

The Coming Storm: Crisis in Funding Rural Schools

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Senator Vinehout writes about the funding crisis facing rural schools across the state. Members of the Speaker's Task Force on Rural Schools released two reports on the funding crisis in rural schools. Going to referendum to raise property taxes for a school district's survival is unsustainable. Proposals to fix the state's school funding formula target aid for the unique needs of rural schools and now we need a bi-partisan commitment to get the work done for the sake of our communities.

MADISON - "It is well recognized by many, including our legislators, that our equalized aid formula which uses property values as the 'equalizing factor'...is broken," testified Alma Superintendent Steve Sedlmayr during a Pepin public hearing.

Following hearings in Pepin and around the state, members of the Speaker's Task Force on Rural Schools recently issued two reports: the first by majority members of the task force and the second released by Representative Fred Clark and minority members.

While many recommendations were similar, the two reports represent the split among legislators who, along with the Governor, will determine the future of funding public education in rural Wisconsin.

Representative Clark recently summarized the crisis facing rural schools: At our six public hearings around the state, testimony from rural school leaders was consistent and compelling. Inadequate funding adds to factors such as high transportation costs, high costs for technology, and the expenses of having sparse student populations. The bottom line is that many of our rural schools lack the resources to provide students with educational opportunities anywhere near those of our wealthier, suburban districts. One sign of the un-level playing field for rural

schools is that of the 956 operating referendums (asking taxpayers for extra funding just to pay teachers and keep the lights on) that public school districts have placed on ballots since 1998, 73% have been for rural schools.

An increase in referendums is the direct result of choices made by legislators to not address the unfairness of state school funding. Instead addressing this unfairness, many lawmakers encourage school boards to go to voters and ask for an increase in property taxes.

For example, at a recent round table discussion sponsored by the Chippewa Falls School District, Representative Tom Larson said, "Referendums are tough for school boards, but a good way to let voters decide. It's up to them to increase taxes."

This thinking has justified deep cuts in state funding for education and an increase in referendums to raise property taxes just to keep rural schools alive. Before school boards mostly went to referendum for new construction; now they turn to referendums for their schools' survival. This results in very unequal property tax bills.

Take the example of the Gilmanston school district which provides an outstanding education. High school juniors taking the ACT ranked in the top ten of all school districts in the state. Local people love their school. For the sake of their school's survival, the community voted to increase property taxes by 45% according to a report by the Wisconsin Taxpayers Alliance.

But increasing property taxes to keep a school alive is not sustainable.

A Gilmanston resident told me, "We will never be able to do this again." Local superintendents agree. "People simply can't afford an increase in property taxes," said one.

School boards have cut expenses to the bone and spent down "reserves" or savings accounts. With no place left to cut expenses, a community that won't support a referendum and experiences dramatic declines in state support, are beginning to talk of the dreaded 'C' word: Closing.

Facing such a 'do or die' referendum, rural Oakfield Superintendent Sue Green recently told the Milwaukee Journal Sentinel, "We don't want to be the first school district to be forced to close because of a failed referendum."

The solution is to change the way the state pays for schools. Numerous proposals, including State Superintendent Tony Evers' 2013-15 proposed budget, describe the details. But Governor Walker eliminated Evers' proposal before sending his budget on to lawmakers. Republican leaders fought every effort to bring the proposal to a vote despite having funds available as the result of a recovering economy.

Paying for local schools shouldn't be a partisan issue. Every rural legislator must agree the state needs to pay for high cost transportation and rural broadband.

Recommendations offered by both the majority and minority members of the Speaker's Task Force on Rural Schools are a good first step. Lawmakers must stop the talk and walk the walk. Let's see a bipartisan pledge to support Tony Evers' proposal in the next budget.

The work is done, the crisis is clear. Now we need the votes.

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