

ADAPTING TO POPULATION DECLINE - RESOURCES FOR RURAL SCHOOLS

Testimony for the Center for Rural PA

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My name is Amanda Hetrick and I have served as the Superintendent of the Forest Area School District for the past 12 years. I have spent 35 years working in education as a teacher and administrator with 33 of those years being in rural K-12 schools and two years at a post-secondary proprietary career school. In the time I have been with the Forest Area School District, I have seen the population of students served by the schools drop from 525 in 2012 to 378 in 2024. One of my predecessors checks in with me sometimes and talks about having a student population of nearly 750 students during his tenure which ended in 2005. A population decline of this magnitude brings with it many challenges for small rural schools and the need for some supportive measures which I will highlight for you during this testimony.

Forest Area School District includes all of Forest County and small portions of Venango and Elk Counties. The district is just over 500 square miles with an enrollment of just under 400 students. Forest County has around 6,600 residents with about 2,000 of those being inmates of the state prison located in Marienville (Department of Corrections, 2023), this is 30% of our population. In the past several years, we have had an overall population decrease of 5%, while realizing an increase of those living in poverty and senior citizens who are on fixed incomes. We educate students in two Pre-K through grade 12 school buildings located almost 30 miles apart.

Our student demographics reflect 22% special education, 15% homeless, 64% economically disadvantaged, and 19.6% persons in poverty with 31.4% of children aged 18 years and under living under the poverty level, which is almost double the state-wide average in the state of Pennsylvania (16.4%). The median income of our families is \$43,958 per year as compared

to a state average of \$67,587 per year. The Forest County per capita income is \$20,696, which is the third lowest in the state. (US Census Bureau, 2022)

POTENTIAL FOR CONSOLIDATION

Based upon what I have just stated, the argument might be made to consolidate the two Forest Area Schools into one building, which on the surface sounds like an excellent solution for declining enrollment. As mentioned earlier, the district is just over 500 square miles. The Allegheny National Forest, which occupies 50% of our district's area, divides our attendance area right down the center and creates significant transportation issues. Each day, our buses and vans travel 2,500 miles to transport students to and from school. The costs for this transportation are high for rural schools and our transportation reimbursement typically covers about 50% of our expenses. Consolidation of our schools would significantly increase the amount of time that students spend on buses to close to 90 minutes one way for some students as well as our overall transportation costs.

Looking at consolidation from another point of view might involve splitting the students up and sending them to the nearest schools in other districts. This also increases rather than alleviating transportation costs and in many cases would mean bus rides of between 60 and 100 minutes one way for students which would certainly impact attendance and their ability to participate in extracurricular activities since transportation to and from the school would be challenging and difficult for their parents. It would also mean a loss of identity for our communities which center many of their activities around the schools.

In addition, the Board of Directors of Forest Area has been diligent in caring for our buildings and keeping them warm, safe and dry for the students who attend. Building a single school in a more central location is not a good option since the District and our taxpayers could not afford to take on the debt that would be associated with a new building. Furthermore, since the Allegheny

National Forest bisects the district, it is questionable that we could identify a good central location. If we could and if the existing schools were sold, it is unlikely that in Forest County we could sell them for what they would be worth thereby shortchanging the taxpayers and the students.

The schools are truly community centers in Forest County and the students rely on the schools to provide many basic services such as medical care and mental health counseling which will be detailed later on in my testimony. Depriving students and their families of these benefits of schools based in our communities would be devastating to the survival of our rural way of life.

STAFFING

Small rural schools struggle with staffing issues and I am sure you have probably seen many references to the teacher shortage in PA. Teachers in the Forest Area have risen to the occasion by earning teaching credentials in multiple areas so that we can continue to offer a variety of courses to our students and meet state regulations. For example, I have two English Language Arts teachers who also teach Family and Consumer Science. One of those ladies is also teaching a section of sixth grade math since she has obtained her middle level mathematics certificate. There are also elementary teachers who are teaching multi-grade classes. In all, of 49 professional staff in Forest Area, 30 have two or more areas of certification with some teachers having as many as five.

Despite the willingness of our teachers to work hard and develop multiple areas of specialization, some of the most difficult certifications to find are Physics and Chemistry. However, rural students need to have the opportunity to take these courses. In our situation, we need one section of Chemistry in each building each year and one section of physics every other year. It would be very helpful if the state were to grant waivers which would allow a teacher with general science or physical science to teach classes in Chemistry or Physics for

credit if a school has made reasonable efforts to find a certified teacher in that area. Another example is that a middle level math teacher can teach geometry to ninth grade students, but they are not allowed to teach the identical course for tenth grade students without a Secondary Math certification. Rural schools need additional flexibility so that they can best utilize the staff that they have and can afford.

