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Assembly's Task Force on Rural Schools Tours Local Districts

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Rural schools face unique challenges including declining enrollment, high transportation costs and poverty.

To learn more about rural schools' plight and to try and solve some problems, the Wisconsin Assembly has put together the Task Force on Rural Schools.

The task force is traveling across Wisconsin, visiting rural schools and holding public hearings. It held a hearing Wednesday at Antigo High School after a tour at the school. Members also visited the Elcho School District.

Jerry Fiene, the executive director of the Wisconsin Rural Schools Alliance, is praising the work of the task force, which is comprised of state representatives, including those from the NewsChannel 7 viewing area.

Fiene says most rural school districts have had to cut deeply into academics, instruction and extracurricular programs because they're funded disproportionately.

"The revenue limits over the last 20 years has created a real issue for the rural school districts because of declining enrollment their revenues have gone down and yet their expenses have not gone down," he said.

All of the rural school districts in Central Wisconsin have had significant budget cuts every single year, often prompting them to run referendums just to maintain operations.

One of the biggest challenges for rural school is transportation. In Antigo, the district spends roughly \$2 million a year to bus students throughout 540 square miles. That's 3 students per square mile and 7 percent of the general fund budget. The longest bus ride is one hour and twenty minutes one way.

Rural schools are also dealing with a lack of broadband access across their districts - an integral part of learning in today's educational environment.

Rural schools typically have a high number of students living in poverty. According to Director of Business Services Mary Jo Filbrandt, the Antigo School District's poverty rate is 58 percent and in some elementary schools, the rate is in the 60-79 percent range.

"This creates difficulties in the education of students, particularly when we are trying to do more with instructional technology from home to support students," she told the task force.

In Antigo, Elcho, and other rural school districts, there is difficulty recruiting and retaining quality teachers, because they simply cannot compete with larger districts that can offer higher salaries.

"We saw a record loss of teachers and administrators this past year. We are losing tenured teachers that are now able to go to other districts and negotiate for higher wages and benefits," Filbrandt said. "Antigo is becoming a training ground for starting teachers who seem to move on to higher paying positions."

An average teacher's salary in 2010-2011 of \$47,000 has now been reduced to \$42,000 because of the higher cost of retirement and health insurance.

Rep. Mandy Wright (D-Wausau) of the 85th Assembly District, says she's been shocked to learn how hard it is for many of the school districts to find the resources to thoroughly educate students, but they're managing to do an excellent job.

Public education has suffered serious cuts to state aid in the past few years, but Rep. Wright, who supports the Department of Public Instruction's Fair Funding for Our Future school finance reform plan, says the money is available.

"We are spending \$420 million dollars of public funds going to private schools, which are

significantly less accountable, so I really believe that we have the funds," Rep. Wright said. "I know, in fact, we have the funds to make our public school kids a priority and fix this funding structure."

The Fair Funding for Our Future plan would increase state aid to all school districts, accounts for poverty and would restore reasonable growth in revenue limits without increasing property taxes.

Recently, the state has seen a swing toward more funding of private and charter schools with public funds. Rep. Rob Swearingen (R-Rhineland) of the 34th Assembly District, says parents ought to have the choice to send their child to whatever educational institution they see fit.

Rep. Swearingen, who chairs the task force, says rural schools are doing the best they can with what they have, but we can't just throw more money at the problem.

"It always boils down to more money, but the state can't afford to keep throwing money at what we have," Rep. Swearingen said. "We want to make sure they're implementing good best practices so if they're able to share resources in these rural school districts they can do that. Consolidation really hasn't come up, but that's something on everybody's mind."

He says hopefully they will come up with some innovative legislation that will help meet the challenges of rural schools. A report is to be completed and turned into Assembly Speaker Robin Vos (R-Rochester) in March.

Forty-four percent of Wisconsin students attend a rural school.

Find this article at:

<http://www.wsaw.com/news/education/headlines/Assemblys-Task-Force-on-Rural-Schools-Tours-Local-Districts-239356861.html>

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