



State of Wisconsin  
Department of Public Instruction

Elizabeth Burmaster, State Superintendent

---

*Advancing Rural Wisconsin*  
*Rural Wisconsin Schools and Communities Moving Forward Together*

**State Superintendent Elizabeth Burmaster's  
Preliminary Report on Strengthening Rural Education and Rural Communities**

**April 19, 2004**

Wisconsin's tradition of educational excellence has been founded on the commitment of successive generations to invest in the future by providing support for high-quality educational opportunity. Our commitment to education is best viewed as a commitment to the fulfillment of our state's motto, Forward.

As a third-generation Wisconsin teacher, I fondly recall the stories of my grandmother's experience as a teacher in a country school outside of Sparta. All of you are part of Wisconsin's long and proud progressive tradition of offering excellent public education to our children wherever they reside. And, to a very large degree, that success is built on the success of Wisconsin's rural tradition. Rural districts are the foundation of this state's educational history.

Working together – focusing on the unmet needs of students enrolled in our state's rural schools – can help us to move forward and to progress. The work promises to be hard, but we know it is important. By uniting our efforts and working in partnership, we can help ensure that rural Wisconsin youth have access to the same future full of hope and possibility that our state has provided to all of our residents over the years since statehood.

This is a preliminary report, an outline of several key policies that have been developed. I cordially invite you to provide comments and suggestions that will be incorporated into this comprehensive approach.

**Elizabeth Burmaster  
State Superintendent**

*Advancing Rural Wisconsin: A Preliminary Report*

**Table of Contents**

<b>Letter of Introduction</b>	Cover Page
<b>Executive Summary</b>	
Part A – Understanding the Context	Page 2
Part B – What Specific Actions Are Advanced?	Page 3
<b>Advancing Rural Wisconsin</b>	
Part A – Introduction	Page 5
Part B – Strengths and Challenges Facing Rural Schools	Page 6
Part C – What Policies Should be Pursued?	Page 7
School Finance	Page 7
Collaborative Efforts	Page 8
Leadership Development	Page 8
Rural School Development	Page 9
Part D – Conclusion – Advancing Rural Wisconsin	Page 9
<b>Closing Word</b>	Page 11

## *Executive Summary*

### *Advancing Rural Wisconsin Rural Wisconsin Schools and Communities Moving Forward Together*

#### *Part A - Understanding the Context*

Wisconsin's historical roots in agriculture and mining have given way to a tradition of strength in manufacturing and the more recent emergence of an expanding service sector. Through each successive change, residents living in rural Wisconsin have faced unique pressures and challenges.

Education is the key to help our citizenry survive, thrive, and grow in an often uncertain economy. Investments in public education return real economic benefits to the state in terms of personal earnings, community wealth, and statewide economic health.

Wisconsin must assess the current conditions in our rural communities. Continued access to educational opportunity – access to high-quality schools, professional teachers and educators, and appropriate environments to teaching and learning excellence – is an essential precondition to the health and vibrancy of rural communities and the state's rural economy.

The plan included within this document outlines the issues and concerns that face rural Wisconsin schools. It outlines a series of policy objectives that focus on five strategic directions for our state's long-term health. These strategic directions will help to strengthen our state by placing the interests of rural schools and rural communities in focus as clear policy priorities requiring thoughtful attention and concerted action.

The strategic directions include efforts to improve school funding by recognizing the unique characteristics and challenges facing rural schools. The plan also recognizes that we must embrace comprehensive leadership development efforts for our rural areas. The plan sees value in forging new collaborative efforts to link rural schools with rural communities. The plan identifies rural economic development as a key to our state's long-term success. Finally, the plan advances a comprehensive framework for rural school development through curriculum, instruction, and programs.

This plan, *Advancing Rural Wisconsin*, reflects input gathered at the Rural Policy Network Forum held in Wausau on January 29-30, 2004. It is a nonpartisan prescription for the future health and well-being of our state's rural schools. This should not be viewed as a comprehensive effort, but rather a set of the key priorities we should pursue to make a difference in the quality of the educational opportunity we offer in our state.

