

## News Release

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### Rural school students deserve a piece of the budget pie

MADISON — Wisconsin’s rural landscape is dotted with small towns, white farm houses, red-brick school buildings, close-knit communities, and lots of open spaces. The characteristics that make rural Wisconsin a great place to rear children also present challenges to their education.

The open spaces mean higher costs to transport students to and from school, small student populations mean economies of scale don’t fit rural reality, and declining public school enrollments mean less state aid to support the remaining students. State Superintendent Tony Evers included a number of provisions in his state budget that would support all, and especially rural, school districts. Those include school finance reform through “Fair Funding for Our Future” and investments in other key aid programs such as special education. An [“Investing in Rural Schools” package, which is part of his 2015-17 budget proposal](#), would address some of the most pressing issues facing rural and small schools.

“About half of Wisconsin’s public school children attend school in rural areas,” Evers said. “We owe it to them and our state’s economic future to ensure that students in rural and small schools enjoy a piece of the budget pie to address equity and access issues that their schools face. My 2015-17 education budget proposal makes an investment in our most important resource: our children.”

The Department of Public Instruction’s 2015-17 budget requests full funding for sparsity aid, which would provide \$300 per student to qualifying districts. The 133 eligible school districts in the 2013-14 school year had enrollments of less than 725 students and a population density of less than 10 students per square mile. Sparsity aid, which has been reduced, or prorated, because claims exceed the budget allocation, provides school districts with additional resources to address the higher costs of operating geographically large and small membership districts.

“Investing in Rural Schools” also includes four budget proposals to address transportation issues that disproportionately impact rural school districts. The department seeks an increase in the reimbursement rate for students whose one-way trip to or from school is more than 12 miles. That rate would increase from \$275 to \$300 per year. An analysis of all statewide expenditures for operating schools showed that transportation expenses have

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experienced the largest inflationary increase over the years. No additional funding is requested to make this change in the transportation reimbursement rate.

“School districts have a statutory requirement to transport all eligible public and private school pupils who reside within their boundaries to and from school,” Evers noted. “Increasing the reimbursement rate for the longest bus routes will have a very positive effect on rural and sparsely populated school districts.”

In the 2013-15 budget, the governor and Legislature established a new a high-cost transportation aid program based on the DPI budget request. For the 2015-17 biennium, the department seeks an increase in the reimbursement rate from 32.5 percent to 50 percent of eligible costs. The budget proposal would also modify eligibility requirements for the aid to ensure funding is directed to districts that cannot achieve economies of scale due to low population density and large relative use of transportation by the students they serve.

A number of changes are requested for the state’s open enrollment program, also known as public school choice, that would improve equity and access for students across the state. To specifically impact that equity for sparsely populated school districts, the 2015-17 education budget proposes to fully fund open enrollment aid for transportation for low-income families. Open enrollment transportation claims have exceeded the budget appropriation for a number of years, and in the 2013-14 school year, were prorated at 27.6 percent of eligible costs. To illustrate the impact on a low-income family whose children qualify for subsidized school meals, the maximum reimbursement for one child was reduced from an annual payment of \$1,210 for a 9.2 mile round trip for each school day to \$327 for the year. Aid for transportation associated with the Youth Options program has also been prorated. That program allows public high school juniors and seniors to take postsecondary courses at a University of Wisconsin institution, a Wisconsin technical college, or one of the state’s participating private colleges or universities. The department’s budget request seeks to fully fund state aids for youth options transportation.

“State budgets are about priorities,” Evers said. “I look forward to working with the governor and Legislature to adopt a spending plan that ensures our rural kids have the same educational advantages as their suburban and urban counterparts.”

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**Video:** State Superintendent’s Rural Schools Message (November 2014), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=w1OdRaTiJo>

**More information:** Department of Public Instruction 2015-17 budget request, <http://pb.dpi.wi.gov/>

**NOTES:** A high resolution photo of the state superintendent is available on the Department of Public Instruction “Media Contacts and Resources” webpage at [http://news.dpi.wi.gov/eis\\_vm-media](http://news.dpi.wi.gov/eis_vm-media). This news release is available electronically at [http://dpi.wi.gov/sites/default/files/news-release/dpinr2015\\_08.pdf](http://dpi.wi.gov/sites/default/files/news-release/dpinr2015_08.pdf).