SPECIAL EDUCATION AND GIFTED EDUCATION

There are a lot of rules and regulations that we must follow in providing special education and gifted education services to students. Small rural districts often do not have enough students that qualify for a specific service to justify the costs of offering that service in house. That means that many times, we must pay tuition to other schools that provide those services which can be very costly and then in addition, we must transport students to those classrooms and/or activities that are designed for their specific needs. For example, placing one Emotional Support student in a classroom hosted by our Intermediate Unit which runs consortium classes for smaller schools in our region costs \$37,287. In addition, we typically spend anywhere from \$80,000- \$150,000 annually in additional transportation for those students. It would be helpful to provide funding to help offset the costs of special education transportation for rural schools.

FUNDING

Although the fair funding lawsuit on behalf of schools in PA was successful, it will not be of significant benefit for Forest Area School District and several of the small rural districts in our region. Because of transportation costs, the cost of operating two buildings and the number of special education students we serve (22% of our population) along with the more usual costs as compared to our declining population, our per student cost is high. In the adequacy map developed by the plaintiffs, Forest Area is shown as needing no additional funding. This could not be further from the truth. About 55% of our funding comes from local sources of revenue.

Our residents are being taxed at a much higher proportion than residents of surrounding geographic locations, many of whom are funded by the state at a much higher percentage than the 40% that Forest Area receives, even though our residents have far fewer financial resources. There needs to be a mechanism attached to the funding formula that allows rural school districts to demonstrate their need since unfortunately education can be far more expensive in rural districts since they lack the economies of scale that can be found in more populated areas.

MEDICAL SERVICES

In Forest County, there are two primary communities and each one hosts a part-time medical clinic for primary care. There are no places in the county that provide dental or vision care. As a result, many of our students go without essential care for far too long which often exacerbates medical problems for students. When students have parents who are able to take the time off from work and can afford to take them for medical services, it often requires missing a full day of school for the appointment since they must travel so far to access the services, which impacts school performance. As the population declines in our region, I see this situation becoming worse rather than better. Schools need to be able to have services provided at their site and I would encourage the state to consider supporting mobile medical, dental and vision services for students and potentially for their families.

At Forest Area, we have found a sponsor and been able to provide mobile dental services for students that include preventative care and some restorative services for the past several years. We schedule the service for 3-4 days in the spring and again in the fall and nearly half of our students receive regular dental care in this way. When we first started this service, we had multiple elementary age students who had never been to the dentist. We are still working on

finding a way to provide vision services so that students can get glasses as a part of the service. I suspect many schools face the same issues.

MENTAL HEALTH SERVICES

It can be very difficult to access mental health services in rural areas and waiting times are often weeks and sometimes months. While in recent years, the state has provided funding to support mental health services in schools, districts have no assurance that this will be sustainable if they hire their own staff with the available funding. Despite that concern, districts have been hiring staff with this money, but in many cases by doing so, districts have been contributing to a larger problem within the community. Districts are attractive employers since benefits are better than typical mental health providers can offer. So since there is a shortage of mental health workers in most rural areas, districts are hiring staff away from providers and then even though students may benefit, the community suffers because waiting times and available services decrease for everyone else in the community. It might be better to streamline the process to license schools as outpatient clinics so that providers can see students at school which would reduce no show rates for providers and avoid the travel and absenteeism that come with students seeing providers in the community. Once schools are licensed, it might also be possible to allow them to be used as clinics in the late afternoons and evenings for adult patients so that services can be provided in the community so that they are more accessible for all. By following this model of licensing, Forest Area has been able to provide a continuum of mental health services for students starting with online daily check-ins for all students, in-person check-ins for some students with specific staff members, services from the school counselor, sessions with the licensed social worker and then on for more intensive outpatient counseling with a community agency. We have also been able to offer medical supervision and medicine management services at school. I think that many rural schools and potentially communities could benefit from this type of model.

HOMELESSNESS

As you may know, the McKinney Vento definition of homelessness that governs school districts requires that we count anyone who could lose their housing at any given moment. These students most commonly include families that are doubled up, grandchildren living with a relative other than their parents, families living in campers or tents or other seasonal housing. More than 50 of our 378 students are considered homeless.

We have noted an upward trend in the number of grandparents raising their grandchildren. Most of these grandparents were never planning for this responsibility and find themselves struggling with financial burdens that come with raising a child. They live on a fixed income and often have unreliable transportation so it is difficult for them to access services their grandchildren need. We have worked hard to be a good partner to these grandparents by starting a support group where they can ask for ideas and support from their peers. In addition, we also provide information about technology, the process of applying for social security and other programs that can help them in supporting their families financially, an understanding of legal terms and the status that they have in terms of making decisions for their grandchildren with regard to medical care, education and other services. The number of these families where grandparents are standing in for parents appear to be growing in our rural communities and supporting these grandparents will be an essential component of ensuring their grandchildren have an opportunity to succeed since many of these grandchildren are dealing with the trauma that comes from abuse, exposure to drug and alcohol abuse or grief from the death or incarceration of their parents.

