



Make Rural Schools a Priority

Considerations for Reauthorizing the Elementary and Secondary Education Act

Jeremy Ayers August 2011

Introduction and summary

The public usually thinks of large urban schools when it considers reforms to the American education system. But rural students account for a large and growing segment of the school-age population, and their needs have too often been overlooked in school improvement efforts. Policymakers and the public must make rural education a priority if the nation as a whole is to make marked gains in student outcomes.

One in five students attends a rural school, and more than half of all school districts and one-third of all public schools are in rural areas.¹ Rural student enrollment grew 15 percent between 2002 and 2005, an increase of 1.3 million students. That compares to only 1 percent growth in nationwide enrollment during the same time period.²

Definitions of “rural” vary. The U.S. Census Bureau defines rural areas by their geographic distance from urban centers, and as communities that contain fewer than 2,500 people.³ The Department of Education defines rural *schools* as those located in districts with fewer than 600 students.⁴ Some rural education advocates identify rural schools as those residing in communities with fewer than 2,500 residents, following the Census classification, but also argue for including schools in towns up to 25,000 people.⁵ The exact definition matters less than the realization that a large number of rural schools exist and face unique challenges and opportunities. Then there are “frontier” schools that may have only dozens of students, located in very remote or isolated parts of the country such as Alaska, Appalachia, the prairies of the Plains states, and the Mountain West.

Many rural areas of the country contain concentrated poverty, just as urban areas do.⁶ Rural schools face particular difficulty in recruiting and retaining teachers and principals. Rural schools continue to lag behind others in Internet access, and rural high schools are not able to provide advanced coursework such as AP and IB classes in the way more urban and suburban areas can.⁷ Research on rural education has, at times,

been underfunded or not encouraged.⁸ And, overall, rural areas have experienced shrinking tax bases, shifting local economies, and brain drain among young people who move to more urban areas after high school graduation.⁹

At the same time, rural schools possess unique strengths and opportunities. They usually enjoy strong community support, including opportunities for students to connect directly with future employers. Often, rural schools are at the forefront in using distance technology to provide educational services.

Unfortunately, federal education efforts do not always consider the issues of rural students and schools in ways they could, despite their unique challenges. A few examples stand out.

Funding. Title I of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, or ESEA, is the largest federal funding stream designed to support educational services for schools with concentrations of low-income students. Two of Title I's four complex formulas, however, unfairly steer more funds to large districts, despite some districts' comparatively lower concentration of poverty.¹⁰ And some evidence exists that rural high schools receive less funding than high schools in suburban or urban areas due to the ways in which high schools can be funded in Title I allocations.¹¹

Competitive grants. Some federal education programs are competitive grants designed to reward states and districts that best meet established criteria. Competitive funds can encourage reform and reward grantees who make valuable changes. But some competitive grants may make it more difficult for rural districts to compete. For example, the first round of the Investing in Innovation Fund competition asked applicants to demonstrate how much their innovative practices would cost to scale up to serve 100,000 to 500,000 to 1 million students.¹² Rural districts—and even whole states—do not have this many students, capacity to serve them if they did, or ability to estimate such a cost in their rural context. For example, Montana only has 140,000 students statewide. Plus, for any competition, many rural districts call on the principal or superintendent to write a grant application while large districts may have the resources to employ full-time grant writers. Therefore, it may make sense to take this into account when reviewing grant applications from rural districts.¹³

Congress has the opportunity to move forward on education reform by reauthorizing ESEA to ensure all children achieve their greatest potential. ESEA is the largest and most significant federal education law supporting public schools. The law, currently known as No Child Left Behind, was due to be reauthorized in 2007. Congress now has the opportunity to fix numerous flaws in NCLB and to ensure the needs of rural students and schools are met.

Congress should keep the following considerations in mind so that federal education law better addresses the needs of rural students and schools:

1. Ensure rural schools and districts have fair chances to receive and compete for federal education funds
2. Make school-based wraparound services available to rural students in recognition of the special circumstances and sometimes limited capacity of rural schools
3. Ensure options are available to rural districts for the successful turnaround of low-performing schools
4. Enhance supports for building the teacher and principal workforce for rural schools

These points are by no means exhaustive. Others have done important work on how to improve rural education. We offer here a few key considerations for how a new ESEA can improve the way federal programs and policies serve rural interests.¹⁴

Make federal education funding more fair and efficient for rural students

Title I, Part A of ESEA, is the largest program operated by the U.S. Department of Education. Congress appropriated \$14.46 billion for Title I in fiscal year 2011. The program reaches 95 percent of school districts nationwide, and its goal is to help districts with concentrations of children from low-income families to expand and improve their educational programs. Over time, Title I's goal has evolved to ensure an equitable education for disadvantaged students and to bolster economic competitiveness by promoting higher academic achievement. Yet, Title I has some glaring problems. Due to cumbersome allocation formulas, some states and districts receive a disproportionate amount of money while others do not receive their fair share. The result is that small districts and those serving medium-sized cities, including many serving high concentrations of poverty, receive less proportional funding than districts with larger numbers of students.

