

# VIEW FROM THE DISTRICT

## RURAL EDUCATION ACHIEVEMENT PROGRAM (REAP)

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Tara Thomas

# INTRODUCTION

Rural schools represent 28% of all schools in the United States, serving more than 9 million students<sup>i</sup>. Although the federal definition of rural differs by department, agency and program (the U.S. Department of Agriculture alone has more than 7<sup>ii</sup>), the Department of Education (ED) determines rurality based on low population density and geographic distance from more populated areas<sup>iii</sup>. Rural schools vary greatly across the country but these definitive factors result in a few similar challenges. Smaller populations mean that rural schools often have less students, staff and resources than their suburban and urban counterparts. And due to their isolated location, services are more difficult and expensive to access, attracting educators is harder, and the lack of broadband connectivity is more prevalent<sup>iv</sup>.

AASA, The School Superintendents Association, represents more than 10,000 education leaders – with 38% from rural communities. As an organization committed to ensuring equitable access to a high-quality education for all students, we support federal policy that flexibly addresses the unique needs of rural communities. The Rural Education Achievement Program (REAP) is the only federal program that provides funding solely to K-12 rural schools and provides broad flexibility on how districts can use funds to support students. However, the program hasn't been studied in almost a decade. In August 2023, AASA surveyed district leaders from across the country who participate in REAP to gain a better understanding of how they utilize the investment to support students.

## BACKGROUND

In 2001, Congress passed the reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) known as No Child Left Behind which included the Rural Education Achievement Program—the first federal education program dedicated to support rural students and districts. The program was funded at \$162 million. The program was created in recognition of the unique challenges rural school districts face compared to non-rural districts due to limited resources and capacity, including the difficulty in both seeking competitive awards and utilizing small formula grant amounts from varied programs<sup>v</sup>. The success of REAP led to increased funding and its inclusion in the 2015 ESEA reauthorization known as the Every Student Succeeds Act. In 2023, REAP was funded at \$215 million.

The program provides funding to districts through two sub-grant programs: 1) Small Rural Schools Achievement (SRSA) which goes to districts with locale codes of 41, 42, or 43, and an average daily attendance of less than 600; and Rural Low-Income Schools (RLIS) which targets

funding to districts with locale codes of 32, 33, 41, 42, or 43 and at least 20% of the student population below the federal poverty line. SRSA grants are made directly to districts by ED, and RLIS funds are first provided to states based on a formula then distributed to eligible districts by a formula or competitive basis.

The program provides broad flexibility in how districts can use the funds, and recent research has not investigated how individual districts are investing REAP funds to support their students and schools. AASA undertook this project to better understand:

- How REAP funding is used at the district level
- The amount of funding districts receive under the program
- District leaders' perspective of the program and how it could be improved

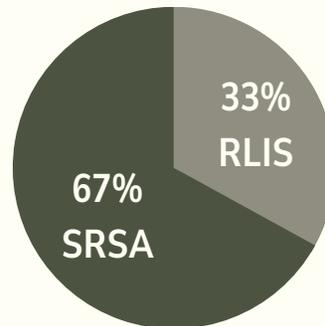


# RESPONDENTS

In August 2023, AASA surveyed 354 district leaders from 33 states who participated in REAP for Fiscal Year (FY) 2023. According to the U.S. Department of Education, 6,217 districts participated in the program in FY2023, with 2,204 (33%) participating in RLIS and 4,193 (67%) in SRSA. Among respondents in the survey, 28% participated in RLIS and 72% participated in SRSA. Nineteen percent of respondents were eligible for both SRSA and RLIS in 2023. Those respondents were then asked which program they chose to participate in this year (those answers are reflected in the statistics above). Out of the respondents who were eligible for both, 69% opted for SRSA, while 31% chose to participate in RLIS.

