

TO: Legislative Colleagues
FROM: Sen. Vinehout
DATE: February 8th, 2018
RE: Co-sponsorship of LRB 5387/1: Higher Ed Academic Scholarships for Rural Schools
DEADLINE: 3pm on Friday, February 16th, 2018

Please join me in co-sponsoring this bill to offer fairness to small, rural school districts for the Academic Excellence Scholarship. To illustrate the importance of this legislation, I'll share the story of our constituent:

Joel (not his real name) knew from the 8th grade he wanted to be valedictorian of his high school class. His cousin just graduated at the top of his class. Because of this achievement, the cousin received a scholarship.

The Academic Excellence Higher Education Scholarship is Wisconsin's way of saying, "Well done" to a graduating valedictorian. The scholarship amounts to \$2,250 a year to be used for tuition at a Wisconsin college or university. Depending on the total number of students enrolled in a high school, additional scholarships may be awarded to the top graduating seniors.

Joel got to work. He took every class seriously. He studied hard and received nearly perfect grades. He was nominated to the National Honor Society since his sophomore year.

Joel competed against other students who might have been smarter, might have had better test scores and might have had some other advantages. But Joel worked harder. And not just in the classroom.

He was on Student Council for three years and served as an officer. He played in Jazz Band all four years of high school. He was nominated for and played in three regional honors bands. He took his alto saxophone to state solo ensemble competition for three years.

Although Joel was not particularly outgoing, he polished his public speaking skills through forensics; making it to the state competition all four years of high school.

Joel's talents and hard work continued in his community service. He volunteered at church. He loved Scouts and served as Senior Patrol. He cleaned up a local park as part of his Eagle Scout community service project. Joel showed livestock, did wood-working and served as President of his 4H club. He helped at the county fair Lions Club food booth when he wasn't keeping his 4H hogs well-behaved and clean. If that isn't enough Joel, who also served as FFA President for three years, helped his dad around the farm.

Joel's already took three college courses – which he aced – spent three years on the golf team and played a leading role in the school play – three years in a row.

To say Joel is well-deserving of a scholarship is an understatement.

Joel was named valedictorian of his graduating class. His parents were surprised to find out the scholarship Joel deserved was not forthcoming. Why? Because the number of students in Joel's high school dipped below 80 that year.

High schools with a total pupil count below 80 are not automatically awarded a scholarship. Instead the names of valedictorians from these high schools are put into a pool from which only ten scholarships are awarded. Last year about 77 small schools fell into this category. Many of these schools are charter or private schools. But as enrollment drops in rural areas whole public school districts are being caught up in the 80-student rule. Several others are at the tipping point and could fall below 80 next year – penalizing next year's valedictorian simply because he or she is from a small school district.

A superintendent of another small local rural high school with a pupil count of 81 in 2015 put it very well: *"a student should not be penalized for the size of the high school they attend. The current law would seem to be discriminatory to students who live in rural Wisconsin."*

I think the superintendent was too kind. The law is discriminatory – and needs to be changed. We need to reward the hard work of all Wisconsin valedictorians – regardless of where they live.

To co-sponsor this legislation, please **reply to this email or call Sen. Vinehout's office at 6-8546 before 3pm on Friday, February 16th, 2018.**

Analysis by the Legislative Reference Bureau

This bill makes changes in the way the Higher Educational Aids Board awards academic excellence higher education scholarships to students in public or tribal high schools having between 20 and 79 students.

Under current law, the Higher Educational Aids Board (HEAB) administers the Academic Excellence Higher Education Scholarship Program under which HEAB awards scholarships to certain scholars, designated on the basis of grade point average, who enroll, on a full-time basis, in a public or private institution of higher education in this state. Under the program, an academic excellence higher education scholarship recipient is exempt from up to \$2,250 in tuition and fees for each academic year that the recipient is enrolled full time, maintains at least a 3.000 grade point average, and makes satisfactory progress toward an associate or a bachelor's degree or a vocational diploma.

Currently, those scholarships may be awarded to 1) the senior with the highest grade point average from each high school in this state enrolling at least 80 but fewer than 500 pupils; 2) the two seniors with the two highest grade point averages from each high school in this state enrolling at least 500 but fewer than 1,000 pupils; 3) the three seniors with the three highest grade point averages from each high school in this state enrolling at least 1,000 but fewer than 1,500 pupils; 4) the four seniors with the four highest grade point averages from each high school in this state enrolling at least 1,500 but fewer than 2,000 pupils; 5) the five seniors with the five highest grade point averages from each high school in this state enrolling at least 2,000 but fewer than 2,500 pupils; and 6) the six seniors with the six highest grade point averages from each high school in this state enrolling 2,500 or more pupils. In addition, not more than ten scholarships statewide may be awarded to seniors with the highest grade point averages from high schools enrolling fewer than 80 pupils.

This bill permits 1) a scholarship to be awarded to the senior with the highest grade point average from each public or tribal high school in this state enrolling at least 20 but fewer than

500 pupils; and 2) not more than ten scholarships to be awarded statewide to seniors from public or tribal high schools enrolling fewer than 20 pupils and to seniors from private high schools enrolling fewer than 80 pupils. Notwithstanding the February 25 deadline under current law for designating a senior as a scholar, the bill permits a school board of a school district operating a public high school, or a governing body of a tribal high school, with an enrollment of at least 20 pupils but fewer than 80 pupils to designate a senior as a scholar by June 1, 2016, and provides that a scholar so designated is eligible for an academic excellence higher education scholarship in the 2016–17 academic year.

Notwithstanding the February 25 deadline under current law for designating a senior as a scholar, the bill permits a school board of a school district operating a public high school, or a governing body of a tribal high school, with an enrollment of at least 20 pupils but fewer than 80 pupils to designate a senior as a scholar by June 1, 2018, and provides that a scholar so designated is eligible for an academic excellence higher education scholarship in the 2018-19 academic year.

*For further information see the **state** fiscal estimate, which will be printed as an appendix to this bill.*