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A policy and advocacy update from the Iowa Department of Education

As expected, the Rural Education Recommendations approved last month by the State Board of Education have generated considerable conversation and controversy in many communities large and small. After working at the state level for more than 14 years, I anticipated and understand the degree of emotion and the fact that most concerns have been expressed from smaller districts that would not be directly affected by the pending recommendations. There are some ironies and contradictions that arise in any discussion about small school districts in Iowa. Since most of our districts are small by national comparisons, anything that raises questions about any small districts elicits a response from a great many communities.

One of the ironies in starting a conversation about schools that may be too small is that small districts have been the backbone of Iowa's traditional success both in education in other aspects of community life. Small school districts will continue to be essential to Iowa's educational growth in the future. Indeed, I have spent most of my time in state government in appreciation and admiration of the community commitment that that has served us so well.

Why, then, after more than 14 years, would I raise any concerns? First, it is important to point out that the recommendations from me that have been supported by the State Board of Education and the Governor have been about high schools. Quite honestly, it is not because we have clear evidence that our smallest high schools have dramatically lower achievement; the data that we have does, however, indicate that the future quality may be threatened. As such, the dialogue we need today is about the future of education quality in Iowa. It must be about taking the steps today that will assure that 10-15 years down the road our students will be provided the opportunity to exceed the performance levels we see today.

I have attached a spreadsheet to this Education Leader that provides you with the annual number of births by county since 1983. Generally, the number of high school students today across the state will provide the largest graduating classes we will see for the next 20 years. In 2001, the statewide kindergarten class was 16% smaller than the class of graduating seniors. These are the statewide numbers. It is not uncommon for me to speak with district leaders who see 30% fewer students in K-3 compared to their students in grades 9-12.

This means that the vise will continue to tighten for our smaller districts. Fewer students will mean fewer dollars. Fewer dollars will mean lower teacher pay and difficulty in recruiting teachers - particularly for high schools. According to the Rural School and Community Trust, Iowa's rural teacher salaries are the fifth lowest in the nation and third worst compared to other teachers in the state. More than ever, the labor market for new teachers is a national market and we are losing our ability to be even minimally competitive in our smallest districts.

Though the topic is difficult and often emotionally charged, I believe that preventing or refusing to begin the dialogue to occur is not a responsible leadership option. The State Board and I understand that if we take greater responsibility for initiating the conversation, it provides support to those who need to sponsor it locally. I think we also clearly understand that the end result may be different in different communities who find different ways to an acceptable solution for their students. The viability of high school opportunity will depend on factors that may vary considerably from one community or set of communities to the next.

Community leaders need to come together and look to the future. Sketch out a 3-year plan, a 5-year plan, and 10-year plan using the most likely scenario - not the most severe or the most optimistic, but the most likely, using factors such as the ones outlined below. (Incidentally, I think that all of the planning perspectives below apply to districts of all sizes.)

Projected enrollments: Certainly look at the birth rates, but also use what you know about how young families are distributed in the county or counties served by your district. You will also have the data to see how large the first and second grade classes were that provided this year's juniors and seniors. Would you anticipate similar trends in terms of gains or losses? Consider the pattern of available and future housing and its realistic effect on enrollment.

Finances: Calculate projected costs based on projected enrollment and instructional/administrative costs. Compare revenue sources as realistically as possible. For example, some districts may be able to access additional levies while others may not. Obviously, the diminished budget guarantee will be a factor to consider.

Student achievement: Examine results of various assessments to determine if achievement is improving and students are prepared for college. Examine other indicators such as graduation rates and attendance records. Don't let current policy or testing controversies cause you to narrow your curriculum. Research how well local students do once they get to college. Remember that, in the very new future, the hallmark of an effective K-12 district will not be high school graduation, but the success of those graduates in earning a two-year or four-year degree. Will students from your district have had the opportunities needed to be competitive with those from other districts?

Education programs and staff: Examine the coursework to determine if it is rigorous, challenging, and prepares students for college. Do you have the ability to provide the support programs to help a larger proportion of students be prepared for postsecondary success? Review staffing records to project retirements and other changes that will create the need to be competitive in faculty or leadership recruitment and retention. Are you open and prepared to access emerging distance learning opportunities through funding and changes in staffing, scheduling and calendars?

Cooperation with neighboring districts, your community college and other education providers: Are you and your neighbors open to sharing programs and staff, and regional academies? Are you just beginning those partnerships or are you well into the flexibility that is needed for successful collaboration? It usually takes some time for those relationships to develop.

Facilities: Assess the quality of buildings and other assets such as busses to determine future purchasing needs or remodeling budgets. Buildings should include necessary features such as technology, labs, and special-needs accommodations, and meet fire and safety codes. Do you have a long-term and short-term facilities plan?

Conclusion:

It is most important that this **not** be a conversation among and about a very few districts that may feel particularly threatened by some current proposals. In looking to the future, we have to look at Iowa broadly and recognize the fact that much of our state will be coping with declining population until our economy begins to change. How can we work together, with districts of all sizes and with other non-education partners, to establish and expand new ways of working together to assure continued quality education and continued quality of life for Iowans? If you truly believe in the heritage that has brought us today's level of success, then you will be able to see how that same commitment can provide for a strong future as well.

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