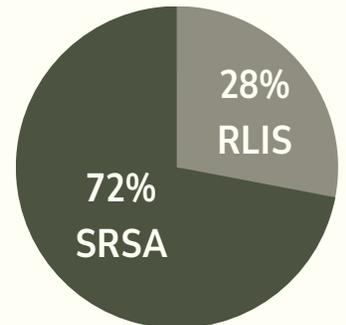
The majority of our analysis examines respondents as a whole, rather than by program. Although percentages are similar to the breakdown by program, given the small sample size, caution should be exercised in drawing conclusions or inferences from the small number of participants who participated in RLIS. Readers should consider the data descriptive and not necessarily representative of all districts that participate in REAP.

## PARTICIPATION IN REAP PROGRAMS



DATA FROM  
US DEPARTMENT  
OF EDUCATION

RESPONDENTS TO  
AASA, THE SCHOOL  
SUPERINTENDENTS  
ASSOCIATION



# MAJOR FINDINGS

## MOST COMMON INVESTMENTS

We found that the most common use of REAP funding was for purchasing technology, devices and software – with 56% of respondents selecting that option. The second most popular use of REAP funds (27%) was in professional development for teachers and staff and tied for third (20%) was investing in greater staff compensation and expanded curricular offerings (STEM courses, arts education, etc.).

Beyond the top three, the majority of the other responses received between 10-16%.

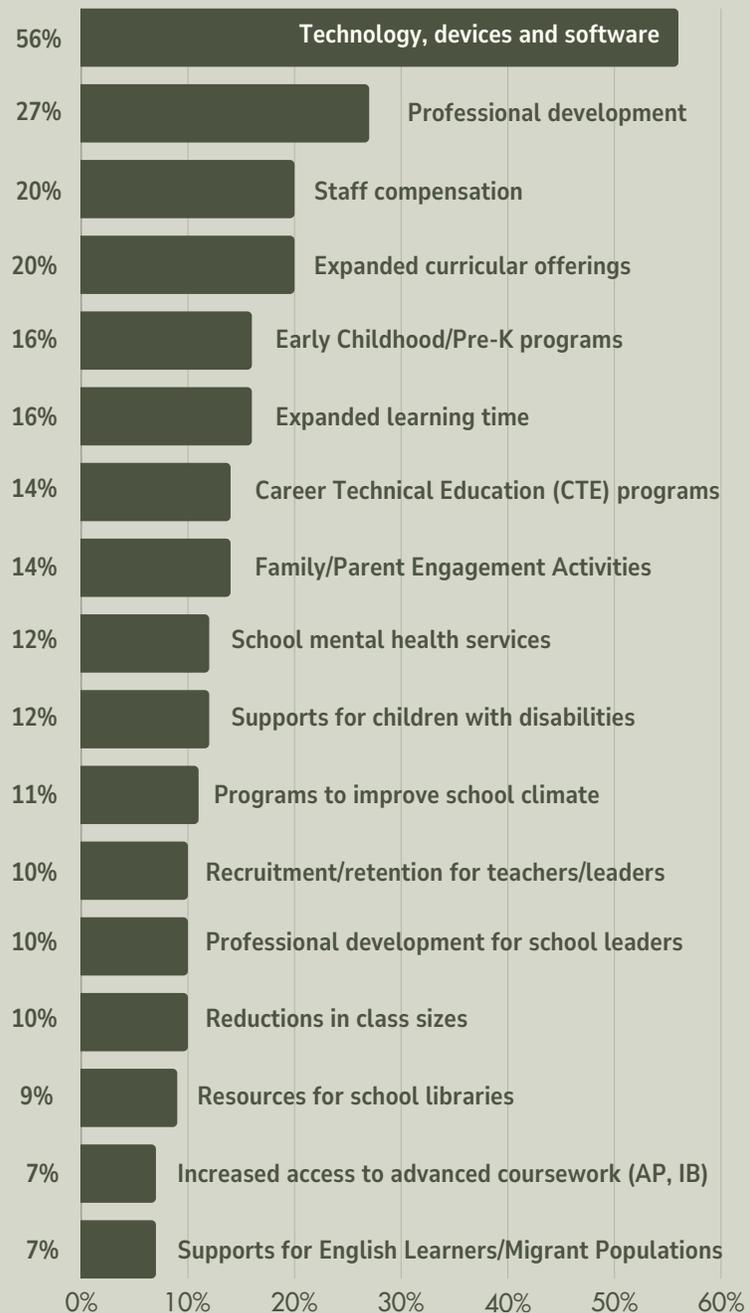
The lack of an overwhelming majority for a few investment categories, underscores the value of the program’s flexibility. Every district is different; therefore, every district’s needs and necessary investments will also be different. REAP provides a broad array of options, allowing districts to target funds to ensure their students are getting the supports they need.

