

Investing in Rural Schools

Good for Wisconsin's Bottom Line

Historically, funding for Public Education has been the top spending priority in the state's budget – and rightly so. Studies show states with strong educational attainment perform better economically over the long run.

Education is also good for Wisconsin's bottom line. Well-educated citizens tend to obtain better jobs, have more disposable income, pay more in sales and income taxes and rely less on state assistance.

Elementary, Middle, and High Schools are especially important to Wisconsin's rural communities. Rural schools often serve as the center of community life.



Despite the importance of education to the economy and rural communities, state aid to schools has been on the decline in recent years. For example: data from the School District of Rhinelander, a rural school district, show the declining percentage of state aid: In that district, state aid has dropped from 52% of school spending in 2000-01 to 11% in 2014-15.

Declines in state aid must be made up with local property taxes, which can result in divisive fights over local referenda.

Cuts in state education funding hit rural schools especially hard, because property values in rural areas might be high even though incomes are low. **Over the past 20 years, 80% of the referenda asking taxpayers for more money to keep the school doors open have been in rural school districts.**

In the 2017-2019 budget, Wisconsin Farmers Union supports:

- Adjust the cutoff for rural schools receiving Sparsity Aid. Sparsity Aid was increased between 2015-2017, but the aid only went to rural schools with less than 740 students. Many districts that consolidated schools before 2015 didn't receive Sparsity Aid because their schools grew too big.
- Maintain robust funding for the TEACH program, which funds broadband expansion and technological infrastructure within schools to allow more access to digital learning, which helps schools keep up with advancements in technology."
- Fully fund the rural teacher loan forgiveness program authorized by the legislature in 2016 (2015 Wisconsin Act 359) to help attract teachers to rural areas.
- Restore revenue limit authority (+\$200-204 per pupil) to all districts, providing a modest increase in school spending while protecting taxpayers and setting schools on the right path for the future.
- Increase the cap for sparsity aid up to a threshold of 1,500 students.

This fact sheet is brought to you by:



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