

News Release

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State budget proposal does not help rural schools

MADISON — The 2013-15 state budget proposal currently being considered by the Legislature’s Joint Committee on Finance does not help Wisconsin’s rural school districts address the unique challenges they face.

“More than half of Wisconsin school districts have fewer than 1,000 students and many are dealing with issues of increasing poverty levels and declining enrollment, which means they receive less state aid to educate their students,” said State Superintendent Tony Evers. “We must work together to ensure that our rural kids have the same advantages as their suburban and urban counterparts. Unfortunately, the state budget proposal currently being considered by the Legislature does not serve any school district in Wisconsin well, especially rural schools.”

Many of the state’s small, rural districts are facing budget cuts while also dealing with declining enrollment, large geographic areas, rising property values, and low median income. These factors work together to further lower state aid for those districts. Since state imposed revenue limits began in the 1990s, they had generally increased or held steady to accommodate rising costs. In 2011, however, those revenue limits were cut by more than \$500 per pupil, straining districts ability to cover costs, leading to programming and staff cuts around Wisconsin. Evers’ 2013-15 budget proposal included increasing the per pupil revenue limits by \$225 in the first year, and by \$230 in the second year of the biennium. The governor’s budget proposal froze revenue limits, leaving districts with few options to cover increasing costs beyond making significant cuts.

To address some of the challenges faced by smaller more rural districts in Wisconsin, the sparsity aid program was established in 2007. This program provides additional funding to districts based on enrollment of fewer than 725 students, population density of fewer than 10 pupils per square mile, and a minimum of 20 percent of students qualifying to receive free or reduced-price lunch. Evers’ budget proposal included a request to fully fund the state’s sparsity aid categorical grant program at \$300 per pupil and eliminate the free and reduced-price lunch eligibility threshold. The governor’s budget denied both of those requests.

Wisconsin’s small and rural districts have been hardest hit by rising fuel costs. This is because they must transport students over larger geographic areas as compared to more urban districts. As part of his budget proposal,

(more)

Evers included increased funding to help cover pupil transportation aid, particularly for those districts where per pupil transportation costs are more than 150 percent of the state average. The governor's budget proposal denied that request, leaving it up to districts to cover these higher and ever increasing expenses.

Another factor impacting small and rural school districts are costs associated with providing special education services. Federal and state categorical aids to districts to help pay for special education have not increased at the same rate as costs. Any special education costs not reimbursed by the state or federal government are covered by the district. However, because state imposed revenue limits restrict the amount of money a district may raise, this may reduce the funds available to districts for regular education services. Evers' budget proposal included an increase in funding for both the state special education categorical aid program and the state high-cost special education aid program. The governor's budget denied both of those requests and reintroduced a proposal to establish a special needs voucher program that would further reduce state aid for public schools.

