



TO: Members of the Assembly Committee on Mining and Rural Development
DATE: February 4, 2016
RE: Assembly Bill 793
FROM: Kara O'Connor, Wisconsin Farmers Union,
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Good morning. My name is Kara O'Connor, and I am the Government Relations Director at Wisconsin Farmers Union. Thank you for the opportunity to testify on Assembly Bill 793, relating to the teacher loan program.

On behalf of the farm families and rural residents that make up our organization, I am testifying in favor of AB 793, which would modify the teacher loan program to provide loan forgiveness for teachers employed in school districts in rural counties.

Rural schools face a unique set of challenges as they work to provide nearly 44% of Wisconsin's PreK-12 students with a high quality education including high transportation costs, slow, unreliable internet service, and limited options for cutting costs. Additionally, since 2011, overall state aid to rural schools has declined. With fewer resources, rural districts are often unable to offer teaching positions with competitive wages, making it harder for these districts to recruit new teachers. Even teachers that are successfully recruited for a position at a rural school often opt to leave for higher-paying positions in urban districts just a few years later.

By establishing student loan forgiveness for teachers in rural districts, AB 793 creates an additional incentive for our best and brightest educators to seek employment at Wisconsin's rural schools. While this bill is certainly a step in the right direction, it does represent additional red tape that prospective teachers must navigate. One way to address this issue is to increase state funding to two-thirds of the costs associated with public education. Doing so would allow rural districts to offer more resources and competitive wages to our teachers.

On behalf of the farm families and rural residents that make up our organization, I would like to thank the authors and cosponsors of AB 793 for recognizing that an investment in our children's education is an investment in our future. Wisconsin Farmers Union urges the committee to pass this legislation through committee.

Thank you, and I would be happy to answer any questions.



Romaine Quinn

STATE REPRESENTATIVE • 75th ASSEMBLY DISTRICT

AB 793

Thank you for the opportunity to discuss these important bills today.

The Rural Wisconsin Initiative is the product of many conversations about how to improve opportunities for our rural residents, and how to attract new residents to areas that are quickly aging. While development projects and infrastructure in the southeast corner of the state often take the headlines in news reports, our rural areas sometimes see their issues moved to the back burner.

The 21 outstate legislators who have come together in support of many of the bills you will hear today agree that the conversation needs to include our rural counties. No one wants a handout; rather, our goal is to give our students, parents, and workers the same opportunities to grow, develop, and excel that their more urban counterparts can sometimes take for granted. Rural Wisconsin is quickly aging, and will continue to lose population over the coming decades. Addressing this problem now is vital to maintaining the vibrancy of our state.

The teacher loan forgiveness program has been offered to education students in urban Milwaukee and administered through the Higher Educational Aids Board (HEAB), provided the student meets certain criteria, including enrollment in a program of study leading to a teacher's license in a teacher shortage field. Under the program, HEAB may award, to an eligible student, a loan of up to \$10,000 annually for up to three years. HEAB must forgive 25 percent of the loan for each school year that the loan recipient 1) is employed in the city of Milwaukee as a full-time elementary or secondary school teacher in a high-demand, teacher shortage field; and 2) receives a teacher rating of proficient or distinguished.

As we have said, the Rural Wisconsin Initiative is about equality of opportunity. Through discussions with administrators at my district schools, my local CESA, and the Wisconsin Association of School Boards, I know that rural schools face many of the same challenges in

attracting excellent teachers that these urban Milwaukee schools face. Declining enrollment as families relocate to cities means that rural school budgets are tight, and schools often face a limited pool of candidates that have often been reviewed previously.

Meanwhile, the loan forgiveness program has been underutilized, having spent only half of its budget this year. That leaves money available to expand this program to rural education students who want to stay near home, but may not be able to afford to do so while paying off student loans.

Four to five years is generally seen as the turning point when teachers decide whether to stay in the profession or change schools or even careers. In a demanding job, if we can reduce the stress new teachers in rural areas face in their first five years, we significantly increase the likelihood that they will stay with their school, stay in their local community, and perhaps begin to consider raising a family. We would do this without reducing support for students currently availing themselves of the program and with only a small investment in upgrading the program's database. Simply, it will give rural students and school districts the same opportunity to succeed as Milwaukee schools.

We can't allow rural schools to slip behind urban or suburban schools, and we know that a good education starts with a great teacher. Allowing equal access to this loan forgiveness program will ensure that all students in our state have the opportunity to learn from the talented teachers we are producing.



Alberta Darling
Wisconsin State Senator
Co-Chair, Joint Committee on Finance

TESTIMONY BEFORE THE ASSEMBLY COMMITTEE ON MINING AND RURAL
DEVELOPMENT
Assembly Bill 793
February 4, 2016

Thank you Chairman Kulp and committee members for holding a public hearing this morning on Assembly Bill 793. The legislation before you modifies the teacher loan program to provide for loan forgiveness to certain teachers employed in school districts in rural counties.

Like many other states, Wisconsin is dealing with a teacher shortage. We have college graduates entering the teaching profession at a smaller rate than before. Even more alarming is the need for teachers in rural communities. Finding quality teachers in rural areas is becoming more and more challenging. It is my hope that AB 793 will incentivize teachers to look at job openings in rural communities throughout Wisconsin.

