



June 4, 2009

EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE

Henry Bietz, Superintendent
Westwood Unified SD
(530) 256-2311

Dale Drew, President
Washington Colony Elem. SD
(559) 233-0706

Allan Gordon, Superintendent
St. Helena Unified SD
(707) 967-2708

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(650) 624-3100

Chris McGriff, Superintendent
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Kevin Ogden, Superintendent
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(760) 765-0661

Debbie Pearson, Superintendent
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(530) 633-3130

Rich Rhodes, President-Elect
Pacheco Union Elementary SD
(530) 224-4589

Chris von Kleist, Treasurer
Orland Joint Unified SD
(530) 865-1200

LEGISLATIVE ADVOCATE

David L. Walrath
c/o Murdoch, Walrath &
Holmes
1130 K Street, Suite 210
Sacramento, CA 95814
Tel: (916) 441-3300
Fax: (916) 441-3893
Email: dwalrath@m-w-h.com

SSDA OFFICE

455 Capitol Mall, Suite 315
Sacramento, CA 95814
Tel: (916) 444-9335
Fax: (916) 441-4851
Website: www.ssda.org

The Honorable Howard "Buck" McKeon
United States House of Representatives
2184 Rayburn House Office Building
Washington D.C. 20215

Dear Representative McKeon:

The California Small School Districts' Association (SSDA) requests amendments to the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) during reauthorization. Specifically, SSDA requests amendments in the following provisions:

- 1) Title I Allocations to School Districts
- 2) Requirements for Highly Qualified Teachers in Small Rural Areas
- 3) Title II Enhancing Education Through Technology
- 4) Parental Testing Opt-Out
- 5) Continuation of the Rural Education Achievement Program for Rural School District Assistance
- 6) Development of a School Renovation and Repair Program

1) Title I Allocations to School Districts

SSDA requests an amendment to the Title I allocation methodology in order to accomplish three goals. The first goal is to ensure a minimum allocation to school districts that have Title I students. The second is to allow alternatives to the census poverty count for the allocation of Title I funds. The third is to increase funding for basic grants and restore the historic proportion of funds allocated for Title I basic grants compared to the other Title I grant programs.

Small District Minimums

The current Title I provision does not allow funding to a school district that has fewer than ten Title I eligible students or fewer than two percent of their students eligible for Title I.

SSDA believes that because ESEA affects all school districts which have Title I students, there ought to be a minimum allocation for those districts that have fewer than ten students eligible for Title I funding.

Don Brann, Emeritus
and Superintendent
Wiseburn Elementary SD
(310) 643-3025

Ray Edman, Emeritus
1926-2006

David Evans, Emeritus
(831) 624-4741

Specifically, SSDA believes there ought to be sufficient funds to provide reimbursement for one Full-Time Equivalent (FTE) aide to work with such students. The annual cost for such a FTE aide is approximately \$20,000. Consequently, SSDA requests a minimum allocation of \$20,000 for those school districts that have fewer than ten Title I eligible students.

Rationale

The fact that there are fewer than ten Title I students does not mean that these students do not have a need for educational assistance. This need is particularly true in the situation of a small school where there may be only 50 students, while almost 20% of the students are in poverty and the other 80% are close to poverty. Not recognizing the effects of poverty simply because there are fewer than ten students disadvantages those students. SSDA believes that Title I should be a student-need-driven program rather than a benchmark number program. SSDA believes that there ought to be a minimum allocation for any school that has a sizeable percentage of Title I children, even if that does not convert to ten or more eligible students.

Use of Alternatives to Census Poverty Count for Title I Allocation

Currently, states are able to request a waiver to using the census poverty count for Title I funding eligibility. Not all states have applied for waivers, and different waiver provisions have been granted to different states. SSDA believes that regardless of whether a state has or has not asked for a waiver, there ought to be a consistently applied alternative for all rural school districts.

SSDA believes that the ESEA reauthorization should include a provision where rural school districts, meaning those school districts that are eligible for Rural Education Achievement Program (Title VI) funding, be able to substitute their free lunch count students in lieu of the census poverty count.

Rationale

The Census Bureau uses a sampling methodology to determine poverty counts. The Census Bureau concurs that it does not work well in small sample sizes. The effect for rural America is that the census calculations are not accurate. Free meal counts more accurately reflect true poverty in these areas. A count of all the students who are eligible for free meals can be adjusted on an annual basis to reflect changes in pupil demographics. This will provide more accuracy and more statistically reliable validation of the poverty counts in each rural school district.