## LEAST COMMON INVESTMENTS

District leaders were least likely to dedicate REAP funding to resources for their school libraries, supports for English learners/migrant students and activities designed to increase access to high-quality advanced coursework (AP, IB, etc).

One explanation for the low percentage for support of English Language Learners (ELL) could be that the participating districts don’t have a large population of ELLs and therefore these investments are not necessary. Additionally, other federal resources, like Title III-A of ESEA, are available for districts to use for these activities. In Fiscal Year (FY) 2023, Title III-A received \$890 million, a \$59 million increase from FY22 – meaning districts likely received additional funds under this program, allowing them to target REAP funds on different investments.

## MOST COMMON REAP INVESTMENTS



# A CLOSER LOOK

To gain a better understanding of what REAP funds look like at the district and school levels, we provided an opportunity for participants to respond to an open-ended question and include more details of how they were investing their REAP dollars. These responses have provided greater insight into how these funds are being used.

For example, while many districts indicated that they use REAP funds to provide 1:1 devices to students, other districts demonstrated a broader investment in technology—updating a primary server, investing in an intercom system and door entry technology for school safety, purchasing software that enables teacher/parent communication or screening for math and reading proficiency, and improving data systems to better support students with college and career readiness. A necessary reminder that the technology needs in rural schools are often greater and more wide-ranging than those of their urban or suburban counterparts.

Another common theme found in the open-ended answers was using REAP funds to expose students to experiences and resources that they otherwise would not have access to from field trips to arts and cultural events to college courses.

“Technology purchased through REAP has allowed our district to improve our Data-Driven Decision Making: The school uses data to inform its college and career planning efforts. This includes reviewing student outcomes, such as college acceptance rates, career placement, and student satisfaction. Data analysis guides the committee's discussions and helps identify areas that need improvement.”

“[REAP] has allowed us, a small, small rural school to be able to provide things like virtual reality goggles for our students to witness things like autopsies, tours of historical places, and exploration of places they probably won't ever go!”

## USING REAP FUNDS TO ADDRESS SCHOOL STAFF SHORTAGES

Across the country, school districts are struggling to recruit and retain teachers. Teacher preparation programs are experiencing declining enrollment – the most recent data shows enrollment at 70% of what it was a decade earlier<sup>vi</sup>. While there are many commonalities in the challenges brought on by the decreasing number of available teachers, district types often differ in experiences. Recruitment is becoming increasingly difficult for all districts, but usually retention strategies are the primary focus of combatting the shortages – between 40% and 50% of teachers leave the profession within the first five years<sup>vii</sup>. However, rural districts often experience the inverse. Due to their remote location and considerably lower salary scales, rural districts have always struggled to

recruit new teachers<sup>viii</sup>. But retention is less of a challenge – what it is commonly seen as a positive attribute of rural schools is that they are the center of a strong community. Rural teachers and school staff often stay longer in their positions due to the strength of relationships with students, colleagues, administrators and community members<sup>ix</sup>.

Further analysis of the detailed responses of how districts are using REAP, particularly through professional development and staff compensation, one common theme was using these funds to fill vacancies or ensure access to curriculum. Within the professional development for teachers and staff category, multiple respondents shared that they were using professional



# USING REAP FUNDS TO ADDRESS SCHOOL STAFF SHORTAGES (CONT.)

development to provide certification to teachers to enable them to offer other courses. Because rural districts typically have a smaller staff and budget, rural teachers teach multiple courses and subjects to ensure that students have access to the curriculum they need. In the smallest schools, with a small student population, teachers must juggle teaching different grades as well – sometimes at the same time.