## *Advancing Rural Wisconsin: A Preliminary Report*

### *Part B - What Specific Actions Are Advanced?*

In response to recommendations developed at the Rural Policy Network Forum, State Superintendent Burmaster announced a series of six initiatives that address school finance, regional discussions, rural leadership, special education, rural schools, and the establishment of a Rural Policy Advisory Council.

The state superintendent recognizes this is but the start of an ongoing process. In putting forth this plan, the state superintendent seeks additional feedback and recommendations from broad constituencies concerned about rural schools and rural communities. The six policy initiatives are:

**School Finance.** The state superintendent submitted to the Governor's Task Force on Educational Excellence several recommendations related to the needs of rural and small schools. Those recommendations included the following key provisions:

- A new categorical aid program to provide additional financial assistance to districts based upon sparsity;
- increased transportation aid, especially changing the formula to have higher reimbursements for longer bus routes that are so costly and all too common in our rural communities; and
- provisions that cushion the impact of declining enrollment on small schools.

The scope of these proposals reflects understanding that costs do not necessarily decrease when the number of students decreases. Wisconsin needs a school funding system that also recognizes that fact.

**Regional Discussions.** The state superintendent is establishing a partnership between the Department of Public Instruction and the University of Wisconsin-Extension to help encourage and promote regional discussion forums on rural issues, including quality of life and accessibility to adequate, affordable, and accessible housing, health care, and senior care in rural communities. Rural communities should define and establish their own priorities in these areas.

**Rural Leadership.** The state superintendent will establish another partnership between the DPI and UW-Extension to strengthen and improve the quality of leadership in Wisconsin's rural areas. This collaboration is intended to ensure that comprehensive statewide efforts are undertaken to identify, develop, and nurture rural leaders. These efforts should help to reinforce activities by such groups as the Youth Connecting Communities Program, Wisconsin Rural Leadership Program, Wisconsin Rural Partners, Wisconsin Rural Challenge, Wisconsin Community Education Association, 4-H, FFA, FBLA, Junior Achievement, Junior Kiwanis, and Junior Rotary. The state superintendent will seek direct federal assistance to pay for these leadership efforts. These leadership development programs also are envisioned to assist rural teachers and educational leaders in fulfilling licensure requirements found in Chapter PI 34, the Wisconsin Quality Educator Initiative.

## *Advancing Rural Wisconsin: A Preliminary Report*

**Special Education.** The state superintendent recognizes that rural schools often lack the capacity to appropriately support teachers who work with autistic and other behaviorally challenged children. Accordingly, she will dedicate approximately one million dollars of IDEA funding to build a statewide support infrastructure to address the behavioral needs of children. This infrastructure will provide rural teachers with the expert advice and skills to meet the challenges they face educating autistic and behaviorally challenged children.

**Rural Schools.** The state superintendent will establish a cross-divisional team within the Department of Public Instruction that will focus on the needs of rural schools. This group will be asked to find ways to ensure that all initiatives proposed by the department are viewed through a rural lens. Furthermore, the state superintendent will establish an out-of-Madison office that will become a one-stop service center for rural issues. These efforts recognize that the DPI is an important resource for rural Wisconsin, and it must be responsive to those needs.

**Advisory Council.** The state superintendent will announce the appointment of the State Superintendent's Advisory Council on Rural Schools, Libraries, and Communities when she announces the rural policy agenda in early summer. Council membership will represent the interconnectedness of all facets of rural life. It will focus on the special needs and challenges associated with rural education and the various efforts we need to undertake to help strengthen rural schools and the communities they serve. The council will provide ongoing advice and recommendations and help to further strengthen the rural policy agenda.

# ***Advancing Rural Wisconsin***

*A Policy Agenda by State Superintendent Elizabeth Burmaster*

## ***Part A – Introduction***

*Advancing Rural Wisconsin* represents State Superintendent Burmaster's commitment to address established needs in rural Wisconsin communities. She knows the interests of rural schools must be served in order for our state to ensure that all students have access to high-quality educational opportunity.