Title I Basic Grant Funding

Many smaller districts have been losing Title I funds even though they have not been losing Title I eligible students. The cause of this is a reallocation of Title I funding from basic grants into the other grants that are focused on aiding concentrations of poverty. Rural poverty is still important.

SSDA believes that basic grants should form the foundation of Title I services. The basic grants should not be used for redirection to other Title I programs. SSDA believes that the Title I basic grant should be restored to its former per pupil funding levels adjusted for inflation and be restored to a level proportionate to all Title I funds for basic grants and the other grant allocations.

2) **Requirements for Highly Qualified Teachers in Small Rural Areas**

SSDA requests an amendment to the ESEA regarding highly qualified teachers in small rural schools, particularly small rural high schools. The credentialing requirements and the economics of small high schools do not fit together. Small rural high schools do not have enough money to hire all the teachers necessary to meet the instructional program and also be highly qualified teachers in every subject area.

The reality is when a teacher leaves a small rural high school, that teacher may have been a mathematics teacher with a background in algebra and geometry, some trigonometry and limited calculus. That teacher may have also been required to teach an earth science class or an introduction to chemistry class, as well as the mathematics classes. There might not have been sufficient students in the high school to fully utilize the instructor's time for six hours a day solely in mathematics.

The result is that many teachers in rural high schools teach in subject areas where they do not have a major or a master's degree in that subject matter. These teachers, however, may be fully capable of teaching the assignment because of professional development and work in the subject area to improve their instructional skills.

SSDA believes that small rural high schools and middle schools should be allowed to employ as highly qualified teachers those individuals who pass state proficiency tests in subject matters in which they will be teaching.

3) Enhancing Education Through Technology (EETT)

SSDA supports EETT reauthorization with formula changes to allocate a greater amount of funds through formula grants, small school minimums and increasing the percentage for professional development.

Courseware for Rural Schools

SSDA requests that a pilot program be developed to test the delivery of high speed broadband courseware by highly qualified teachers that would meet the academic standards of the state in which the rural school district is located.

The provision of high quality coursework taught by highly qualified teachers will assist small rural high schools in meeting the curriculum requirements for students to meet state and federal standards.

SSDA believes this type of program would address many of the concerns with ensuring fully credentialed highly qualified teachers in the ESEA required subject matters.

For this reason, SSDA believes such an expansion of enhancing education through technology would directly address the intent of Title II in both teacher training and in using technology to improve education.

4) Parental Opt Out For Standardized Testing

SSDA recommends students whose parents have submitted valid requests to exclude the student from standardized testing requirement, not be counted as eligible to take the standardized test.

California allows parents to opt out of standardized tests for their children. This provision ensures parental choice and control over the types of questions that are asked of their children. California law does not count these children within the calculation of those eligible to take the test. Federal law, however, does count these students as eligible to take the test. This divergence results in many very small rural schools not meeting the percentage of test taker requirements in ESEA.

SSDA believes the students are the parent's children and the parents ought to be able to determine whether or not they want their children taking government tests. For this reason, SSDA believes that school districts should not be penalized as program improvement if a number of students are excluded from standardized testing. For a very small school district, a change of two students could result in that district not meeting its 95% testing requirement. SSDA believes this is an unnecessarily rigid provision of federal compliance regulation and ought to be amended.

- 5) **Rural Education Achievement Program (REAP) Funding for Small Rural School Districts**
SSDA encourages Congress to retain the Rural Education Achievement Program and relook at the minimums to better reflect the instructional funding requirements for small rural school districts.

SSDA also requests that the definition of "rural" and the school district size limits be reviewed to more accurately reflect rural districts in urban counties and the assumption that county rural areas have the same population growth as urban areas.

SSDA strongly supports and appreciates that Congress established REAP and hopes it will continue as a significant part of reauthorization for ESEA.

- 6) **Development of a School Renovation and Repair Program**
Small rural school districts do not have access to the same level of property taxes as larger districts to meet local school renovation and repair needs. HR 2187 would provide \$6.4 billion in grants to state and local school districts to renovate, repair and modernize schools for the fiscal year 2010. HR 2187 would allocate the same percentage of funds to states and school districts as they receive under Part A of Title I of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act with a guarantee that each district receive a minimum of \$5,000.

Thank you for your consideration.

Sincerely,



David L. Walrath
Legislative Advocate
Email: dwalrath@m-w-h.com
Phone: 916.441.3300