Additionally, under staff compensation, respondents reported a broad array of critical positions added due to REAP funds: counselors, social workers, family support coordinator, tutors, reading specialists, instructional technology director, paraprofessionals and school nurses. We also found that 10% of respondents used REAP funds to reduce class sizes by adding staff as well.

REAP funds play a critical role in supporting rural districts in educator recruitment and ensuring that

students have equitable access to courses and curricula as well as access to academic, physical and mental health supports by allowing districts to offer more competitive compensation and providing high-quality professional development.

## SRSA V. RLIS

When spending priorities are broken down by program, the top two investments remain the same for districts that receive RLIS or SRSA. For RLIS participants, expanded curricular offerings was the third common investment, while more SRSA participants were more likely to choose staff compensation. One explanation for this, could be that SRSA recipients are often smaller schools with fewer resources and therefore must prioritize staff compensation more than larger rural districts that are eligible for RLIS funding\*.

## LEVELS OF FUNDING

Aside from knowing how districts are spending REAP funds, another key question is how much funding districts are receiving from REAP. Respondents were asked how much they received for SY2023-24.

The majority of responses fell into two ranges: \$10,000 – 24,999 (42%) and \$25,000 – 49,999 (36%); 10% received \$1,000 – 9,999 and 5% received between \$50,000 - 74,999.

Only 4% of respondents received more than \$75,000, which is indicative of the fact that the maximum grant amount for SRSA is \$60,000.



\* As mentioned before, it is important to note that the sample size of districts participating in RLIS was 96, which limits our ability to draw strong conclusions about those districts. However, since this is still the first survey of its kind in many years, we believe the information is still an interesting insight into the program.



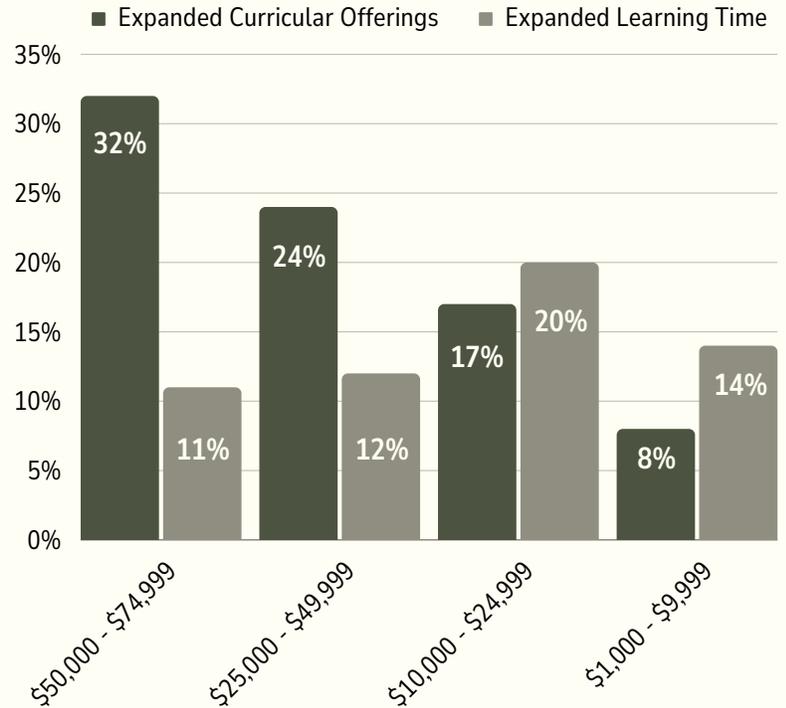
# LEVELS OF FUNDING (CONT.)