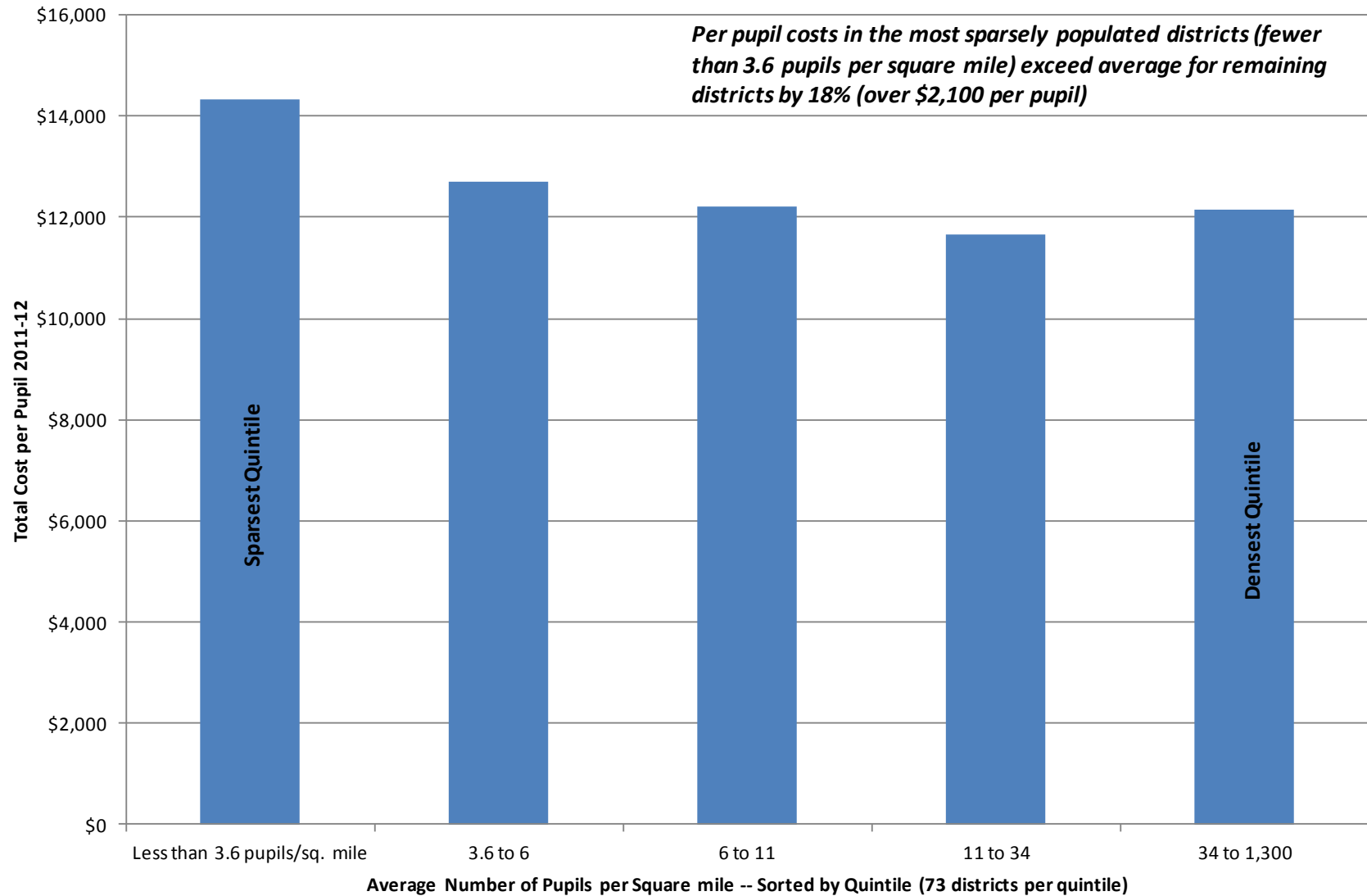
“State budgets are about priorities and choices. I am disappointed that this budget, as rolled out to date, does not prioritize funding for our 870,000 public school students, and does little to help our small and rural districts address the challenges they face,” added Evers. “Through my budget proposals, I called for reinvestment in our public schools, and I call on our legislators to prioritize our children and public schools. Our public schools are all about the common good, and I believe it is high time to once again make the common good our priority.”

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NOTE: Two graphs follow illustrating the higher costs for rural districts as compared to more urban districts: “Sparsely populated school districts have higher per pupil costs,” and “Sparsely populated school districts have higher transportation costs.” This news release is available electronically at http://www.dpi.wi.gov/eis/pdf/dpinr2013_45.pdf. Information about the state superintendent's 2013-15 state budget proposal for education can be found at http://news.dpi.wi.gov/news_2013-15-state-budget-information.