Major structural transitions taking place in Wisconsin's economy, coupled with limitations in available public resources, place a premium on making the right decisions to advance the interests of rural education. This commitment to serving the needs of rural schools and rural communities is a key part of our state's broader commitment to economic growth and advancement.

State Superintendent Burmaster knows we can improve the conditions in rural Wisconsin by taking specific steps to address key issues in the following areas: school finance, regional discussions, rural leadership, special education, rural schools, and the establishment of a Rural Policy Advisory Council.

These strategic directions are key parts of a comprehensive effort to advance rural schools in Wisconsin. This focus on rural education is an important part of State Superintendent Burmaster's platform to seek to ensure a quality education for every Wisconsin student. This commitment was called the *New Wisconsin Promise*. Central to this promise is the simple notion that our state's common ground is our commitment to ensuring a quality education for every child.

The *New Wisconsin Promise* includes:

- Closing the achievement gap between economically disadvantaged students and children of color and their peers.
- Ensuring quality teachers in every classroom and strong leadership in every school.
- Improving student achievement with a focus on reading and a balanced literacy standard that has all students reading at grade level.
- Investing in early learning opportunities through the four-year-old kindergarten, Preschool to Grade 5, and SAGE class-size reduction programs.
- Shared responsibility through increasing parental and community involvement in our schools and libraries to address teenage literacy, dropouts, and truancy.

## ***Advancing Rural Wisconsin: A Preliminary Report***

- Career and technical education as a comprehensive strategy to involve students in becoming active citizens by better understanding their role in the family, society, and the world of work.

The *New Wisconsin Promise* is a statewide commitment that applies equally to our rural and urban communities. It applies to school districts with abundant resources and to those that face the real limitations of extreme fiscal constraint. The strategic directions advanced in this plan help to fulfill this promise.

### ***Part B - Strengths and Challenges Facing Rural Wisconsin***

**Strengths of Rural Schools.** The schools within rural communities are very visible and are strongly connected with the community. Rural schools are often the largest building and the largest employer. In many ways, the school defines the community and serves as its cultural center.

Teachers in rural schools are a source of creative energy and talent, and they are valued and respected members of those communities. They know the students and their families, and they are respected for the quality of the education they provide.

Rural schools tend to have smaller class sizes, so teachers are able to devote individual attention to the students. The size of rural schools also provides opportunities for student leadership and involvement in a wide variety of educational and extra-curricular activities. Rural schools tend to have flatter organizational structures, resulting in open lines of active communication, which enhances the ability of rural schools to adapt and change rapidly to changing conditions.

Rural communities are fortunate to be served by elected officials with strong historical ties to the people and the institutions within the community, including the schools. By necessity, rural schools tend to use technology through distance educational opportunities, and they have strong business partnerships and cooperative programs with industry. School-to-work and service-learning opportunities are valued in rural areas.

Students attending rural schools tend to support one another in such activities as peer mentoring and this helps to ensure low dropout rates. Rural communities tend to have a strong value system and a deep sense of community pride. This support is felt by the schools, the teachers, and the students. People living in rural areas tend to have a strong work ethic and tend to know one another and act in a more "family-like" manner, with strong traditions of family leadership and involvement.

Rural communities tend to be safe, with a lower incidence of violence and crime and fewer discipline problems in the schools.

**Challenges Facing Rural Schools.** Rural schools face extreme fiscal problems. Revenues are limited, if not declining, and the QEO restricts options. Rural schools also tend to have declining enrollment and simultaneously face major problems with funding the cost of transportation over large geographic areas. Funding limitations often result in a limited range of curricular options and a lack of advance placement course offerings.