Federal recommendation

Congress should streamline the four Title I formulas into a single, fairer formula.

The Department of Education applies four formulas to determine Title I grants to districts: Basic, Concentration, Targeted, and Education Incentive Finance Grants. Because the formulas are needlessly complex, state agencies exhaust capacity re-calculating grants to districts that remain oblivious to the number of formulas. Therefore, we propose consolidating the four Title I formulas into one.

Our proposal uses the eligibility criteria of Targeted Grants, which stipulates that eligible districts must serve at least 10 low-income children representing at least 5 percent of all children served by the district. In addition, we recommend setting the minimum state allocation to a level tied to the fixed costs of operating public schools. Lastly we propose that the authorized amount for each district would be the product of four factors:

- An amount of \$2,250, which puts the product in dollar terms and determines an authorized total
- A rescaled weighted-cost factor based on state and local values on the Department of Education's Comparable Wage Index
- A fiscal-effort factor using a refinement of the measure used by the current Education Finance Incentive Grant formula
- A weighted count of qualifying children, employing only the concentration-based weighting scale in the current targeted grant formula

The final point is important because a concentration-based weighting scheme is fair to small and large districts alike. Furthermore, because estimates of the number of qualifying children served by small districts are volatile, replacing the raw estimate with a three-year running average would make allocations to small districts more stable.

Changing funding formulas would be challenging to implement and some states and districts may gain funds while others do not. We recommend creating a temporary equity fund to help implement formula changes and to lessen the impact for districts facing a lower allocation. Districts would receive equity funds based on the old formulas or allocations gradually approaching higher levels due to the new formula.

Proposed legislation

The All Children are Equal Act introduced by Reps. Glenn Thompson (R-PA) and G.K. Butterfield (D-NC) would weaken the size advantage built into the Title I formulas, thus softening the blow to low-income children in small- and medium-sized districts. The bill's approach is straightforward. It would simply lower each of the weights associated with the number-weighting scheme by an amount equal to 10 percent of its current value for four consecutive years.

Provide wraparound services for rural students in need

Some students come to school with significant nonacademic challenges that interfere with their ability to learn. Such problems can include health and dental issues, social or emotional problems, low levels of parent education or involvement, or lack of before- and after-school opportunities. Wraparound services, which include physical and men-

tal health care, adult literacy classes for parents, and out-of-school time programming, formally address students' nonacademic needs and connect their services to classroom activities so that student achievement improves.

The Full-Service Community Schools Program is one federal funding stream that provides wraparound services to low-income students and can be of particular value in rural settings where these services may be scarce and geographically difficult to access. Others include School Improvement Grants, 21st Century Community Learning Centers, and Promise Neighborhoods.

Community schools can become the center of rural communities by providing services for students and parents in a central and accessible location, such as school-based health services and after-school learning, while adults are offered such things as English classes for language learners, job training, and antipoverty assistance.¹⁵ They are especially helpful in rural communities, where students are often unable to take advantage of public health services, food distribution, and after-school enrichment activities because of their location.

Community schools can be an economically feasible way to reduce the effects of poverty on a rural child's academic achievement. Building operation costs and maintenance are lowered by bringing several services in one place, while the joint purchasing of co-located services can reduce both the cost of supplies and the strain on local resources. Combining services with a strong academic focus may hold the greatest potential for addressing rural education's challenges and ensuring that every child has an equal opportunity to succeed.

Federal recommendations

Increase funding for the Full Service Community Schools Program and Promise Neighborhoods through a streamlined wraparound services program. As Congress moves to reauthorize ESEA, it should authorize a program to provide comprehensive wraparound services. Currently, two federal programs that support wraparound services—Promise Neighborhoods and Full-Service Community Schools—have significant areas of overlap that indicate potential for consolidation.¹⁶

Provide incentives for providing wraparound services in the School Improvement Grant program and 21st Century Community Learning Centers. These federal programs currently allow federal funds to be used to provide wraparound services and should continue to do so.

Proposed legislation

The Full Service Community Schools Act, sponsored by Sens. Ben Nelson (D-NE) and Thad Cochran (R-MS) and Rep. Steny Hoyer (D-MD), authorizes grants to consortia composed of one or more local educational agencies and one or more community-based, nonprofit, or other public or private entities to assist public elementary or secondary schools to function as full-service community schools. The bill would also fund state collaboratives to support the development of full-service community school programs.