## MORE MONEY, MORE OPTIONS

When we analyzed whether there is any correlation to how much REAP funding a district receives and how they choose to invest these dollars programmatically, we found that the greater the level of funding, the more likely the district was to invest in expanded curricular offerings (STEM, arts education, etc). In contrast, districts receiving smaller REAP allocations were more likely to invest in expanded learning time (summer programs, before/after schools, etc.).

This could be due to the fact that adding an entire course typically requires the addition of a new staff member or additional certification/professional development, while providing expanded learning time can be accomplished through compensating existing staff for just a few hours of additional time – which requires less funding. This demonstrates that larger REAP grants often translates into more comprehensive supports and resources for students.

## REAP INVESTMENTS BASED ON FUNDING LEVELS

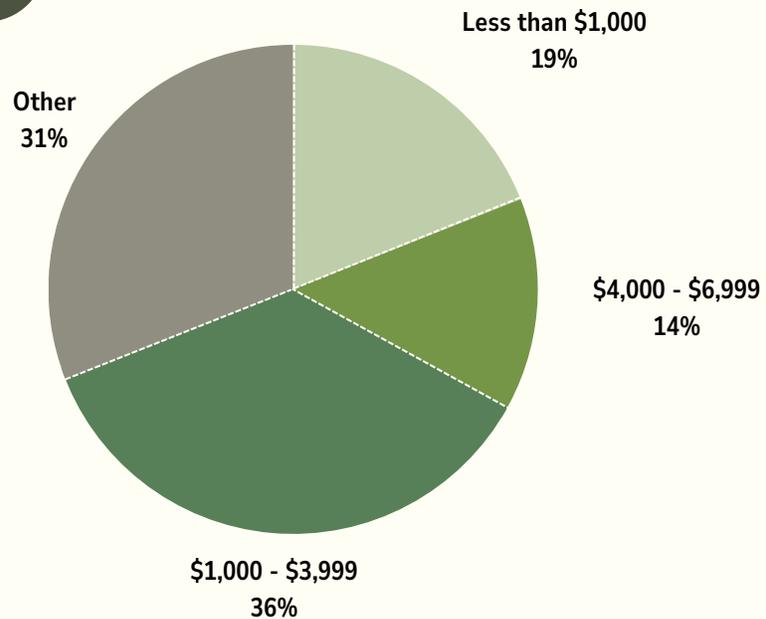


# IMPACT OF FY23 INCREASE

In FY23, Congress provided REAP with an unprecedented amount of \$215 million—an increase of \$20 million from FY22. This survey asked district leaders to share how this increased funding impacted their programs and what, if anything, changed because of the funding increase\*.

While the level of funding a district receives can change relative to the \$20 million increase in federal appropriations for FY23, we were curious if this new high watermark for REAP funding in FY23 was noticeable by superintendents.

The majority of respondents reported an increase of \$7,000 or less.



\* It is important to note that the increase of funding this year cannot definitively be attributed to the increase from Congress. Fluctuations in REAP funding could be the result of many changing factors: number of districts participating, changes in Average Daily Attendance (ADA), and level of investment in two ESEA grant programs that are used for an offset provision (Title II, Part A; Title IV, Part A) for SRSA. The variable we cannot account for here is changes in ADA. For the other variables:

- The overall number of districts participating only increased by 4 – increasing from 6,213 in 2022 to 6,217 – according to ED.
- Title II-A received a \$20 million increase from FY22
- Title IV-A received a \$100 million increase from FY22



## IMPACT OF FY23 INCREASE (CONT.)

We provided the opportunity for participants to share what this increase would allow them to do. The majority of responses indicated that they would be able to expand and enhance existing investments – like reaching more families in need through an expanded community outreach program, offering more individual support and small group instruction, and purchasing more technology and instructional programs for students.

However, some shared new investments or additional staff that were made possible by the increase. For example, one district is able to staff and offer an after-school program in their rural community that offers no other child or day care centers. Another district shared that the increase will allow for ed tech positions in each elementary classroom for reading, language and math

support. Other districts said they would use the increase to add an English language learner teacher, adding teachers to tutor for after school program and hire a school nurse.



