

Gresham School District

GRESHAM COMMUNITY SCHOOLS



*Newell E. Haffner
Denise Guex
James Dudek
Benjamin Heninger
Valerie Brooks*

*District Administrator/4K-5 Principal
Director of Finance
Director of Maintenance and Operations
6-12 Principal
Director of Special Education*



Testimony - Joint Finance Committee Hearing

- **Wednesday, April 21, 2021 - The Hodag Dome, Rhinelander, WI**

To The Honorable Members of the Joint Finance Committee:

Thank you for the opportunity to speak on behalf of the students, staff, and community members of the Gresham School District. My name is Benjamin Heninger and I currently serve as the Grade 6 through 12 Principal, Band Teacher, District Assessment Coordinator, Title IX investigator, and Substitute School Bus Driver for the Gresham School District, a micro-laboratory for learning with 261 students located equidistant between Wausau and Green Bay, just north of Highway 29. I come before you today as an advocate for small school districts and the essential role that each plays in cultivating healthy, sustainable, and productive communities.

Students with Disabilities

Although a high quality public education should be the fundamental foundation upon which a lifelong love of learning is built, there are many areas of the state, especially across the Northwoods, where the resources do not adequately address the needs of all students. In particular, the children of the Gresham School District, which is one of the smallest preK through Grade 12 facilities in Wisconsin, are not privy to the same financial and educational funding sources that students in larger, more affluent areas of state enjoy. For example, we have been challenged by an ever-growing and disproportionate number of students who require special education services in our district. It is critical that categorical aid reimbursement in SPED be raised to a level which more thoroughly meets the needs of our most vulnerable students. Fifty percent reimbursement of aidable costs would be a step in the right direction, but even higher would be better.

Additional Funding for Economically Disadvantaged Students

Similarly, around sixty percent of our families are at or below the poverty line and qualify for free and reduced lunch. Wisconsin does not currently have a comprehensive program that targets additional resources to raise achievement among students who come from low socioeconomic backgrounds. Even a modest increase of \$150 per economically disadvantaged student in per pupil aid, as recommended by the State Superintendent's state budget request, would provide a boost to our district's goal of closing perennial learning shortfalls. Although we were recently recognized by the Department of Public Instruction as a '*Title I School of Recognition*' for closing gaps, more work and resources will be needed.

Gresham School District

GRESHAM COMMUNITY SCHOOLS



*Newell E. Haffner
Denise Guex
James Dudek
Benjamin Heninger
Valerie Brooks*

*District Administrator/4K-5 Principal
Director of Finance
Director of Maintenance and Operations
6-12 Principal
Director of Special Education*



Educator Recruitment and Retention

Lastly, one does not have to look beyond their local school district to acknowledge that things are not as stable in the education profession as they were just ten years ago. In my own journey, I have moved school districts three times since the passage of Wisconsin Act 10; all due to budget cuts, program reductions, and failed referenda. Perhaps it is fate, perhaps it is irony, or perhaps it is luck. Whatever the case may be, I have grown into an advocate for small schools and witnessed, firsthand, the incredible champions that our staff members have become for our students. As a lifelong educator, I hold an unshakable belief that it takes a special kind of person to be an inspirational teacher. Without mincing words, our school board and administrative team have moved heaven and earth to attract, retain, and promote servant leaders in our district. In some cases, we have been successful. In others, we have come up short; largely due to our inability to keep pace with larger districts who are able to offer significantly higher pay and fringe benefits.

The time is upon us when our state must recommit to the vision of providing a high quality public education for all Wisconsin students by keeping highly-qualified teachers in the profession, eliminating the proliferation of taxpayer funded schools that are not held to the same standards as public schools, ensuring access to reliable and affordable broadband internet, and directing additional per-pupil funding towards students with disabilities and those experiencing high levels of poverty, who reside in our smallest and neediest communities across the Northwoods.

Thank you, once again, for the opportunity to speak today.

Sincerely,

Benjamin Heninger, Ed.D.
On Behalf of the Gresham School District
heningb@gresham.k12.wi.us