The Promise Neighborhoods Act of 2011, sponsored by Sen. Tom Harkin (D-IA) and Rep. Donald Payne (D-NJ), authorizes grants to nonprofit organizations partnering with local education agencies to implement a comprehensive continuum of supports and services to improve academic and social outcomes of children in distressed neighborhoods.

Turn around low-performing schools in rural areas

States and districts across the country are focusing on turning around the nation's lowest-performing schools. Turnaround has proven difficult to do at scale, however, as well as in some rural and frontier areas. Many districts introduce piecemeal reforms and neglect larger issues of human capital such as how to prepare, recruit, and retain educators for work in high-needs schools. Rural districts in particular face difficulty in recruiting and retaining staff, as well as coordinating resources across large expanses of territory in some sparsely populated frontier areas. State laws, policies, and lack of capacity prevent state education agencies from effectively managing or supporting district turnaround efforts.

Systemic, sustained interventions are needed to break cycles of underperformance. Federal policy can help by supporting states and districts that commit to effective turnaround reforms, particularly in rural areas where some turnaround strategies and supports have not yet enabled success.¹⁷

Federal recommendations

Target funds to states and districts that have comprehensive plans to recruit and retain educators for high-needs schools. The competitive process of turnaround grants should be used to encourage districts to think more comprehensively about recruiting and retaining teachers. And states should be required to show they are helping rural districts and schools meet their human capital needs in order to receive a grant.

Provide flexibility in the models and strategies used to turn around schools. Districts using the transformation or turnaround models should use evaluation measures to screen the effectiveness of their staff and make hiring and replacement decisions accordingly—rather than dismissing a set number or percentage of staff. Districts should also have the flexibility to try a model of their own choosing if they can demonstrate it has successfully improved student achievement.

Encourage grouping of low-performing schools across states. States can help rural districts and schools by grouping low-performing schools into a centralized unit or district, similar to Louisiana’s Recovery School District or Tennessee’s Achievement School District. Such a move could help share resources, spread best practices, and contain costs.

Ensure turnaround funds can be used to provide wraparound services. Wraparound services through programs such as full-service community schools have been valuable resources to rural schools with concentrated poverty. A new federal turnaround program should continue to encourage and allow funds to be used to provide wraparound services.

Proposed legislation

Sen. Kay Hagan (D-NC) introduced a bill in 2011 that would provide resources and support to states and districts that agree to turn around their lowest-performing schools. That bill, the School Turnaround and Reward, or STAR, Act, would both reward schools that make progress and support schools in need of dramatic improvement.

Build the teacher and principal workforce for rural schools

Effective teachers are critical to raising achievement and closing longstanding gaps between student subgroups such as low-income students and students of color. Therefore, we must ensure that all students have the strong teachers that they need and deserve if our nation is to remain a global economic leader. In reauthorizing ESEA Congress should maintain formula funding focused on teachers and principals, while increasing competitive funding programs that support promising reforms yet ensure rural districts and schools can fairly compete. The Center also believes that federal funding should be used more strategically to ensure that all students, in all schools, have access to effective teachers.¹⁸

Federal recommendations

Broaden the current Teacher Incentive Fund to become a new Teacher and Leader Innovation Fund. A Teacher and Leader Innovation Fund would provide support for states and districts to better train, recruit, place, evaluate, develop, reward, and retain effective educators for high-needs schools, subjects, geographic areas, and students. Our proposal would require states seeking a grant to serve high-needs geographic areas.

Require states to ensure students have equitable access to good teachers, both within and between school districts. As a requirement of receiving Title II funds, states should monitor, report, and act on the access students have to effective teachers.¹⁹ States with inequities between and within districts must use Title II funds to redress those inequities. This would ensure that rural districts and schools are not shortchanged in their educator workforce.

Ensure states and districts receiving School Improvement Grants build pipelines of effective teachers and principals for rural schools. As mentioned above, school turnaround grants have the power to encourage systematic approaches to staffing rural schools. For example, Louisiana trains teachers and principals particularly for their rural turnaround schools in order to assist sparsely populated districts that lack the capacity to do so. Districts desiring a federal grant should demonstrate commitment to recruiting and retaining educators for their struggling schools, and states should identify their role in creating or incentivizing educator pipelines for high-needs areas such as rural and frontier districts and schools.

Proposed legislation and policies

The STAR Act, sponsored by Sen. Kay Hagan (D-NC) and summarized above, would require states to demonstrate how they build pipelines of effective educators for high-needs schools and would provide a priority to districts seeking a school turnaround grant that have a comprehensive approach to building their teacher and principal workforce.

The Obama administration recommended authorizing a Teacher and Leader Innovation Fund in a newly revised ESEA, and it requested funding for such a program in its FY 2012 budget. No legislation has been introduced to date on this topic, or on the topic of teacher access. The Securing Teacher Effectiveness, Leaders, Learning, and Results, or STELLAR, Act does address some of these proposals. The STELLAR Act is sponsored by Sens. Joseph Lieberman (I-CT) and Scott Brown (R-MA), and the House companion bill is sponsored by Reps. Susan Davis (D-CA) and Jared Polis (D-CO).

