



National Rural Education Advocacy Coalition

2008 Legislative Agenda

Developed on January 29, 2008

Rural schools are a vital part of the American public education system, serving over 30 percent of the nation's students. The National Rural Education Advocacy Coalition strongly encourages Congress to take into consideration the unique needs of rural schools as one-size-fits-all policy can often have devastating effects.

NREAC believes funding America's public schools directly is an integral component to improving student learning and outcomes. Federal funding should flow directly to local school districts, bypassing the state wherever possible.

Elementary and Secondary Education Act

NREAC advocates a fundamental transformation of the federal role in education as defined by the Elementary and Secondary Education Act. NREAC believes that the primary responsibility for determining educational methods and strategies should reside at the local level, consistent with the U.S. Department of Education Organization Act. That flexibility is necessary in order to increase student achievement.

NREAC supports a federal role that is consistent with both the intent of the 2001 reauthorization of success for each child and the original 1965 statute to improve outcomes for low-income children.

NREAC believes that the role of the federal government in education is to help ensure access to equal educational opportunity for each child by helping states and school districts develop capacity, providing leadership and providing resources. The federal government should supplement and support rather than dictate state efforts in education.

Title I

NREAC believes that in order to help clarify the federal role in public education, students served by Title I programs should be considered as a separate subgroup and schools/ school districts should be held accountable to the terms of the contract with the federal government for their success with these students. In the case of school wide Title I programs, schools would be responsible for the performance of all of their students.

NREAC believes federal efforts should focus on program improvement for schools and districts that need assistance rather than on one-size-fits-all sanctions that do not meet the unique needs and

challenges of rural schools. There should be maximum flexibility to ensure that options for rural schools are crafted to meet their unique circumstances.

NREAC believes that poverty has an impact student achievement. Schools are partners in the effort to overcome and help mitigate the effects of poverty by working with other agencies and efforts, such as health care and housing.

NREAC recommends that the reauthorized law require the Department of Education to develop rules that guarantee states and school districts consistency of application and transparency of administration, with an emphasis that the federal government's role is not to set curriculum or make local education decisions, which should be left to states and school districts.

NREAC recommends an emphasis on formula rather than competitive grants. Formula grants, especially when used with guaranteed minimum allocations, are the only way to ensure that rural school districts receive their fair share of assistance.

NREAC urges caution in the use of data and calculations under the reauthorized law. Small numbers of students, present in many rural communities, can have dramatic impact on averaged test scores and other calculations. Small, rural school districts must receive fair treatment due to their circumstances.

Accountability and Assessment

NREAC believes states are responsible for determining the type and frequency of assessment, including the use of growth or progress models. Federal requirements should not override these state decisions. Students should be treated as individuals under such assessment systems and with an emphasis on growth, improvement and closing achievement gaps. NREAC supports the use of federal incentive money to encourage states to develop formative and summative assessments.

NREAC believes the Individualized Educational Program team should make the determination of how special education students are assessed and their measurable results reported. Assessment opportunities for students with disabilities should not be limited by arbitrary caps and grade-level requirements.

NREAC believes states and school districts have the responsibility for identifying, assessing, and evaluating English Language Learners based on their individual needs and reporting the results.

Collaborative Leadership for Improving Student Outcomes

NREAC believes that excellent teaching is essential and that the states are better able to set appropriate teacher standards than the federal government. States are more aware of the unique circumstances teachers face when teaching in multiple subject areas or when teaching students with special needs in rural settings.

NREAC strongly recommends that Congress authorize and fund a NAEP oversample of rural schools. This oversample will help provide useful insight into the performance of students in rural America.

Focus on Rural Schools

NREAC is concerned that current policy targets Title I funds to concentrations of poverty based on large numbers of students, not merely percentages. This clearly disadvantages poor children in rural areas. NREAC encourages all Title I funds to be focused on percentages of students in poverty. All school districts participating in Title I should receive a minimum amount of assistance under Title I.

NREAC believes that the federal government should support states in their ongoing high school improvement efforts and recognizes the important role of career and technical education in preparing students for a competitive economy.

Recommendations for other Titles of ESEA

Title II Part A

NREAC supports the role of federal government in increasing and assisting the recruitment and retention of teachers in rural and/or geographically isolated districts. This could be accomplished through tax credits, incentive pay and loan forgiveness among other options.

NREAC recognizes the proven relationship between competent, well trained teachers and student achievement. The demonstrated impact of teacher preparation on student achievement necessitates increased support of teacher recruitment and financial support for qualified teachers.

Title II, Part D

NREAC believes education technology funds should continue to be distributed on a formula basis to ensure parity for rural schools. NREAC recommends that a minimum guaranteed grant size be established.

Title III: Bilingual, Immigrant and English Language Learner Students

NREAC believes it is the state's responsibility to determine the assessment tools and requirements for bilingual, immigrant, and English Language Learner students.

NREAC believes the role of federal government—as it pertains to bilingual, immigrant and English Language Learner students—is limited to supporting states and districts with rapidly increasing diversity. This could include support for local instructional methods, financial assistance for tutors and help in recruiting ELL instructors and tutors for geographically isolated areas.

Title IV

NREAC supports the role that Safe and Drug Free Schools plays in fighting ongoing and new challenges in rural America, such as methamphetamine labs. Safe and Drug Free Schools funding at the school level is critical to leveraging additional dollars to ensure a safe learning environment. NREAC supports the maintenance of Safe and Drug Free Schools as a formula grant. The office of Safe and Drug Free Schools should only exist if there are funds and those funds are formula driven. NREAC believes that 100 percent of the funding under Safe and Drug Free School Act should flow directly to local school districts to ensure the maximum benefit at the local level.

