



July 21, 2022

The Honorable Miguel Cardona, Secretary
United States Department of Education
400 Maryland Avenue, S.W.
Washington, D.C. 20202

Dear Secretary Cardona:

In a letter dated March 2, 2021, the Organizations Concerned about Rural Education (OCRE) a broad-based national coalition representing more than two dozen national education, farm, agriculture, tele-com, energy, tribal and business organizations advocating for the 10 million students in rural schools and communities across the country, wrote a congratulatory letter to President Biden commending him on an impressive start building a strong and effective Administration. OCRE's overall mission is to ensure that both Congress and Federal agencies recognize as they make policy decisions, that the needs and challenges facing rural schools are included in the formulation of such policy.

The OCRE letter to the President expressed our appreciation and support for the American Rescue Plan as it took aim at addressing the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. We also identified issues both related to the pandemic as well as other matters that have a major impact on rural schools. Our list included transportation, teacher recruitment and retention, providing Wi-Fi for students and communities, closing homework gaps, nutrition, health, and counseling services; all of which are challenges facing rural schools. OCRE noted in our letter (see attached) that the issues listed could and should be a priority of the Administration. To ensure that rural education be a Department priority we underscored the need for a Department of Education, Office of Rural Education Policy. Our basic request is that rural schools, students, and rural communities need a seat at the table.

Our letter to the President was answered in a May 7 letter from Ian Rosenblum who at the time was serving as the Deputy Assistant Secretary for Policy and Programs and who was delegated the authority to perform the functions and duties of the Assistant Secretary. Deputy Assistant Rosenblum concurred with the issues raised in our letter to the President. He referenced the programs addressing the COVID-19 pandemic and mentioned President Biden's Executive Order 13985, titled "Advancing Racial Equity and Support for Underserved Communities Through the Federal Government," which as Rosenblum stated "requires collaboration across agencies to target issues of equity that impact rural schools and

communities” noting that this EO will commit “resources to broadly and more effectively support rural development and the approximately 10 million students that attend schools in rural communities across the country.”

Deputy Assistant Secretary Rosenblum also assured OCRE that the Department will “regularly coordinate with other Federal agencies whose programs have an impact on rural education.....” He specifically cited improving coordination with the Departments of Agriculture, Interior, and Health and Human Services to support and serve students in rural communities. He also underscored the importance of “sharing information and developing streamlined approaches to delivering services to rural communities” an action item that OCRE totally supports as Rosenblum mentions the historic efforts that the Department of Education has made over the years to “communicate and collaborate across program offices that support rural schools, students and communities”. Again, Deputy Assistant Secretary Rosenblum cited as an example the Department’s Rural Interagency Working Group assistance in helping to ensure offices responsible for Department programs such as the Rural Education Achievement Programs (REAP) collaborate on related initiatives like access to broadband services.... noting that he hoped the Department “can expand upon these successful initiatives”.

OCRE was very much encouraged in Assistant Secretary Rosenblum’s closing comments when he stated “....the Department will continue to lean on local leaders and rural stakeholders for their expertise and knowledge of rural schools” noting that the Department maintains close contacts with “REAP grantees and organizations like OCRE” that will help the Department institute “longer term plans related to supporting rural schools, including the proposal to establish an Office of Rural Education Policy”.

Mr. Secretary now that the Administration and the Department of Education have had 18 months to implement policy, both as outlined by Deputy Assistant Secretary Rosenblum as well as under your watch, the question that OCRE respectfully asks is, what is the status of the activities and outreach to rural schools that Rosenblum spoke to in his May 7, 2021, letter to OCRE?

OCRE respectfully is requesting updates including:

1. Examples of how E.O. 13985 has fostered agency coordination that target issues of equity that impact rural schools and communities.
2. OCRE strongly supports the reference to the Department coordinating with other Federal agencies i.e., Agriculture, Interior and Health and Human Services on interdepartmental issues and policy decisions affecting rural schools and the communities they serve. Could you provide OCRE with examples of specific coordination as we would like to commend such interagency support for rural schools and to lend OCRE’s active support and participation to that effort in every way possible?
3. In citing the Department’s Rural Interagency Working Group, what role is it played in addition to working with REAP grantees to provide inter-department support in providing (sharing information) examples of successful “Best Practices” strategies that address teacher recruitment

and retention and other potential examples of innovative curriculum that rural schools have implemented to address student needs, i.e., college/career options; special education; emotional support. Are there any “Best Practices” examples that the Department is making available via Department websites.

4. Finally, Mr. Secretary, Deputy Assistant Secretary Rosenblum cited that the Department will “continue to lean on local leaders and stakeholders like OCRE to provide input that will help the Department institute longer term plans “longer term plans related to supporting rural schools, including the proposal to establish an Office of Rural Education Policy”.

A question, Mr. Secretary, is how the Department is reaching out to local leaders and stakeholders like OCRE – We ask that because OCRE membership wants to be involved – to offer our input and our on-the-ground direct experiences working with rural schools.

Finally, is there any discussion within the Department on the establishment of an Office of Rural Education Policy and if not, is there any discussion to ensure that issues affecting rural schools, students and rural communities are included in Education Department policy discussions and decision making.

Mr. Secretary, OCRE asks these questions because we want to assist you and the mission of the Department of Education to advance the success of all students including our nation’s 10 million rural students. An OCRE concern and focus is that the Department of Education as it implements policy will ensure that the 10 million children enrolled in rural schools and rural communities will be able to have the same opportunities to be competitive as children in non-rural communities.

OCRE normally meets virtually monthly; usually the third Thursday. Anywhere from 25 to 30 representatives from organizations representing rural America join us as we discuss critical issues affecting rural students, schools, and communities.

We enthusiastically extend to you Mr. Secretary or a representative from your office, to join a future OCRE meeting.

Please feel free to contact OCRE at any time. OCRE looks forward to hearing directly from you and the Department of Education responses to our questions as we all work to advance the success of our nation’s 10 million students in rural school and communities in every state across our nation.

Sincerely,

John Forkenbrock, OCRE President