Under current law, a student eligible for a loan from the Higher Educational Aids Board may be awarded up to \$10,000 annually for not more than 3 years, with a maximum of \$30,000 per student. HEAB is then required to forgive 25% of the loan each school year the loan recipient, is employed in the city of Milwaukee and receives a teacher rating of proficient or distinguished.

AB 793 modifies the teacher loan program to provide loan forgiveness to not only teachers employed in the city of Milwaukee but also to school teachers teaching in rural counties. This would be a huge benefit to teachers who are dealing with the burden of their student loans.

It is our hope the extra incentive for college graduates in education will help fill the teacher shortage we are seeing in many rural counties.

I want to thank Representative Quinn for his work on this bill and the members of the Rural Wisconsin Initiative. Their work has been very helpful to addressing the needs of rural Wisconsin.

Thank you again committee members and I hope to have your support for AB 793.



TO: Assembly Committee on Mining and Rural Development
Representative Kulp, Chair

FROM: Jeremy Levin, MHA, Director of Advocacy

DATE: February 4, 2016

RE: SUPPORT Rural Wisconsin Initiative

The Rural Wisconsin Health Cooperative (RWHC), owned and operated by forty rural community hospitals, thanks you for this opportunity to share our thoughts on the seven bills that comprise the Rural Wisconsin Initiative. RWHC thanks the 21 lawmakers who have authored this effort.

RWHC has long supported cross-sector collaboration and realizes the need to improve more than just community health status, and that is why we wholeheartedly support the Rural Wisconsin Initiative. Some of our member hospitals have taken to community initiatives aimed at retaining a younger workforce by collaborating with high schools and tech schools to make sure students will have the skills needed to match the jobs available and other members have worked with employers in the area to make sure there is adequate child care available to entice young families to their communities and the jobs available.

AB793

Attracting and retaining good teachers is a challenge for rural schools. Health care has faced similar workforce challenges and one tool to attract health care workers have been loan forgiveness programs; these should be tried to attract new teachers, too. Such a program could help new teachers decide where to settle and where to teach, just as health care loan forgiveness programs are tied to practice. It would also encourage students interested in teaching to come back to their hometowns after their educations are complete, rural health education programs, such as the Wisconsin Academy Rural Medicine, seek a rural background to also gauge chance to practice in rural areas.

AB794

This bill requires the Higher Educational Aids Board to make student loan reimbursement payments on behalf of rural county residents. These "rural opportunity zones" will look to incentivize young people looking to relocate after finishing their post-secondary education. Currently, the demographics of rural areas skew older than more urban and suburban areas in the state; likewise, rural health care providers reflect these demographics and as they retire, good health care jobs will be available.

AB795

RWHC believes that the \$500,000 increase in Youth Apprenticeship program is another valuable tool for students. The program is designed for high school students who want hands-on learning in an occupational area



with classroom instruction. The funds go to rural schools, tech colleges and businesses that are working together to equip students with the skills they will need to succeed in their local industries.

AB796

The increase in the Apprenticeship Completion Award program, which partially reimburses eligible apprentices, sponsors and employers for certain costs of related instruction, will continue to support “on the job” training. Health care has had a long history in apprenticeship learning across different health provider professionals. This can support other health care focused entities like the Wisconsin Area Health Education Centers (AHEC) that seeks to improve access to quality health care by developing community-based health professions training programs and enhancing health education resources across the state by allowing students to experience firsthand the challenges, opportunities and rewards of health professions.

AB797

This bill supports the Wisconsin Rural Physician Residency Assistance Program (WRPRAP), which has successfully drawn physicians to rural communities. In 2011, RWHC Proposed the Wisconsin Rural Training Track Collaborative to the WRPRAP for start-up funding. In just three years these funds have made it possible to grow from the Collaborative’s initial eight organizations interested in developing and sustaining rural graduate medical education (GME) funding, to 28 hospitals, clinics, and residencies investigating and developing rural GME, and that number is growing. The new bill would propose an increase of WRPRAP funding by \$250,000, to strengthen residency programs for doctors pursuing obstetrics and gynecology specialties.

AB798

We support enhanced funding for rural broadband expansion grants. In 2007, RWHC Information Technology Network (ITN) incorporated as a 501(c)3 organization dedicated to providing member hospitals with shared health information services. In 2013, RWHC ITN became one of the first networks in the country to be designated as a Healthcare Connect Fund (HCF) Consortium, helping 29 hospitals and nearly 70 sites apply for broadband funding through the new FCC HCF subsidy program.

AB799

The proposed Rural STEM (science, technology, engineering and math) Grant legislation will help small school districts in rural Wisconsin communities start, expand, and maintain STEM education programs. These education programs help to shape students’ interests and prepare them to pursue the high wage, high demand careers that are involved in advance manufacturing that can be found in rural areas.

Thank you again for this opportunity to comment on and express our support for the Rural Wisconsin Initiative. We encourage the Committee to act on these bills so that they might become law and more can be done to help rural areas and the health care providers that serve these areas of Wisconsin.