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January 8, 2014

Rural Schools Task Force – Antigo Hearing

Representative Swearingen, Representative Clark and Members of the Rural Task Force,

Thank you for giving me the opportunity to speak with you today about the challenges facing rural public schools and the district I serve, Merrill Area Public Schools (MAPS). Some may think that Merrill doesn't face rural problems because we are a school of approximately 2,700 students locally and 759 students in a virtual school. Some would say we have capacity to face many of the challenges rural schools face because we have 4 central office administrators, 7 principals, and 3 associate principals. Others would say we have room to cut because we offer so many opportunities to kids like jazz band, art honors, advanced building and trades, and numerous opportunities like these.

To this I say, yes we are a division 1 school that is proud to be a member of the Wisconsin Valley Conference, students and staff are provided administrative guidance, support and leadership, and we do value relevant learning opportunities that enrich the lives of students in Merrill and the surrounding communities the District serves. However, these factors don't exclude us from the rural setting. MAPS encompasses well over half of Lincoln County. At 570 square miles, we are the 7th largest district in the state. The majority of our educational service area is agricultural and forest land. With stretches of county forest land and managed forest lands, there is a disproportionate distribution of property tax across the District. Much like other rural districts we have suffered some of the worst unemployment rates in the state, as many of the industries rely on the housing and manufacturing industries. Furthermore, Merrill's 2011 median household income was \$37,210, well below the state average of \$50,395. For this reason, Merrill and Lincoln County relies on a stable presence by the school district as an employer and a contributor to the local economy. So while we are bigger than most rural schools, we do share the same challenges. If anything, our challenges are magnified simply due to our size.

I want to take a moment to express that as I focus on funding essential learning and teaching, the concept of a SAGE equivalency model, the challenges we face in providing access to technology, and the need to recruit and retain staff as it relates to a quality education; that MAPS does have an interest in many of the issues that my colleagues have brought to your attention. Issues such as Tony Evers' fair funding; high cost transportation; determining sparsity aid solely on students per square mile; repeal of the September 1 start date; not allowing the expansion of the voucher system; and, local school districts retaining sole authority to authorize charter schools, is equally important and beneficial to MAPS.

Funding Essential Learning and Teaching

The unintended consequence of tying revenue limit to enrollment is that it doesn't take into account economy of scale. My colleague in Royall, Mark Gruen, stated it well when he identified that the cost of goods and services in rural settings are more expensive. Having fewer kids doesn't mean it costs less to educate. In most cases the cost per pupil increases. This is validated in the Wisconsin School Facts Report provided by The Wisconsin Taxpayers Alliance.

The concept of ensuring that students are college and career ready has appropriately raised the bar of rigor and relevance in schools. It is negligent to provide today's students the same education their parents or grandparents received. Innovations in society and advancements in industries require us to prepare students to have a strong foundation of academic skills, the ability to apply learning to unpredictable or new situations, and be self-directed learners. What is clearly evident is that students in rural schools are not afforded an equal opportunity to essential learning and teaching. This is more evident in the rural district I previously worked in, but even in Merrill as cost per pupil has increased and revenue has decreased, we have made reductions in instructional staff and eliminated instructional supports such as literacy coaches.

In 2012, Merrill addressed how relevant learning is delivered and the need to avoid a budget deficit due to decrease in revenue and state aid by creating a virtual charter school. We have experienced many logistic and instructional delivery challenges with this endeavor. Significant time and resources have been allocated to make changes to the virtual school to address compliance issues and provide a personalized learning opportunity for students. What was once thought of as a way to offset a reduction in state aid is now a potential break-even proposition.

To further put the district at risk is Assembly Bill 549 and Senate Bill 76. The primary concern with AB 549 is the creation of an independent authorizer of

charter schools. It is important to note that Merrill has a collaborative relationship with the governing board for our virtual charter school; however, the potential increase in revenue an independent charter school may receive has the potential of becoming appealing to any charter school throughout the state. As Merrill looks to make the required changes to its virtual charter school, the local taxpayers runs the risk of incurring all the costs of development just to see the charter school possibly become independent. SB 76, the expansion of the Milwaukee Charter Schools will have an impact on the equalization aid formula, which will negatively impact school districts across the state. For these reasons, I ask you to not support either bill.

The heart of a community is the school. Schools generate pride in a community, establishes traditions and fond memories for generations after generations. From the choir and band concerts, football games, to the courts and the wrestling mats, schools become the place that families and neighbors share in celebrating the accomplishments of their children. You may be wondering why I would talk about activities when I said I want to talk about learning and teaching. The reason is first, empirical evidence indicates increases in student achievement when students are involved in co-curricular activities. Secondly, and to the point I will emphasize, when districts face the need to make budget reductions, the enhancements to learning as stated above often are retained at the expense of academic offerings.

My colleagues and I have witnessed this far too often. Enter a board meeting and indicate that we will be cutting the sections in an academic area or reduce the number of art classes and no one shows up, but suggest cutting co-curricular and you need to move the board meeting to the Fieldhouse. I understand why this happens. People are emotionally and personally connected to the experiences co-curricular activities have for a lifetime not just while in school.

Another unintended consequence is board members struggle with the decision because what is considered a logical economic decision impacts relationships and business opportunities in the community for individual board members. This also causes potential board member candidates to choose to not run for office.

What is necessary for us to move forward as a state is to consider changes in funding that will provide students regardless of where they live with essential learning opportunities so that they are college and career ready and well prepared for life in our communities.

