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Members of the Joint Committee on Finance:

I am Kim Kaukl, the Executive Director of the Wisconsin Rural Schools Alliance, an organization of 215 plus members with 154 school districts and several CESAs, technical colleges, universities, business members and individual members. WiRSA represents the students, administrators, teachers, school board members and communities of our rural schools. Due to the time constraints and to leave more time for individual members to testify, I am submitting the Wisconsin Rural Schools Alliance (WiRSA) Biennial Budget testimony in written format. I want to thank you for this opportunity to share our organization’s perspective on the Governors 2019-2020 state budget proposal and the Blue-Ribbon Commission on School Funding Report (BRC).

WiRSA supports the Governor’s budget proposal for K-12 education and we feel this proposal is another major step in the right direction to adequately fund all schools. We also support many of the BRC’s recommendations. With that said, there are several items in both proposals that are very similar and provide common ground that should bring about bipartisan support. They are:

1. 30/60 Special Education Reimbursement
2. Revenue Limit Per Pupil Adjustment
3. Aid for Mental Health
4. Sparsity Aid
5. Low-income Aid
6. Bilingual Aid
7. High-Cost Transportation Aid
8. Assistance to help attract and retain Teachers and Administrators
9. Shared Services
10. State Funded Full Day 4K

Please note that many of these proposals were the main topics of concern discussed by administrators, board members, teachers and community members across the state during the BRC hearings.

Looking at the specifics of the Governor’s budget proposals for K-12 Education -

1. We support the Governor’s proposal to increase Special Education Funding by 30% in 2019-20 and 60% in 2020-21. The BRC has also made a similar recommendation. We feel this movement is needed as Special Ed. Funding has been locked at the present level, around 25%, since 2008. Because of this low funding and not keeping up with CPI, many of our rural districts are having to use anywhere from 15-20% of their Fund 10 General Fund to offset their Fund 27 Special Education cost, thus impacting the needs and programs of the rest of the student population. Finally, we are very concerned with the inequity that is presently happening between our Public-School Special Need’s Students receiving around 25% funding while Special Needs Voucher Students are receiving 90%.
2. We support both the Governor’s Revenue Limit Per Pupil Adjustment of $200 and $204 over the biennium. We also support the BRC’s recommendation on this subject of using CPI for future increases.
3. We support the Governor’s proposal for an additional $22,000,000 annually above the base funding of $3,000,000 for Mental Health Services. The BRC also supports increased funding in this very important area. As we know, research is showing the impact that mental health has to do with the day to day lives of our students and staff. Addressing this need head-on can have a major impact on areas like school discipline, academic success and the overall health of students.
4. We support the Governor’s proposal to improve Sparsity Aid by removing the enrollment cap and providing $100 for any district that is over 745 students and a population density of fewer than 10 students per square mile. The BRC also makes a similar recommendation. This is a change our organization has pushed for over the last four years and feel it would be very helpful to many of our larger rural districts. *See attached document showing high enrollment and sparsity examples.*
5. We support the Governor’s proposal and the BRC’s recommendation of counting economically disadvantage students at 1.2 FTE. This will be helpful in creating a balance in many of our rural areas that have high property value along with high poverty.
6. We support the proposals put forward by the Governor and the BRC providing additional aid for our Bilingual-Bicultural programs. In many of our rural districts there are limited resources, and/or the cost of resources can have a major impact on local budgets. These proposals will help address these needs.
7. We support the Governor’s proposal for High Cost Transportation Aid. The BRC also makes a similar recommendation. This issue is key to many of our rural districts where transportation cost has a major negative impact on our rural budgets. Many of our district’s bus more than 300 square miles with some as high as 600+ square miles.
8. We support the Governor’s proposal and the BRC in allowing the rehiring of retirees and other recommendations per Paper #28 on Educator Workforce Shortage.
9. We support the BRC’s recommendation of $2,000,000 GPR annually for Shared Service Incentives. Shared Services is a much more desired route than consolidation already occurring in many of our rural districts. This incentive will help many districts maintain their identities, while providing needed services between districts at a manageable cost.
10. We support increased funding for Full Day 4K recommended both by the Governor and the BRC.

In closing, there are many other items from the Governor’s Proposal and the BRC’s recommendation that WiRSA supports. I invite you to visit the public schools in your area and talk to the students, teachers and administrators. I think you would be amazed at the great things happening in our public schools. I also invite you to join us at our WiRSA Conference October 28-29 in Wisconsin Dells where we showcase the great programs that are occurring in our rural schools.

Thank you for listening and for serving the citizens of Wisconsin.

Sincerely,

Kim Kaukl

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