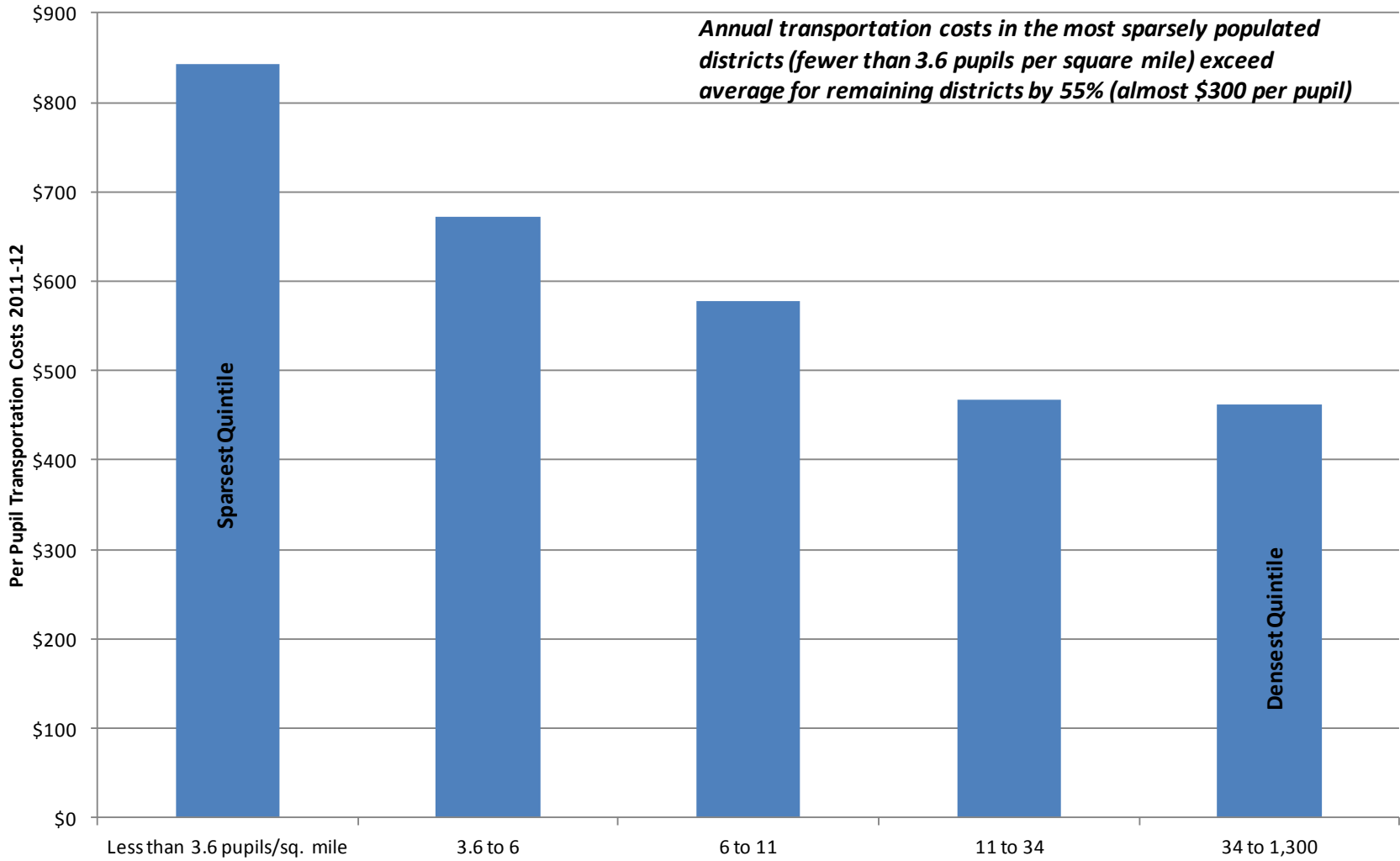
Sparsely populated school districts have higher per pupil costs

(K-12 districts only)



Sparsely populated school districts have higher transportation costs

(K-12 districts only)



Average Number of Pupils per Square mile -- Sorted by Quintile (73 districts per quintile)