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Contact: Tom Beebe, 414-384-9094

Wisconsin Alliance
for Excellent Schools

Burmaster's State Aid Initiative Helps Rural Schools

The Wisconsin Alliance for Excellent Schools applauds State Superintendent Elizabeth Burmaster's "Advancing Rural Wisconsin" initiative, as a significant step toward addressing the financial problems facing many rural school districts.

Burmaster, who heads the Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction, announced her proposal Friday, June 4, 2004, in a speech in Eau Claire to the Rural Policy Network Forum Reunion.

The most noteworthy part of her initiative is a proposal to create a new sparsity-based categorical aid program for small rural districts with high levels of poverty. Burmaster said that "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 efforts." Depending on its still-forthcoming details, this new categorical aid program could provide a major boost to many of the state's rural communities.

WAES also supports the other elements in her rural initiative, including additional funds for the state's transportation categorical aid program; a technical change in revenue limits that would help declining-enrollment districts; and the creation of a number of partnerships and teams to focus on problems faced by rural schools.

The Wisconsin Alliance for Excellent Schools (WAES) has long advocated special aid for small rural districts. Its Wisconsin Adequacy Plan includes specific measures to do just that. While the details of the WAES plan differ from Burmaster's, WAES is delighted that the Superintendent is taking the lead on this issue.

Some of the particular problems in Wisconsin's rural schools were highlighted in a recent report by the Institute for Wisconsin's Future (IWF), *Wisconsin Atlas of School Finance*. WAES and IWF are collaborators on the Wisconsin Adequacy Plan. Nearly 60% of Wisconsin's school districts are rural and more than 30% of the state's students attend rural schools. These schools tend to have higher levels of poverty, higher transportation costs, and higher ratios of staff-to-students, along with other inefficiencies due to their geography.

WAES is a statewide, broad-based, diverse coalition of school boards, parent groups, educators, students, faith-based organizations, and communities working to increase state education aid so that schools have the resources required to meet academic standards and the real needs of all Wisconsin children.

For more information on WAES, the Wisconsin Adequacy Plan, or the Atlas, see the WAES website at <http://www.excellentschools.org>, or contact Tom Beebe, Institute for Wisconsin's Future, at 414-384-9094.