

HF 1144

Hello Chair Davnie, Representative Feist, and members of the committee,

My name is Ted Conover. I am a junior and senior high English teacher at ISD 100, Wrenshall school. Wrenshall is a very small, rural community in Carlton County, just half an hour southwest of Duluth. Our school is a K-12 district in a building of about 400 students total. There are fewer than 200 students in grades 7-12. 50 percent of our students live in poverty.

I'm writing to ask you to support HF1144 which would improve the compensatory funding formula. My school deserves to have as much of the compensatory funding as possible used at our site to benefit my students in the most impactful ways possible. This also means ensuring that the funds are being used in evidence-based ways that impact students who are behind and that there is thoughtful rationale behind how funds are being used to close opportunity gaps across racial and economic demographics.

Small, rural districts in greater Minnesota like Wrenshall have unique benefits for our students. Our school provides students with a unique experience because of our size. Class sizes are mostly small — my largest class is a section of 9th grade English with 18 students. So students are able to get a lot of individualized attention from teachers. We're really like an extended family here, where I know every student by name even if I don't have them in class. It's really a student-centered, welcoming place.

Being small has a lot of benefits, but there are significant challenges as well. Our district draws on a small number of households for property taxes. In addition, we are a relatively high poverty area, with around 50% of our students receiving free or reduced lunch. Since I began teaching here in 2016, district residents have voted down three separate bonding referendums to make improvements to our facilities. There is no appetite locally for increased property taxes, and the district's students have suffered because of this. Our facilities were in dire need of repair, not just because they were unsightly or outdated, but because they were a health and safety issue. Luckily, in 2019, our School Board made the difficult but necessary decision to leverage a non-voter approved tax levy to make improvements to indoor air circulation, replace the failing heating system, and other health and safety improvements. We are now enjoying these improvements to our facility after teaching remotely to begin the 2020 school year. That being said, our district has been lucky that many of these improvements can be coded under health and safety, and therefore, done without voter approval. After years of putting off costly and necessary repairs, we find ourselves in a good place, mostly because of the leadership of the Governor and MDE. Still, more can be done. Though we have been able to remedy our immediate needs of an unsafe building with improvements, our district could still benefit from more targeted help with Special Education, funding for robust professional development for teachers, resources to recruit and support of teachers of color, increased resources to support American Indian students, and other measures that will directly help our students.

Failed bonding referendums and budget shortfalls due to small tax bases are fairly common challenges among rural schools in greater Minnesota. Though funding disparities may look different here than in Metro-area schools, we still struggle to meet the diverse needs of our students, especially with an economic downturn and recession spurred by the COVID-19

pandemic. I ask that you consider ways to decrease the tax burden for districts like Wrenshall, where in-district voters have made it clear there is no appetite for property tax increases. Our students, especially those most marginalized, should not suffer second-class facilities, programming, and curriculum because of this. With improvements made to compensatory spending, small, rural districts can flourish and provide robust education for all students.

Increasing education spending is critical, but we also need to ensure funds are positively impacting students who are behind, students living in poverty--my students. This means, as a start, ensuring more funds are actually spent on the students generating them (at their site). Second, it means taking a hard look at whether the way we're using the money currently is targeted and making improvements in academic and social outcomes.

I urge you to support HF1144 because it is a step in the right direction to providing a more equitable education system in Greater Minnesota. Thank you Mr. Chair and members of the committee.

Sincerely,

Ted Conover
He/His
English Teacher
Wrenshall School