

Rural Schools Task Force Calls Attention to Technology and Funding Issues

Recommendations include broadband Internet service for rural schools and more state aid for transportation

Dan Rossmiller

The Legislature has concluded its final legislative floor period, but work continues on a number of issues relating to K-12 education. The 2013-14 session ended without the passage of a comprehensive school accountability system for all publicly funded schools; however, a new effort is under way to develop such a proposal for consideration in January, when the 2015-16 session begins.

Senator Paul Farrow (R-Pewaukee) and Rep. Jim Steineke (R-Kaukauna) have reopened discussions on creating a state school accountability system that likely will include a more comprehensive school report

card, perhaps with weighted measurements, and could include sanctions for schools that fail to meet expectations. Representatives of various education groups, including the WASB, were invited to an initial conversation in mid-May. Further discussions are anticipated over the summer.

Issues likely to be at the center of these discussions include: clearly defining the purpose of school report cards; selecting multiple measures of student performance that strike a balance between student proficiency and student growth and include measures of college- and career-readiness; providing transparency

across the public and private voucher sectors; and providing data that informs curricular and instructional improvements and parent choices.

In early May, the Assembly Speaker's Task Force on Rural Schools completed its work and released an official report following eight months of study, six public hearings and numerous school tours. Recommendations of the 12-member bipartisan task force (8 Republicans, 4 Democrats) were presented as recommendations of its chair, state Rep. Rob Swearingen (R-Rhineland).

A key recommendation calls for revamping the Technology for Educational Achievement (TEACH)

Summer **ADVOCACY HOMEWORK**

Here are some critical steps you can take to keep education issues on the top of your lawmaker's list of priorities.

STEP 1: *Identify the critical issues for your district and the "stories" you will tell about them.*

Examples:

- Declining enrollment under the revenue limits, coupled with an inability to pass recurring referendums, is forcing your district to go to referendums where the amount voters are asked to approve is growing larger with each successive referendum, threatening the district's long-term sustainability.
- Your district lacks adequate broadband connectivity to offer 1:1 computing, limiting your ability to provide students with interactive learning experiences that are effective, challenging and motivating. Further, many students lack access to high-speed Internet connections at home, placing them at a competitive disadvantage.

Think about how your board can communicate your concerns in a way that will help legislative candidates understand the problem as well as the solution you seek. Explain how the rural schools task force recommendations (see article above) help address these issues.

Make sure the "stories" you tell provide specific examples of how each critical issue will affect students in your district.

When most bills are debated in the Legislature, it is typical for a lawmaker to stand before their colleagues and tell a story about how a constituent might be affected by the proposal before the body. Legislators tell stories — you should, too.

For example, don't talk merely in terms of dollar cuts, but put a human face on what those cuts mean — large class sizes, fewer academic and extracurricular opportunities for students, reduced teaching staff that translates into fewer opportunities for one-on-one tutoring to help struggling students.

Finally, agree beforehand what your "ask" will be (e.g., Will you vote to support the "TEACH 2.0" proposal?).

program (a “TEACH version 2.0”) to provide more funding for broadband access and networking equipment as well as for training to facilitate technology-empowered learning in rural schools. A separate recommendation encourages the Legislature to explore incentives to get Internet providers to extend broadband service to rural areas that currently lack it.

Other key task force recommendations include proposals to:

- Provide more state aid for pupil transportation;
- Allow districts to calculate the revenue limit using their highest enrollment in the past five years rather than the current three-year rolling average;
- Exempt one-time technology purchases (e.g., netbooks, tablets or software) from revenue limits;
- Weight enrollment in small school districts when determining state aid and revenue limit authority;

- Authorize districts to adopt whole-grade sharing agreements as an alternative to consolidation; and
- Create a college loan forgiveness program for rural teachers or grant program to help rural districts attract and retain quality teachers.

The full task force stopped short of endorsing changes to the equalization aid formula, recommending instead that the Legislature “review the shortcomings of the equalization aid formula and consider actions to address those shortcomings.”

The timing of the release of the task force report, with the Legislature adjourned until January, means no legislative action is likely on the recommendations until 2015 at the earliest.

Nevertheless, many of the recommendations represent progress in bringing the problems of rural schools to the attention of the full Legislature.

The four Democrats on the committee offered an alternative report as a report of the vice chair, state Rep. Fred Clark (D-Baraboo). They were critical of the “official” report for its lack of proposals for overall school funding reform and lack of discussion about further expansion of taxpayer-funded private school vouchers, which they labeled a serious threat to rural schools.

The challenge for rural school leaders will be to ensure that the recommendations on which there is a consensus are enacted and funded.

Together, we will need to make a push on these issues now (see “Summer Advocacy Homework” below) through the end of the state budget session next year. This will require working with legislators on both sides of the aisle, and particularly rural Republican lawmakers (because the GOP is likely to retain its majorities) to keep these issues alive and moving forward. ■

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■ **STEP 2:** *Develop a plan for how to talk to candidates and the public about these priority issues.*

The legislative campaign season is upon us. The deadline for legislative candidates to file nomination papers and other ballot access documents was June 2.

Think about how best to get the attention of those likely to represent you in the Legislature come January and how to get your message across to them. For example, if a legislator who currently represents your school district isn’t seeking reelection and multiple candidates are seeking that office, hosting a candidate forum may make sense. (See last month’s *Legislative Update* for suggestions on how to hold a candidate forum.) On the other hand, if an incumbent legislator is unopposed or if only one person is running for the seat, setting up a meeting may be more productive.

■ **STEP 3:** *Talk to candidates about your key issues and concerns.*

What we’re talking about is a conversation. You can always invite legislative candidates to meet with you to get to know you and your district. Be polite but persistent. Understand

that candidates are busy, with lots of demands on their time. Pick a time that works for both of you. Keep trying. If you can’t get them to come to you, find out where they will be and ask them personally for a chance to talk.

Don’t assume a candidate understands your district’s concerns. Don’t expect them, for example, to understand that your need to pass revenue limit referendums is growing. You need to communicate this.

If you can get a candidate to your school and time permits, it’s always good to take candidates on a brief school tour that allows you to celebrate your successes, but also illustrates your challenges.

After the school tour, it can help to have a sit-down with parents, business leaders, school staff and other public school advocates in your community to discuss the important education issues for your community. Stories from parents, students and local business people are more apt to stick with a candidate than budget numbers — although both can be important.

If you’ve prepared the “stories” you want to tell, your part in this should be easy. After all, if you don’t tell your district’s story who will? □