

Rural School Challenges and the Future of the Common Core

Rural Schools Task Force Shines a Light on Problems of Small, Rural School Districts

Wisconsin school districts play a critical role in their communities and face similar challenges across the state. However, small, rural school districts are often confronted by a common set of challenges, which, when combined, can make their jobs even harder. They often lack economies of scale and scope, have fewer students per square mile, lack adequate technology infrastructure, and have greater difficulty attracting and retaining quality teachers and administrators.

In addition, rural economies are often challenged by a relative lack of job opportunities, lower wages and older average populations compared to urban or suburban areas. Meanwhile, a substantial portion of our state's population and its politicians live in the state's most populous, growing and generally prosperous counties. All too often they have been largely unaware of the challenges to rural schools.

An effort is underway to better understand and, hopefully, address the problems and challenges. A 12-member Speaker's Task Force on Rural Schools, appointed by Assembly Speaker Robin Vos (R-Burlington) and chaired by state Rep. Rob Swearingen (R-Rhineland), was formed in early October.

The Task Force is charged to study: creating partnerships among school districts; exploring new avenues to share innovations, efficiencies and best-practices; addressing future transportation needs; mapping strategies for long-

term financial stability; developing tactics for handling declining enrollment; and maximizing opportunities to incorporate advanced technology.

The Task Force held two hearings this fall in Rhinelander and Elroy. The Task Force heard excellent testimony with many specific examples of the great things happening in rural schools and the value of rural schools to their communities. It also heard examples of the serious financial issues facing many rural schools, including testimony that the "tools" in Act 10 are insufficient to prevent the loss of programs and staff in many rural schools, especially those facing severe enrollment declines.

Included among the suggestions offered to the Task Force thus far are:

- Expand sparsity aid to more districts by lifting the enrollment cap on eligibility for this aid;
- Increase transportation aid for rural schools to prevent pupil transportation costs from draining resources from student programs and instruction;
- Invest more in the technology infrastructure of rural schools, and address broadband access and Internet speed in rural schools and students' homes to take full advantage of what technologies can offer;
- Increase utilization of virtual education through state supported options for rural schools;
- Consider modifications to the rolling average used in revenue limit calculations (*e.g.*, use the

highest enrollment in the past five years, allow carryover of a percentage of the declining enrollment exemption);

- Provide incentive grants, including special transportation aid, to support specialized collaborative programs among districts;
- Increase state support for special education, especially high-cost special education;
- Fully fund the SAGE program and consider allowing SAGE funds to be targeted for uses other than class size reduction known to boost learning (*e.g.*, reading coaches);
- Assist rural schools to recruit and retain high-quality educators by addressing the compensation gap between rural and urban/suburban schools; and
- Create incentives (*e.g.*, loan forgiveness) to attract educators to rural areas.

At least two more hearings are planned. A third hearing will be held on Jan. 8, 2014, in a location still to be announced, while a fourth (and possibly a fifth) hearing will be held in January/February 2014.

The Task Force is expected to make its recommendations in the spring of 2014.

The WASB will be putting together a set of recommendations for the Task Force to consider and we are seeking WASB members' and rural school leaders' input. We welcome your suggestions. Please send them to drossmiller@wasb.org. ■

An effort is underway to better understand the challenges faced by rural schools in our state.



Future of Common Core State Standards Likely to be Decided by the Holidays

The cloud of uncertainty surrounding the adoption of the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) in Wisconsin may be lifting somewhat. The Assembly Select Committee on Common Core State Standards, along with an identical Senate committee held four hearings around the state. The Assembly committee also met in the Capitol on Nov. 19 to discuss recommendations for a final report. Most committee members seemed more inclined to tweak the CCSS than to scrap them.

Committee members, who took turns voicing their concerns, generally acknowledged that the CCSS, which were adopted by the State Superintendent in 2010 to cover math and English language arts, are an improvement over the state Model Academic Standards they replaced. Members noted the new standards specify what students should know and be able to do at every grade level, whereas prior standards set learning targets only in grades 4, 8 and 12.

School districts across the state have already spent an estimated \$25 million implementing CCSS, making any significant change in direction difficult and potentially expensive. Committee members largely agreed that too much time and money have gone into the standards to completely undo them, but also said they

could be improved.

“We should take care to remember these standards are a floor, not a ceiling,” said Rep. Dean Knudson (R-Hudson). Rep. Knudson also suggested the clearest consensus is that committee members want any future reviews or changes made to state standards to be more transparent.

Committee chair, Rep. Jeremy Thiesfeldt (R-Fond du Lac), acknowledged concerns about federal intrusion in education voiced by many during the hearings. Thiesfeldt said the state should reject “federal interference and coercion” in setting education standards, adding that national standards do not mean improvement.

While Thiesfeldt said there was nothing evil about the Common Core State Standards themselves, he noted that decades of increased federal involvement in education, most often justified on the twin grounds of raising student achievement and closing achievement gaps, had not achieved better results. While he acknowledged the CCSS were developed outside the federal government, he said they would provide “a unified launching pad through which it will be easier to indoctrinate students.”

“It would be best for Wisconsin to have Wisconsin standards,” Thiesfeldt said, citing a need for

students also to be “STEM-ready.”

Republicans, who outnumber Democrats on the Assembly committee six to two (one Democrat resigned from the committee in protest), expressed strong concerns about student privacy and local control under the CCSS, including that student data and curriculum decisions should stay at the local school district level. And while there is no evidence schools are collecting students’ biometric data, some members urged laws against this. Concerns were also voiced about the amount of standardized testing of students.

Republican members also criticized the Department of Public Instruction (DPI) over the process of adopting the standards. They said DPI hadn’t appropriately involved lawmakers or the public, and instead approved the new standards amid the promise of federal dollars and a waiver from the federal No Child Left Behind law. The legislators called for establishing a periodic review process for evaluating any standards adopted by the state, including public hearings throughout the state, to “make sure standards aren’t placed on a fast track” for adoption.

Rep. Thiesfeldt said he will work with the committee’s Legislative Council attorney to draft a report on the committee’s activities, and a final report will outline the committee’s recommendations. Each recommendation will be voted on as a separate item. Rep. Thiesfeldt hopes to have the committee’s work wrapped up before the holidays.

As of this writing, the Senate Select Committee had not yet scheduled a public meeting to discuss its findings or recommendations. ■

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