Conclusion

Rural schools constitute a significant proportion of America's schools and school districts. So it is imperative that their needs are taken into account. The federal government cannot singlehandedly solve every educational problem, in rural or urban settings. But it can leverage its role in ways—outlined above—that improve outcomes for the nation's students in all geographic areas.

The promise of federal education law is to ensure all students have equal access to a high quality education. That promise cannot materialize if certain geographic segments of the populations are not equitably served by the education system. The federal government has taken certain steps to ensure the needs of rural students are met, but more can and should be done. Reauthorizing ESEA in a way that better addresses rural concerns is a first and good step to take. We stand ready to work with Congress to reauthorize federal education law in such a smart, progressive way.

Endnotes

- 1 Stephen Provasnik and others, "Status of Education in Rural America" (Washington: U.S. Department of Education, 2007). In 2003-2004 more than half of all operating school districts were located in rural areas (56 percent), while 20 percent of districts were located in suburban areas, 18 percent in towns, and 6 percent in cities (8). U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, Common Core of Data (CCD), "Public Elementary/Secondary School Universe Survey" and "Local Education Agency Universe Survey" (2003-04).
- 2 Johnson and M. Strange, "Why Rural Matters 2007: The Realities of Rural Education Growth" (Washington: Rural School and Community Trust, 2007).
- 3 "2010 Census Urban and Rural Classification and Urban Area Criteria" available at <http://www.census.gov/geo/www/ua/2010urbanruralclass.html> (last accessed July 2011).
- 4 For the purposes of the Small, Rural School Achievement Program, the U.S. Department of Education defines a rural district as a local educational agency, or LEA, in which the total number of students in average daily attendance at all of the schools served by the LEA is fewer than 600, or each county in which a school served by the LEA is located has a total population density of fewer than 10 persons per square mile.
- 5 Elisabeth Beeson and Marty Strange, "Rural Matters 2003: The Continuing Need for Every State to Take Action on Rural Education" (Washington: Rural School and Community Trust, 2003).
- 6 Carolyn Rogers, "Rural Children at a Glance, Economic Information Bulletin Number 1" (Washington: U.S. Department of Agriculture Economic Research, 2005).
- 7 See Provasnik and others, "Status of Education in Rural America."
- 8 See Topper Sherwood, "Where Has All the Rural Gone?: Rural Education Research and Current Federal Reform" (Washington Rural School and Community Trust, 2001).
- 9 Alliance for Excellent Education, "Current Challenges and Opportunities in Preparing Rural High School Students for Success in College and Careers: What Federal Policymakers Need to Know" (2010).
- 10 Raegen Miller, "Secret Recipes Revealed: Demystifying the Title I, Part A Funding Formulas" (Washington: Center for American Progress, 2010) and Rural School and Community Trust, "Title I Weighted Grants Skewed Toward Largest Districts: Per Pupil Funding Varies Sharply by District Size" (2007).
- 11 Alliance for Excellent Education, "Current Challenges and Opportunities."
- 12 Office of Innovation and Improvement, U.S. Department of Education, "Applications for New Awards; Investing in Innovation Fund," *Federal Register* 76 (107) (2011): 32148- 32159.
- 13 In recognition of such issues, the Department of Education made serving rural areas an absolute priority in the second round of Investing in Innovation grants. See "New i3 Guidelines Better for Rural Schools" available at <http://www.ruraledu.org/articles.php?id=2717> (last accessed July 2011).
- 14 For a comprehensive approach to ESEA reauthorization, see Jeremy Ayers and Cynthia Brown, "A Way Forward: A Progressive Vision for Reauthorizing the Elementary and Secondary Education Act" (Washington: Center for American Progress, 2011).
- 15 Doris Terry Williams, "The Rural Solution: How Community Schools Can Reinvigorate Rural Education," (Washington: Center for American Progress, 2010).
- 16 Theodora Chang, "Maximizing the Promise of Community Schools: Streamlining Wraparound Services for ESEA" (Washington: Center for American Progress, 2011).
- 17 Jeremy Ayers and Melissa Lazarin, "Incentivizing School Turnaround: A Proposal for Reauthorizing the Elementary and Secondary Education Act" (Washington: Center for American Progress, 2011).
- 18 Ulrich Boser and Robin Chait, "Advancing Teacher and Principal Effectiveness: Four Recommendations for Reforming the Elementary and Secondary Education Act" (Washington: Center for American Progress, 2011).
- 19 Center for American Progress and The Education Trust, "Essential Elements of Teacher Policy in ESEA: Effectiveness, Fairness, and Evaluation" (2011).