Written Comments for Public Hearing

Monday, January 26, 2015

7:00 pm

House Chamber

Presented by Dr. Kevin Fiene, Superintendent, Interstate 35 Community School district, At-large Board Member, Rural School Advocates of Iowa

I am the superintendent at Interstate 35 Community School District, Truro, Iowa. First, thank you for the opportunity to submit comment regarding HF 80, setting 1.25% increase in the state cost per pupil. Thank you, also, for initiating this conversation very early in the session. Our schools needs to know the budget as soon as possible, and we are grateful you are already hard at work to set the rate.

A 1.25% increase is not enough, but appears to be predicated on an assumption that schools have been sufficiently funded for the last several years. There appears to be a disconnect between the information floating around regarding state funding of Iowa public schools over the last decade or so and the actual new resources schools have received over that time. Please dig beneath the numbers being provided that indicate public schools have averaged 4.5% increase in state funding in the last 10 years. The figures you’ve been provided include additional state money in lieu of local property taxes within the state funding formula. This was a decision made by elected state officials, not by local school boards – and resulted IN ABSOLUTELY NO INCREASE OF FUNDING FOR LOCAL SCHOOLS, but rather simply a change in the funding source. Those numbers also include a switch in funding for teacher salary supplement, professional development and class size funds that schools have been accessing for years, previously a state line item appropriation that when included in the school formula, makes it appear as though schools received an additional $330 million. We didn’t. We already counted on those funds. It was an accounting change. But please remember that such categorical funds, even if they are increased, by law can only be used for specified things within that category – they cannot be used for basic necessities of running a school. Examples include preschool funding, which can’t be used to buy library books or keep the lights on at the school and the new teacher leadership and compensation funding – which not all schools have yet received (including Interstate 35) – yet this funding is presented to show adequate financial support for schools. Since it is categorical, it will not pay salaries, energy bills, transportation costs, property insurance, workers compensation, retirement, or anything else within the general fund.

The numbers quoted also don’t tell the whole story of other funding streams that have been reduced, such as dropout prevention, or completely eliminated, such as the state’s share of the Instructional Support Program. The bottom line truth is funding increases for public education since 2008 have not even kept up with increased cost of doing the business of school, much less allowed innovation and change. Why is Iowa ranked 35th in the nation in per pupil funding?

People in the trenches educating our students know that adequate funding (6%) is needed and has not been provided at the level an overly simplified consideration of the single appropriation of state foundation aid would suggest. If we do not receive adequate funding, there is absolutely no doubt we will be reducing 2-5 teaching positions, plus additional support staff positions, in our school district for the 2015-2016 school year. The bottom line is our students will be hurt – please do not let that happen, especially given the contrasting rosy picture of the Iowa’s economic recovery.

Thank you for representing the students, parents, community members and all Iowans who support the priority of funding our future.