During the years of COVID funding, we received money that we could use to support student needs as a result of homelessness which has allowed us to provide hygiene products, towels and sheets and many other basic necessities that most of us take for granted. That money will

come to an end this year, leaving many of our students lacking those supplies. It would be very helpful to have a dedicated funding stream that would help in those extreme situations.

LACK OF ACCESS

One of the greatest challenges to access for our families is the organization and structure of the services that are available to them. Forest County is joined with Warren County for Human Services, with Clarion County for Housing Services, with Crawford County for Early Head Start and Family Literacy Services. Venango County hosts Career Link and the Career and Technical School that serves our students. As you can imagine, this is very confusing for people and often the people working in these agencies are not very familiar with Forest County since the majority of their work is associated with the county in which they are located. Often, families in Forest County simply give up rather than getting the services they need because the system is so difficult to navigate. Broadband is also lacking in Forest County, as in many other rural counties. Many of these services require online submission of information which is not always possible for our families.

I've often thought that it would be extremely helpful to have some kind of an "adult guidance counselor" who would serve as a systems navigator and help families assemble the paperwork they need, offer a location with private Internet access and get people to the right agency to meet their needs so that our students would have safe housing, food security, mental health and medical services that they and their families need. This person would also be able to help adults and students access training, continuing education and support those searching for employment.

IMPORTANCE OF RURAL SCHOOLS

While I have highlighted many of the concerns regarding rural schools, rural schools do provide benefits to their students. According to the report *Why Rural Matters 2023*, rural schools appear to offset some of the impact of poverty. In terms of achievement, students experiencing poverty scored 27 points lower than their peers on the grade 8 NAEP math assessment and 22 points lower in reading; however in rural schools, these differences were 22 and 18, respectively for students in poverty.

In addition, students in rural districts are more likely to graduate high school than their non-rural counterparts. In the report *Why Rural Matters 2023*, the majority of states with enough rural students to make data available (34 of 46), rural students graduate at higher rates than their non-rural peers. It appears that the unique strengths of rural areas, such as smaller schools and close community ties combined to create graduation advantages.

Finally, rural schools as I have mentioned previously serve as community centers where people can come together. Sometimes that is simply to cheer for their children or their neighbor's children at a ball game, but more often than not it is for help in raising those children. Rural schools help families learn about how to access medical and other services, provide information about post-secondary options since many of our students are still first generation college students, and often offer support for struggling families such as clothing and food. Maintaining and supporting our rural schools in these efforts is essential to continuing our rural way of life.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The issues and problems of declining population are many, some of which I highlighted for you. What we need to move forward is the willingness to address these challenges. It is time to reevaluate what it means to provide a public education that meets student needs and prepares

our students for life beyond pre-K-12 programs. The more I think about this, the more I realize that we cannot solve school problems in isolation. We need to look at research on declining population, poverty and community needs and see this as something that should be addressed in a collaborative way.

One of the most promising practices I have read about lately is the idea of full service community schools. An investment in our communities that allowed schools to serve as one-stop shops for families would be one way to address the lack of resources located in the immediate community. Many of our rural schools have additional space because of declining population and the buildings are not utilized to capacity. If schools were utilized in this way, a social worker or resource navigator could be located at the school to help support families. In addition, schools would be an excellent location for mobile medical, dental and vision services to be provided for students and their families. Food pantries and clothing distributions could be handled at school locations as well. In order for this to happen, some of those services would need to be in the late afternoon or early evening and schools would need help covering the cost of the additional staffing that would be necessary to keep them open to the public later in the day. Using existing public buildings to provide services would eliminate the need for office space and permanent staff for many providers and would help to direct their funding directly to consumers.

The state legislature and the PA Department of Education need to recognize that a “one size fits all” approach to our schools will not work for schools with declining populations. There needs to be a process enacted that allows for flexibility, waivers from some regulations and even pilot projects that may be a little unusual, but effective in rural circumstances.

By living in rural areas, people are making trade-offs of access to services and convenience for their way of life, but those choices should not hurt chances for growth and success. We need to

look at new models and demonstrate a commitment to providing rural schools and communities with the opportunity to succeed and thrive.

Thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony and share my passion for rural schools and rural communities. I appreciate your time and attention and am looking forward to answering any questions that this testimony may have raised.

Respectfully submitted,

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