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Elizabeth Burmaster
State Superintendent

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110 rural districts share \$3.6 million in sparsity aid

Wisconsin's small rural school districts are receiving notification of their share of a new \$3.6 million categorical aid program enacted as part of the 2007-09 budget.

School districts are eligible for sparsity aid if their 2007-08 enrollment is no more than 725 students, enrollment density is less than 10 students per square mile, and at least 20 percent of students qualify for free or reduced-price school meals. Payments were set in legislation at \$150 or \$300 per student depending on district poverty levels. For the 2008-09 school year, aid will go to 110 qualifying districts serving nearly 50,000 students.

"Investing in our rural schools advances future economic development," said State Superintendent Elizabeth Burmaster. "This new sparsity aid will support our public school districts in their important role of educating students in our rural communities."

The new aid program was part of Burmaster's biennial budget request to help small, rural districts confront common issues. The State Superintendent's Rural Advisory Council highlighted the lack of economies of scale, declining enrollment, rapidly rising property values, low median income, higher transportation costs, and large geographic boundaries as challenges that impact small, rural districts' ability to provide a quality education for every child. Sen. Kathy Vinehout (D-Alma) provided strong support for including the aid as part of the state's budget.

Wisconsin has more than 76,000 farms dotted across its rural landscape, and about 44 percent of the state's public school students call rural communities home. Districts with the lowest student density, students per square mile, are among the state's lowest wealth districts in terms of average income. On average, these districts have higher poverty rates, higher transportation costs, and in some cases, have high property values that result in the district receiving lower levels of state aid due to the districts' property "wealth" as measured by the state school aid formula. Roughly 30 other states incorporate a sparsity factor into their state school aid formula or provide direct assistance to small, rural districts.

"Wisconsin has an obligation to keep its rural schools and communities strong," Burmaster said. "The local school is often the social center of small, rural communities. With technological, scientific, and global advances making quality education ever more vital, this aid will help our rural schools build capacity to offer educational opportunities that will help their students compete in the 21st century."

For the 2008-09 sparsity aid payment, school membership was based on enrollment for the 2007-08 school year. Total membership for the 110 eligible districts was 49,612 students. Poverty rates ranged from 20 percent in the Pepin Area School District to 81 percent in the Lac du Flambeau School District. The average poverty rate was 38 percent. The 2008-09 aid appropriation of \$3,644,600 will result in per pupil payments prorated at 45 percent of the authorized amount and paid on the third Monday of September.

A list of districts eligible for Sparsity Aid and their prorated aid amount to be paid on Sept. 15, 2008, is available in the [complete news release](#).

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