## *Advancing Rural Wisconsin: A Preliminary Report*

As with other schools, rural schools face the problems of trying to implement various federal and state educational mandates with limited funds. They also face staffing problems and difficulties when trying to attract and retain teachers due to salary limitations. Many rural communities face serious problems with the availability of health care and other supportive community and social services. The lack of public transportation and available housing for new families and teachers is a problem.

Rural schools face significant issues in terms of leadership and governance, development of facilities, and problems posed by the geographic location of the schools. Changing demographics, structural changes in the workforce, and available jobs also pose special problems for rural schools. Rural schools face challenging issues relating to educational technology, special education, and access to alternative educational programs and services.

### *Part C – What Policies Should Be Pursued?*

Recommendations from the small work groups of delegates participating in the Rural Policy Network Forum showed a striking level of consensus on a series of key policy initiatives. The policy recommendations and the state superintendent's responses are set forth in the following sections.

**Recommendation: School Finance.** Changes to the state's K-12 school finance system to take into account the special needs and unique characteristics of rural education. The plan must promote equity and fairness to equalize educational opportunity for students attending rural schools that may face such issues as declining enrollment, population sparsity, aging facilities, and high pupil transportation costs while also providing a measure of flexibility that provides enhanced "local control" to rural school districts. Providing adequate educational funding is the central key toward ensuring the success of rural schools and the communities they serve.

**Response: School Finance.** The state superintendent recently submitted to the Governor's Task Force on Educational Excellence several recommendations related specifically to the needs of rural and small schools. Those recommendations included the following key provisions:

- A new categorical aid program to provide additional financial assistance to districts based upon sparsity;
  - increased transportation aid, especially, changing the formula to provide higher reimbursements for longer bus routes that are so costly and all too common in our rural communities; and
  - provisions that cushion the impact of declining enrollment on small schools.
- The scope of these proposals reflects understanding that costs do not necessarily decrease when the number of students decreases, and Wisconsin needs a school funding system that also recognizes that fact.



## *Advancing Rural Wisconsin: A Preliminary Report*

**Response: Special Education.** The state superintendent recognizes that rural schools often lack the capacity to appropriately support teachers who work with autistic and other behaviorally challenged children. Accordingly, she will dedicate approximately one million dollars of IDEA funding to build a statewide support infrastructure to address the behavioral needs of children. This infrastructure will provide rural teachers with the expert advice and skills to meet the challenges they face educating autistic and behaviorally challenged children.

**Recommendation: Collaborative Efforts.** Collaborative programs and efforts should be developed that will strengthen and improve the ability of rural schools and rural communities to work in creative and innovative ways to advance key issues and local priorities. The plan must support and enhance school and business partnerships, active and engaged regional PK-16 efforts, and other forms of cooperation, collaboration, and partnership. Working through cooperative and collaborative means will promote efficient and effective public and private sector programs and efforts.

**Response: Regional Discussions.** The State Superintendent is establishing a partnership between the Department of Public Instruction and the University of Wisconsin-Extension to help encourage and promote regional discussion forums on rural issues, including the quality of life and accessibility to adequate, affordable, and accessible housing, health care, and senior care in rural communities. Rural communities should define and establish their own priorities.

**Recommendation: Leadership Development.** Comprehensive efforts should be advanced to ensure broad participation and support for leadership development to support Wisconsin's rural areas. That plan must pay special attention to ensure that rural youth have opportunities for meaningful and effective leadership development. Ensuring that our state's rural communities are served by the leadership of active and engaged residents is a key for long-term success and vitality in those rural areas.

**Response: Rural Leadership.** The state superintendent will establish another partnership between the DPI and UW-Extension to strengthen and improve the quality of leadership in Wisconsin's rural areas. This collaboration is intended to ensure that comprehensive statewide efforts are undertaken to identify, develop, and nurture rural leaders. These efforts should help to reinforce activities by such groups as the Youth Connecting Communities Program, Wisconsin Rural Leadership Program, Wisconsin Rural Partners, Wisconsin Rural Challenge, Wisconsin Community Education Association, 4-H, FFA, FBLA, Junior Achievement, Junior Kiwanis, and Junior Rotary. The state superintendent will seek direct federal assistance to pay for these leadership efforts. These leadership development programs also are envisioned to assist rural teachers and educational leaders in fulfilling licensure requirements found in PI 34, the Wisconsin Quality Educator Initiative.

