

Howard Marklein: Working with rural schools

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It's back to school time! As teachers, students and families get back into the groove, I am continuing to seek ways to work with and support rural schools through the legislative process.

In the most recent State Budget, the legislature's budget invested \$500 million more for schools before the Governor added additional funding with his veto pen. As legislators, we allocated \$12.3 billion this biennium and responded to the top three requests from school districts statewide; we increased per pupil aid, we increase special education funding by nearly \$100 million, which will cover 30% of costs by 2021 and we ensured the funding we provided can be counted on for years to come.

For rural Wisconsin, we directed more funding through the Equalization Aids formula, which helps poor, rural schools. We raised the low-revenue limit adjustment for low-spending school districts and funded the increase in order to relieve the property tax burden. We doubled the current funding for student mental health programs.

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As the legislative session continues, I am leading several bills that will further support the needs of rural school districts. These ideas come from both my local school districts in the 17th District and through my work on the Blue Ribbon Commission on School Funding Reform.

Senate Bill (SB) 183 – Special Ed FORT Test Waiver – Rep. Travis Tranel (R-Cuba

City) and I authored this bill which will allow the Department of Public Instruction (DPI) to waive the Foundations of Reading Test (FORT) requirement for special education teachers who have satisfied similar requirements without passing the test. We have some very talented and dedicated people in our schools who want to be Special Education Teachers. They have a lot of experience, but they do not have the specific training to pass this test. It is time intensive and expensive. This bill would give DPI the option of waiving the requirement to put great Special Ed teachers into the classroom.

SB 184 - Waiver for Out of State Certified Teachers - Similarly, Rep. Tranel and I authored SB 184 to allow a person who is educated and licensed out-of-state to begin teaching in Wisconsin with a one-year license with stipulations. This person would then be eligible for a license based on reciprocity if their teaching experience is successful for two semesters. Many of our school districts, especially those near Iowa, are trying to fill vacancies with teachers from neighboring states. This bill will give superintendents and school boards more flexibility to attract, hire and retain qualified, proven teachers without licensing red tape.

SB 206 - Property Tax Parity for Consolidating School Districts - This idea was derived from our work on the Blue Ribbon Commission on School Funding Reform, but was actually originally offered by a local educational leader in the 17th District.

A major obstacle for school districts considering consolidation is the disparate property tax rates of the individual districts. Our proposal would create a new aid program for consolidated districts that are formed on or after July 1, 2020, to offset any property tax increase to one of the consolidated districts. The mill rate for the newly consolidated district would be set equal to the lowest mill rate among the consolidating districts in the year prior to consolidation.

SB 327 - Declining Enrollment - One of the biggest issues our rural schools are dealing with is declining enrollment. School budgets are almost entirely based on the number of students, but communities and families are smaller than they have been historically. SB 327 will modify the current declining enrollment adjustment in the school funding formula to account for long-term enrollment declines, and delete the current prior year base revenue hold harmless adjustment. This will help small, rural school districts manage this issue.

Again, I am working hard to move these bills through the legislative process. I appreciate all of the support and input I have received from the 34 school districts I

represent. Their partnership and willingness to share ideas and real-world commentary is extremely helpful.

- Marklein, R-Spring Green, represents the 17th Senate District.