



State of Wisconsin
Department of Public Instruction
Elizabeth Burmaster, State Superintendent

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Advancing Rural Wisconsin initiative to support schools and communities

MADISON—Calling rural schools centers of their communities, connected to the very fabric of daily life, State Superintendent Elizabeth Burmaster announced a six-point “Advancing Rural Wisconsin” initiative Friday during her address to the Rural Policy Network Forum Reunion in Eau Claire.

“Rural schools are the foundation of this state’s educational history. However, many rural schools struggle with difficult fiscal problems, including revenue caps, declining enrollments, high-cost programs, reductions in categorical aids, and increasing transportation expenses. These funding difficulties often result in tough program and educational choices. Choices that limit our students’ educational opportunities and their futures,” Burmaster said. “It is imperative that we take strong action to support and strengthen rural schools and communities to ensure a quality education for every child.”

Burmaster said that work of the Rural Policy Network Forum held in January shaped and influenced her policy agenda for rural schools. The “Advancing Rural Wisconsin” initiative seeks to ensure rural school traditions. It includes three finance proposals that recognize the many similar issues facing the state’s small, rural districts: lack of economies of scale, declining enrollment, rapidly rising property values, low median income, and large geographic boundaries. Those proposals are

- the “Rural School Promise,” a small rural district aid program based on sparsity. Districts meeting specific criteria in terms of size, student population density, and poverty will receive \$300 per pupil in categorical aid to be used for locally determined educational purposes that address budgetary challenges and focus on closing the achievement gap, implementing new teacher mentoring efforts, and studying the collaboration or consolidation of services with other small districts.
- an increase and revision in the state pupil transportation aid program to double the state statutory reimbursement rates to reflect the increased costs of transporting students in all districts throughout the state. Additionally rural districts that transport students over 12 miles each way will receive higher reimbursement rates.

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- making the current 75 percent declining enrollment hold harmless exemption for revenue limit purposes a recurring exemption, thereby cushioning the impact of declining enrollment on small schools by increasing flexibility under the current revenue caps.

Her second initiative is a partnership with the University of Wisconsin-Extension to encourage and promote regional discussion forums to highlight and emphasize the value and importance of rural communities and their schools. “Rural communities should define and establish their own priorities and enlist the talents and skills of rural youth in leading this effort,” Burmaster said.

Burmaster’s third initiative charges the new partnership between the Department of Public Instruction and the UW-Extension to strengthen and promote the quality of leadership in Wisconsin’s rural areas. “This collaboration will work to ensure that comprehensive statewide efforts identify, develop, and nurture rural leaders. It will involve the resources of the UW-Extension’s Rural Leadership Program, which has been a training ground for some of Wisconsin’s best rural leaders,” Burmaster said.

Recognizing that many rural schools lack the capacity to appropriately support teachers who work with autistic and other behaviorally challenged children, Burmaster’s fourth initiative dedicates approximately \$1 million of federal Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) funding to build a statewide support infrastructure to address the behavioral needs of children. This infrastructure will provide rural teachers with expert advice and skills to meet the challenges they face educating children with autism or severe behavioral disabilities.

Within the DPI, Burmaster’s fifth initiative will create a cross-divisional team that will focus on rural issues and examine how various state-level initiatives will impact small rural districts. Deputy State Superintendent Tony Evers will lead the team.

And finally, Burmaster will form a State Superintendent’s Advisory Council on Rural Schools, Libraries, and Communities. Co-chaired with UW-Extension Chancellor Kevin Reilly, the council will advise policymakers on the needs of Wisconsin’s rural schools and communities. One of the council’s first tasks will be a thorough review, with input from rural school and community leaders, to identify services the DPI should provide to help support rural schools and communities.

“The hope for the future of our rural schools and communities rests within our “Advancing Rural Wisconsin” initiative,” Burmaster said. “There is no better cause than improving the opportunities and future of all Wisconsin children by making rural Wisconsin strong.”

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