**Recommendation: Rural School Development – Curriculum, Instruction, Programs.** Efforts should be made to advance educational progress and curricular improvement by seeking to improve and encourage collaboration between and among school districts. Rural school

## ***Advancing Rural Wisconsin: A Preliminary Report***

development must be viewed as a broad and comprehensive commitment to enhance distance learning and service-learning, expand opportunities to work in partnership with the public libraries, ensure the development of highly qualified educators through a flexible system of licensure, and enhance educational opportunities for all students. Making rural school development a clear priority will lead to innovations and improvements in educational opportunity for rural Wisconsin youth.

**Response: Rural Schools.** The state superintendent will establish a cross-divisional team within the Department of Public Instruction to focus on the needs of rural schools. This group will be asked to find ways to ensure that all initiatives proposed by the department are viewed through a rural lens. Furthermore, the state superintendent will establish an out-of-Madison office that will become a one-stop service center for rural issues. These efforts recognize that the department is an important resource for rural Wisconsin, and it must be responsive to those needs.

**Response: Advisory Council.** The state superintendent will announce the appointment of the State Superintendent's Advisory Council on Rural Schools, Libraries, and Communities when she announces the rural policy agenda in early summer. Council membership will represent the interconnectedness of all facets of rural life. It will focus on the special needs and challenges associated with rural education and the various efforts we need to undertake to help strengthen rural schools and the communities they serve. The council will provide ongoing advice and recommendations and help to further strengthen the rural policy agenda.

### ***Part D – Conclusion – Advancing Rural Wisconsin***

Wisconsin has earned a well-deserved reputation for the quality of educational opportunity provided to state residents. With strong schools, accomplished faculty, experienced administrators, and wise governance, the performance of Wisconsin students on standardized tests has reflected the quality of the schools and the value placed on educational achievement.

As Wisconsin faces structural changes in the nature of available jobs and the state's demographics continue to shift, the state will face significant challenges in maintaining that record of high student achievement and continuation of the levels of funding provided to support educational excellence. The challenges facing the state's rural communities and rural schools is, in many instances, more difficult due to the combined impact of limitations in funding coupled with the rapid pace of change.

This attention to advancing the needs and interests of rural Wisconsin represents a focus to ensure that the students, families, and communities in our state's rural areas have access to the same educational opportunity found in other sectors of the state. The strategic directions included in *Advancing Rural Wisconsin* represent the starting point of a broader commitment to strengthen and support those rural schools.

## ***Advancing Rural Wisconsin: A Preliminary Report***

State Superintendent Burmaster exercises the authority of her office and advancement of the *New Wisconsin Promise* to ensure that all students receive the same high-quality educational opportunity that historically has been provided to the residents of our state.

## *Closing Word*

*From Elizabeth Burmaster, State Superintendent:*

"The well-being of our rural communities and small schools is essential to the successful future of our state. We need to put small schools on the policy agenda of every leader in Wisconsin. It certainly is a major part of my education agenda for Wisconsin, the *New Wisconsin Promise*.

"We need to come together for our small schools and rural communities. In this plan, *Advancing Rural Wisconsin*, we have an initial outline of a series of important initiatives includes a promise of more to come. By working together, we will move forward to strengthen our rural communities and small schools. We all understand the value of being united behind a cause. There is no better cause than improving the opportunities and future of all Wisconsin children.

"I cordially invite and welcome your thoughts, ideas and suggestions."

April 19, 2004

*Comments, reactions, and suggestions can be sent to:*

Tom Grogan  
Office of the State Superintendent  
Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction  
P.O. Box 7841  
Madison, WI 53707-7841

Fax: (608) 266-5188  
thomas.grogan@dpi.state.wi.us