our rural communities strong.

As of the latest calculation, 226 school districts qualify for these teacher-loan-forgiveness scholarships.

SUMMARY OF POLICY PROPOSALS (CONT.)

TEACH II: TECHNOLOGY FOR EDUCATIONAL ACHIEVEMENT IN WISCONSIN (2013 AB 916)

With the passage of the 1997 biennial budget, Governor Tommy Thompson fostered the creation of the Technology for Educational Achievement in Wisconsin (TEACH) program. The program was created to develop an education technology network that provided distance education, communication, and professional development programs throughout Wisconsin. TEACH offered state investments towards; the statewide electrical and computer wiring of schools; the creation of what is now the BadgerNet Converged Network; professional development in classroom technology; and other educational technology needs. In 2002, many parts of the program were unfunded, hindering the means to keep up with rapidly evolving education technology. Since that time, technological innovation and an expanding student populace has left many Wisconsin schools in the dark when it comes to technology.

Since 1997, access to technology in the classroom has developed from luxury to necessity. For schools throughout the country, guidance from tech-savvy educators, access to sufficient broadband, and the hardware to ensure connectivity to all schools in a district have become critical. Unfortunately, there are many schools in rural Wisconsin that are still burdened by extremely slow internet connection speeds. The connection is further diluted by outdated and often obsolete routers, switches and other hardware. This primitive means of accessing and sharing the internet impairs these students' access to digital content and places these students at an innate disadvantage.

Though the TEACH program exists today under the direction of DOA in overseeing the BadgerNet Converged Network, it is imperative that the program be revisited to reflect the needs of 2014, and 2013 AB 916 does just that. The bill recreates the technology block grant and the competitive professional development grant, and boosts the technology infrastructure fund. Additionally, the bill provides funding to the Wisconsin Digital Learning Collaborative program which will offer consortium savings to schools that wish to access digital content including classes and other media. One of the bill's biggest improvements from the original program is an imbedded reporting provision that allows for school districts to spell out their exact technology needs and report on the actual technology investments that they make. This heightened level of accountability will maximize the efficiency of every invested dollar offered through the program.

- END -