“The increase will allow us to revamp a CNC fabrication lab with more modern computers, processing capabilities, and software.”

“An increase in funds will allow us to offer preschool programming in one of our unserved villages.”

## TECHNICAL CHALLENGES/ROOM FOR IMPROVEMENT

Finally, we sought to understand any barriers or challenges districts may face in participating in REAP.

The only challenge that was mentioned by numerous respondents was difficulties managing the various systems and processes required to obtain the grant. Specifically mentioned was G5 – the ED’s grants management system, SAM – system for award management, and obtaining a unique entity identifier (UEI). The responses echo the usual challenges that rural districts, with limited staff and capacity, face in participating in federal grant programs.

However, overall, the majority of responses were very positive; highlighting that the process itself is fairly simple and straightforward. The REAP office at ED has purposefully simplified the application process for SRSA to make it easy for districts to participate (states manage and allocate RLIS grants). The data from the survey shows that it has been relatively successful.

When asked to rank ED’s technical assistance on the program, among SRSA respondents: 32% selected Excellent, 30% chose Very Good and 22% chose Good.

The REAP Office’s actions on SRSA should serve as an example for other programs at ED and other federal agencies on how to recognize the unique position of rural schools and intentionally change processes to ensure rural schools are able to participate in Federal programs.



“The Department of Education has been very responsive when it comes to the simplification of the application each year. They are very helpful compared to most departments at the federal level. You actually get to speak to someone on the phone that most often knows how to help you.”



# CONCLUSION

REAP is the only program aimed specifically for rural school districts, acknowledging their unique circumstances. A key aspect of the program is the flexibility provided to districts, allowing leaders to target funds to best suit their students' needs. One recurring theme of this survey is that rural schools, due to location and size, are often in need of supplies and resources that other districts may take for granted. Again and again, the examples provided showed how different many rural districts' circumstances are when compared to their urban and suburban counterparts. From purchasing TI-84 calculators and high school government curriculum to using the funds to take students on field trips that they otherwise would not be able to go on, this funding is critical to ensuring rural districts can provide equitable educational opportunities for students in their rural communities. The data from this survey demonstrates the importance and value of the Rural Education Achievement Program to superintendents across the country.

We encourage Congress to continue to support this unique federal education program that enables small and high-poverty districts throughout rural America to better support their students, educators and communities.



"[The district is] facing challenges with low performance and high poverty rates. The focus is on attracting and retaining effective teachers through professional development programs that cover technology use for remote learning, teaching methods improvement, and meeting the needs of special education students. To achieve this, the Rural Low-Income Schools grant will fund certified teachers and paraprofessionals who can provide services for exceptional children, English Language Learners, and at-risk students. The funds will also be used to recruit and retain highly qualified classroom, ELL, and special education teachers by offering signing bonuses and financial incentives. Current staff can participate in professional development with a tier system of support, which helps teachers with small group, blended, and personalized learning. The goal is to improve communication with ELL students and their families by hiring a bilingual parent assistant and contracting services to improve communication strategies and targeted professional development to support ELL and special needs students. Teachers who are highly effective will receive stipends for working with students in our after-school targeted tutoring program, providing small group instruction for students at different achievement levels. The ultimate goal is to increase student performance and meet state academic standards."



# CITATIONS

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- v U.S. Congressional Research Service. The Rural Education Achievement Program: Title V-B of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (R44906; February 21, 2021), by Jeffrey Kuenzi.
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- vii Zhang, G., & Zeller, N. (2016). A Longitudinal Investigation of the Relationship Between Teacher Preparation and Teacher Retention. *Teacher Education Quarterly*, 43(2), 73-92.
- viii Jacobs, S. and Olsen, L. “In Demand: The Real Teacher Shortages and How To Solve Them”. October 2021
- ix Ingersoll, R. M., & Tran, H. (2023). Teacher Shortages and Turnover in Rural Schools in the US: An Organizational Analysis. *Educational Administration Quarterly*, 59(2), 396-431. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0013161X231159922>



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