

Focus on Rural Education:

Sustaining Wisconsin's Rural Schools
and the Communities They Serve

Meeting Notes (as revised)

Pre-Conference Planning Session

10:00 a.m. to 12:00 noon

Wednesday, December 10, 2003

Ashland, Green Bay, Madison, and West Salem.

Deputy State Superintendent **Tony Evers** called the meeting to order just past 10:00 a.m.

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Attendance

Ashland – CESA 12

1. Chris Meier, Teacher, Wisconsin Education Association Council
2. Fred Schlichting, Wisconsin Association of CESA Administrators
3. Sharon Stewart, Wisconsin Rural Leadership

Green Bay – CESA 7

4. Connie Friesen, Wisconsin Rural Challenge, Inc.
5. Tim Friesen, Wisconsin Rural Challenge, Inc.
6. Bob Kellogg, Wisconsin Association of CESA Administrators

Madison – Pyle Center

7. Cynthia DiCamelli, President, Wisconsin PTA
8. JoAnn Stormer, Wisconsin Rural Leadership Program
9. Jim Tobakos, Wisconsin Rural Leadership Program
10. Donna Steffan, Wisconsin Educational Media Association

From the Department of Public Instruction

11. Tony Evers, Deputy State Superintendent
12. Jack Kean, Assistant State Superintendent
13. Sue Grady, Director
14. David Carlson, Director
15. Tom Grogan, Advisor

West Salem

16. Jerry Freimark, Wisconsin Association of CESA Administrators
17. Cheryl Hancock, Wisconsin Rural Leadership Program

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Tony thanked the individuals and groups for attending, noting both the bad winter weather and the relatively short advance notice of the meeting that was provided. He expressed appreciation on behalf of **State Superintendent Elizabeth Burmaster** for the interest, participation, and involvement that has been expressed in this initiative.

The planning session was described as a part of an effort to help organize what has been described as a "Statewide Leadership Conference" to be held in a central Wisconsin location (Wausau has been tentatively identified) on Thursday and Friday, January 29-30, 2004

The focus of this meeting was to help address such questions as:

1. What are the critical connections between good rural schools and vibrant rural communities and the vital role they have to play in our state's future economic health?
2. What specific topics should be on the agenda for the statewide conference? Can you identify speakers or presenters?
3. Who should we invite to participate in the statewide conference?

Tom Grogan facilitated the discussion, with help from **Sue Grady**.

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Discussion on the first question (What are the critical connections between good rural schools and vibrant rural communities and the vital role they have to play in our state's future economic health?) included the following:

(Note these are not exact or complete quotes or references, these enumerated items merely serve to annotate the general flow of the interactive conversation.)

- **Chris Meier** said that students and young people must be involved in the discussion.
- **Connie Friesen** discussed how engaged young people can become a catalyst for significant projects that benefit (and inspire) the broader community.
- **Bob Kellogg** stressed the importance of efforts to keep jobs in the rural communities. He mentioned the need to focus on statewide economic development, perhaps enlisting the support and involvement of such groups as: the Wisconsin Association of Manufacturers and Commerce, the Builder's Association, and others.
- **Chris** mentioned that the issues under discussion relate directly to economic development and that it might make sense to have involvement from the Wisconsin Department of Commerce and the Secretary, Cory Nettles.

- **Tim Friesen** talked about the significant role that rural schools play in the cultural life of rural communities. The rural community tends to support rural schools through such things as attendance at plays, concerts, artistic events, athletic contests, etc. The cultural role of the schools was described as a powerful grassroots force.
- **Bob** noted that rural schools face particular challenges due to impending retirements of school leaders. He mentioned the need to develop a program to relate to the development of leadership skills among prospective rural superintendents. Rural schools face shortages for teachers, principals and other school administrators.
- It was also noted that not all rural communities are vibrant and that in some areas there is not the positive energy and cohesion that is typified by other communities.
- **Connie** explained how efforts to unite the efforts of several small rural schools can lead to the completion of exciting projects. The use of "service learning" efforts can help to strengthen these connections.
- **Chris** said that it was important for young people to have a "sense of place" and to feel that they are a part of these broader community efforts.
- **Cheryl Hancock** noted that the school is the very center of many communities. The school provides the very identity. She also noted that school teachers do not live in many school districts; noting that they commute in. Only the administrative personnel tend to live in the district. As discussion turns to the subject of "consolidation" it raises many concerns and fears in rural schools and in rural communities. We need to find ways to keep small schools healthy and operational. School schools have a tremendous impact on the economy.
- **Cynthia DiCamelli** talked about the importance of students and the connection of small schools to the communities they serve. The talk about consolidation may benefit from having other paradigms about what shared cooperation might mean in terms of sharing resources, teachers and even facilities. Any efforts need to recognize the differences that exist between different communities and to realize that some communities are ideally suited for different types of specific economic activities. A longer-term effort should focus on helping to bring high technology opportunities to rural areas.
- **Jim Tobakos** mentioned the problem of attracting people to key leadership positions in rural areas – school boards, for example. He noted that many small communities have major issues relating to such issues as: building location, facility size and use, charges placed on community groups for the use of school facilities.
- This lead to a discussion during which **Bob** talked about the problems associated with the "last mile" of technological connections and the problems associated with efforts by the state legislature to prevent local utilities from being involved in providing high-speed Internet connections.