Two items that will help local school boards is supporting Tony Evers' fair funding plan and allowing the use of fund 80 levy for all co-curricular activities. Tony Evers' plan is a matter of the state committing to what is essential learning. That

commitment would provide an increase in state aid for Merrill of 6.3% or \$1,293,000. Allowing districts to levy for co-curricular activities in fund 80 allows for local control and support of community traditions without costing the state a single penny. Increases in fund 80 still have to be approved at the local level. This would bring meaning back to the district annual meeting and bottom line it allows for the community to identify what programs are important.

SAGE Equivalency Model

The current regulations of class size for SAGE no longer support best learning and teaching practices. Districts that are in the program are reliant on the funds provided through SAGE and have lost efficiencies because a handful of students can put them over the class size requirements. What I propose is considering a SAGE equivalency model that allows districts to develop programs that are researched-based, closely monitored and held accountable for student academic performance. For example, research indicates that hiring reading specialists and implementing programs such as Reading Recovery have a significant impact on student performance.

In a SAGE equivalency model, the class size will be waived in exchange for hiring the reading specialist or implementing Reading Recovery. I would be happy to discuss this further at another time and would be willing to work on a team to establish the criteria for such a model. I believe a SAGE equivalency model support essential learning at no additional cost to the current program.

Access to Technology

Merrill has been faced with some difficult decisions when addressing budget deficits. Another unintended consequence of trying to keep as many instructional resources in the classroom while responding to the deficit is the elimination of a technology budget. Our current practice is to wait till the end of the budget cycle and see if there is any money left to buy technology. This has made long range planning for technology impossible. What money is available is used to maintain, not systematically provide students with innovative technology. If we continue to operate this way, we risk becoming deficient in access; therefore, impacting essential learning.

Due to geography and infrastructure within our district and community, we are required to purchase our internet service from multiple providers. In addition, with the Wisconsin River going through the center of town, connectivity between facilities isn't seamless and has resulted in substantial costs to the district.

Funding support and availability of district wide broadband access would support essential learning in Merrill.

Recruit and Retain Staff as it relates to a Quality Education

Recruiting and retaining staff relies on remaining competitive within the employment field. Before I explain our challenge I want to recognize the need to be responsive to economic factors in our community. The reality is the state has always been a competitive market for the best and brightest teachers. Large districts and urban districts have always provided better compensation and better benefits to teachers and support staff. Although Merrill is a large rural district and provides a compensation package better than many small rural schools, we still lose quality teachers to larger districts in more urban settings that provide better compensation, more support, and access to social activities.

These factors won't change, but they are getting worse. In Merrill, teachers and staff pay more for health benefits; and, they endured 3 consecutive years of salary freezes until this year when they received only this year's CPI increase. Because we are responding to reduction in revenue, we haven't established a salary schedule and it is most likely that all employees will continue to pay more for benefits; and, the future of post employment benefits is bleak.

Districts with stable or increasing enrollments have moved forward with implementing competitive salary structures and a hope to see increases in wages. Rural schools will be at a significant disadvantage when recruiting employees. Yes, there will always be people looking for work. The problem is the unintended consequences of not remaining competitive. Rural schools like Merrill risk becoming training grounds for employees aspiring economic relevance. Research validates the impact of turnover of administration and staff on employee morale, student academic performance, and school climate.

At this time I request your support of the Teacher Loan Forgiveness Bill that Representative Mandy Wright and her colleagues are drafting. The Teacher Loan Forgiveness Bill will allow districts to provide some incentive to teachers to come to our district. It is a bill that levels the playing field because as candidate pools are typically smaller in rural schools, a teacher who is hired in a rural school would have a greater chance of receiving the grant.

Unintended Consequences

In closing, I want to shed some light on what I see happening to education in Wisconsin. Wisconsin Act 10 and Act 32 have created a new world for public education. In the process of reducing collective bargaining agreements to increases in total base wage and returning all other subjects of bargaining to management rights; a paradigm shift in attitudes, beliefs and practices have occurred when it comes to employee working conditions, compensation, benefits, and evaluations. A conversation on student expectations has turned into a renovation of what students are taught, how and what we measure, and who do we hold accountable for student outcomes. What was once thought of as a noble occupation is now under public scrutiny from a fiscal standpoint and measurements of student academic performance. A mentality of “if I can’t have it, no one should have it” rules.

I am not saying that we shouldn’t have changed. My fear is how will this impact student learning, school climate, and the economic relevancy of our communities? A quick example, the average teacher in my previous district lost \$4,700 a year when employees began to pay their share of the WRS and more for health benefits. In addition to teachers, public employees in the county had to do the same. The impact to the local economy was \$1,000,000. That is \$1,000,000 of lost revenue for area shops and businesses.

What I also see is an erosion of the role of the teacher and respect for the profession. Media has engrained the message that all schools are failing, that public employees are not taxpayers. This has negatively impacted the culture of our school. As I stated before, our schools are the heart of our community. They are the place that generates pride in a community, establishes traditions and fond memories for generations after generations.

We all need to do our part to return to our core values as a state. As superintendent of MAPS, I am committed to leading Merrill in a way that promotes academic rigor, provides relevant opportunities for learning in my community and does this in the most efficient and transparent way possible. It is the subtle things that make a difference and I implore you to help us change the perception of education in Wisconsin. Be a part of a change in culture that supports relevant learning opportunities regardless of where you live.

Thank you for allowing me this opportunity today. I am happy to answer any questions you may have.