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### **Rural School Leaders: Schools in Wisconsin are Unequal**

**By**  
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“Where kids live should not determine their education,” rural school administrators told members of the Blue Ribbon Commission on School Funding Reform.

Recently the Commission traveled to Southwestern Wisconsin. We heard from representatives of 20 rural school districts. Administrators, board members, teachers, parents and community members all testified about the struggles rural schools face and the need for change in the way Wisconsin pays for schools.

For decades state policies created hardships for rural schools. Superintendent Nancy Hendrickson of Highland School District explained that spending caps in the 1980s locked in low spending districts. A need for new buildings led to borrowing and increased property taxes in the ‘90s. In 1993, revenue caps locked schools into unequal spending. With school aid tied to the number of students and, with a declining rural population, aid is dropping faster than the cost to educate children.

Administrator Jill Underly of Pecatonica School District affirmed that school segregation still exists. “It may not be based on race necessarily, but it is still to an extent based on income inequality... Public schools, a cornerstone of our democracy, were supposed to equalize opportunity. It shouldn’t matter where you go to school, but in Wisconsin, let’s be honest, it DOES matter.”

Superintendent Doug Olsen of Kickapoo Area School District explained some of the challenges. “We are a consolidated school district of three communities in one building. ... Our district consistently serves an economically disadvantaged population that comprises over half of the student body.”

Olsen noted that with poverty come needs. “... only 48% of poor students are ready for school at age 5, compared to 75% of students from moderate to high income families. From vocabulary and pre-literacy skills, to numeracy, emotional regulation, and trauma, kids in poverty are more at risk to come to school less prepared.”

In addition to increases in student poverty, there are more students with Special Education needs, English Language Learners, and students grappling with mental health challenges. All these students need help – provided by staff that must take on many other tasks.

“Cut, cut, cut,” said Superintendent Hendrickson. “We had to cut so many things.” Rural schools did not recover from deep cuts made in Governor Walker’s first budgets. Across the state, school funding, in real dollars, for this school year is less than a decade ago.

Without resources, buildings and systems maintenance is deferred. School districts see fewer applicants for vacant teaching jobs, a shortage of substitute teachers and problems with a flattening pay scale for teachers making it hard to keep veteran teachers.

Because rural schools struggle with fewer teachers, administrators and support staff, everyone is forced to do multiple jobs. Jamie Nutter of Cooperative Educational Service Agency (CESA) 3 said much sharing of services already exists across districts. “We share hearing, vision, school nursing, curriculum, education development all through the CESA.” Cost for basic services, i.e. transportation, utilities, electricity are increasing. New costs are added including technology, school safety, testing.

Legislative leaders decided if schools need more funding, voters should decide through referendum.

Administrator Olsen pointed out that rural Wisconsin has many farmers who are struggling financially. “As you have heard, Western Wisconsin leads the nation in lost farms due to bankruptcy and farmer suicide. In which community does a referendum to override the revenue limit have a better chance of passing?”

How does the current funding system keep things unequal? To summarize Superintendent Olsen’s testimony: money for schools comes primarily from the state and property tax. State aid is supposed to make things more equal, but the current school funding formula uses real estate (including land values) as a measure of wealth. Thus, the formula often overestimates a rural community’s ability to pay. The situation is made worse when GOP leaders bypassed the funding formula and gave wealthy suburban districts the same money as cash-strapped rural and urban districts.

“Add to this,” said Administrator Olsen, “the rural crisis going on in our farming communities. ... Should we be enacting policies that exacerbate inequality?”

“If we value rural people, you will find a way to fund rural schools.” challenged community member Kriss Marion.

Our schools are unequal and this must change. The Blue Ribbon Commission on School Funding travels next to the Fox Valley and north central Wisconsin. I encourage folks to come and share their stories.