- It was also noted that there was some fear that this effort by the Department of Public Instruction might be a one-time or short-term emphasis. In response **Tom** talked about the commitment of **State Superintendent Burmaster** to the efforts to close the achievement gap, and the recognition that while some people like to view and talk about this as an "urban" problem, the real issue relates to poverty and the state's rural schools and communities have a significant achievement gap and poverty issue. This initiative was described as a long-term commitment by the State Superintendent to make real progress in addressing these issues and in advancing a meaningful agenda.
- **Bob** reiterated that the real issue and focus was one of poverty. **JoAnn Stormer** noted that while there are similarities in the problems that exist across the state, it is also true that real limitations in available resources oftentimes exacerbate problems in those economically less-viable areas. **Tim** noted that place-based learning is also related to those unmet needs. Expanded use of community and service-based learning may be a key to effort to link the curriculum with the solving of real problems.
- **David Carlson** talked about some of the special conditions in rural schools that are not adequately recognized or addressed by the state's school funding formula. It was also noted that the leaders of rural schools (superintendents and principals) need a wide variety of unique skills and abilities. Transportation cost issues, for example, pose real problems.
- **Chris** noted that Wisconsin has a strong "knowledge sector" and that we needed to find ways and strategies to help it to grow. We need to realize how these efforts help to contribute to other sectors of the state's economy.

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Discussion relating to the other questions (What specific topics should be on the agenda for the statewide conference? Can you identify speakers or presenters? Who should we invite to participate in the statewide conference?)

- **Bob** mentioned that Nebraska recently held a conference with a similar focus. He recommended the involvement of **Doug Christensen**, Commissioner of Education for the state of Nebraska.
- **Fred Schlichting** mentioned that the State of Louisiana conducted a study on the viability of small school districts. This study entitled "Small School Districts and Economies of Scale" was released 5/14/03. He said many things cited in that study apply to Wisconsin rural schools.
- **Jerry Freimark** talked about the public relations and marketing challenges facing rural schools. He suggested that **David Jarau** (spelling?) be considered as a potential speaker. He recently addressed a program offered by the Wisconsin Rural Challenge.
- **David** talked about the crucial importance of ensuring that students and teachers were involved in the session. This is where learning and teaching takes place.

- **Tim** mentioned the programs to involve youth through the Youth Connecting Community program.
- **Bob** identified alcohol and other drug programs as a potential topic.
- **JoAnn** mentioned the possibility of securing involvement from 4H programs.
- **Jack Kean** noted the career and technical educational organizations that have consultants and advisors within the Department of Public Instruction.
- **Bob** noted the importance of engaging the press and the news media in these efforts. The unbalanced coverage of issues facing rural schools was noted as an issue.
- **Cheryl** asked who was the focus of our intended audience. This led to a discussion during which **Tom** noted that the key is to involve the efforts of key stakeholders, policy makers and others who can help to sharpen our focus on these issues and challenges.
- **Donna Steffan** mentioned how school librarians used teams in other settings to help accomplish important reform efforts.
- The nature of the session was then described in such terms as: a policy discussion...to produce a work product...that involves the work of groups...with actions plans...focusing on how rural schools can do better...with some sort of a wrap-up session to tie it all together.
- When the involvement of legislators was brought up, it was noted by **Chris** to invite U.S. Representative **Ron Kind** as he serves as the chair of a rural education caucus. Other state legislators that were mentioned included Rep. **Luther Olsen** and Senator **Mike Ellis**.
- **Pam Porter** brought up the discussion of having teams involved in the proceedings. This led to a discussion about the nature of the session and the limitations in the number of available slots.
- **JoAnn** asked about what expenses would be covered. Sue noted that the grant would cover the room and food for the participants, but not the transportation costs.
- **Connie** held up the DPI's recently-published "toolkit for service learning" and noted that the cover image was of a mural that was done by rural students.
- **Fred** expressed the hope that the conference will involve the selection of individuals who live and work north of state highway 29. He wanted to make sure that the session truly reached those who are living in the state's rural areas.
- **David** noted that just as the State Superintendent was in this effort for the "long haul" that it was important for the rural leaders to also make the commitment to work with these issues over an extended period of time. Stronger and more sustained efforts will help to address

rural needs and to ensure that there are the connections and the collaborations required to make progress.

During the middle-part of this discussion, **Tom** presented the following listing of major topics by area:

School-Related

- No Child Left Behind (regulations and problems)
- Teacher recruitment and retention
- Administrator training, replacement, recruitment and retention
- School finance issues
- Curricular issues – including service learning
- Public Relations
- Consolidation
- Collaboration
- News media and public relations

Economics-Related

- Employment prospects for youth
- Schools are cultural centers (arts, recreation, athletics)
- Access to technology (high speed Internet)
- Rural economic development

Leadership Challenges

- At the community level
- At the school district level (superintendents and board members)
- At the school building level (principals and teachers)
- At the student levels (engagement in service learning)

Other Issues

- Facility use and fees/charges
- AODA
- Community pride and momentum

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Tom brought the meeting to a close at roughly 11:30 a.m. He thanked all of the participants on behalf of **State Superintendent Burmaster** and **Deputy State Superintendent Evers**. He said that meeting notes would be prepared and distributed to summarize the proceedings.

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For more information (or to send corrections/additions) contact:

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