Title V

NREAC was concerned with the elimination of the Education Innovative Block Grant under the FY 2008 appropriations bill. This is a critical source of flexible money for local districts to nurture new programs and test new ideas. NREAC recommends the continuation of this program under ESEA and increasing the percentage of funding that goes directly to school districts under the Education Innovative Block Grants and recommends establishing a minimum guaranteed grant size.

Title VI

NREAC supports the expansion of transferability to 100 percent of federal formula grants to better serve children. However, NREAC would oppose being allowed to take money out of Title I; rather, districts should only be permitted to add funding to Title I.

Title VI – Rural Education Achievement Program

NREAC applauds the enormous success of REAP and the role it plays in targeting resources to meet the needs of rural schools. Given the decline in funding to rural districts, NREAC supports increased funding for REAP to continue to support students in rural America.

NREAC supports the Rural Education Achievement Program Reauthorization Act (S 2051 and HR 3545). We oppose the limitation of eligibility under the Rural and Low-income Schools Program that would eliminate funding for many rural districts. In addition, NREAC supports increasing the average daily attendance eligibility requirement under the Small and Rural Schools Achievement Program provided that there is a substantial increase in funding to help offset funding shifts.

NREAC opposes the narrowing of eligibility for the program

NREAC supports the increased average daily attendance requirement, provided that there is increased funding (contingent funding)

Additional Legislative Areas of Interest

Individuals with Disabilities Education Act

NREAC strongly supports the fulfillment of Congress' promise to pay 40 percent of the National Average per Pupil Expenditure for every child in special education. Mandatory funding of IDEA is the only way to ensure that Congress reaches this goal.

Higher Education Act

NREAC supports efforts to increase the number of quality teachers in rural schools. Therefore, Title II of the Higher Education Act should encourage best practices to attract teachers to rural settings. Additionally, NREAC supports the creation of a tax-credit incentive to encourage teachers to work in rural settings.

NREAC supports the expansion of the definition of a high-need school district to include rural school districts in addition to high-poverty districts, recognizing the unique staffing needs and shortages of geographically isolated districts.

NREAC supports a national pilot effort for grow-your-own teacher programs to improve efforts to recruit and retain high quality teachers in rural schools. NREAC encourages proactive partnerships

between LEAs and degree-granting institutions in teacher training, recruitment, and retention efforts.

NREAC supports leadership development activities aimed at developing the unique skill sets school administrators in geographically isolated regions will need.

E-Rate

NREAC strongly supports maintaining E-Rate as an element of the Universal Service Fund. The E-Rate serves an important role in increasing the connectivity of rural schools to the internet and helping to bridge both the digital and geographic divides that impact rural schools.

NREAC supports a streamlined application process that encourages more rural school districts to apply for E-Rate support. NREAC believes in accountability within the E-Rate program but opposes any changes to the program that would increase participation costs to local school districts. Increases in paperwork within the application process often prevent rural districts from applying. School districts already have fiscal accountability requirements that they must meet for their states.

NREAC believes the Universal Service Fund should be permanently exempt from the Anti-Deficiency Act.

NREAC believes success in the program should focus on the level and quality of the connectivity. Connectivity is important but so is the speed and reliability of the connectivity in order to ensure access for the end result of high-quality distance learning services.

Technology

NREAC supports the expansion of broadband into rural America.

Secure Rural Schools and Communities Self-Determination Act

NREAC recognizes the challenges of rural school districts located in federal forest counties and urges the continuation of the safety-net legislation to ensure a consistent funding stream for affected school districts nationwide. Until a full reauthorization can be passed, NREAC urges Congress to pass a temporary emergency extension of the program to provide the impacted school districts the certainty they need to continue their work. In addition, NREAC strongly believes that any full reauthorization of the Secure Rural Schools and Communities Self-Determination Act should treat all states slated to lose funding fairly, allowing for an equal ramp down in all impacted states.

Medicaid Claiming

NREAC believes that rural districts should be reimbursed for medical, administration and transportation expenses attributed to Medicaid eligible students. The Center for Medicare and Medicaid Services should work with rural districts to make reimbursement more feasible for geographically isolated districts. NREAC strongly opposes the steps that CMS has taken to eliminate school-based administrative and transportation Medicaid claiming. Until a suitable solution can be found, NREAC supports the extension of the moratorium that would protect schools from any changes being proposed by CMS.

NREAC supports the Protecting Children's Health in Schools Act, which would include expansion of Medicaid claiming to 504 students. NREAC also supports a more streamlined application process and uniform methodology resulting in a consistent set of rules across all states. NREAC supports the Protecting Children's Health in Schools Act.

Child Nutrition Programs

NREAC supports efforts to develop a new definition of nutritional value in conjunction with appropriate exceptions for fundraising, school-sponsored events and classroom celebrations.

Children's Health Care

NREAC supports efforts to expand health insurance to all children and pregnant mothers up to 300 percent of the poverty line. Health care has a direct impact on student achievement.

Vouchers

NREAC strongly believes that public funds should be used to fund only public schools. Federal funds should not be used to fund private schools through any form of vouchers, scholarships or tuition tax credits. With limited funding available, dollars should be focused on the public districts that must face public accountability.

Qualified Zone Academy Bonds

NREAC recognizes the success of the QZAB and other school construction programs in addressing some school facility needs. NREAC supports the expansion of these programs to include new construction and additional resources.

NREAC believes that the role of federal government in QZAB is to assist in the financing and building of schools that meet the needs of local communities.

Early Childhood

NREAC believes that maximizing children's learning requires equal measures of high expectations, appropriate instruction, early developmental activities and early education. The federal government has a responsibility to address this array of social factors, especially in rural areas, but not at the detriment or expense of K-12 education.