



Organizations Concerned About Rural Education (OCRE)

Rural Education Policy Issues & Solutions

June 2017

PURPOSE

Founded in 1965 in tandem with the passage of the *Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA)*, rural advocates established the Organizations Concerned About Rural Education (OCRE). Given an awareness that the priorities, challenges, and opportunities for rural students and their communities were not taken into account in the original law, this new presence resulted in subsequent federal education laws being more focused on rural education issues, particularly reflected in the adoption of the Rural Education Achievement Program. Yet, challenges remain.

OCRE is a broad-based national coalition of education, agriculture, school infrastructure, community development, and technology and utility organizations dedicated to providing a high-quality education for the nation's more than nine million (*Why Rural Matters 2015-2016*) rural children and aimed at securing the economic future of rural America. OCRE is at the forefront of leading change to improve educational opportunity that strengthens communities regardless of their geographic remoteness.

OCRE's primary focus is to facilitate practical, research-based innovations and policies unique to the rural context. It assists policymakers, business leaders, faith-based institutions, and post-secondary pathway students in finding and effectively using data and information to identify, understand, address, and craft opportunities, resources, and challenges in rural education and school issues.

RURAL EDUCATION ACHIEVEMENT PROGRAM

Congress created the REAP program in a bipartisan effort to address the unique needs of rural schools to equalize education delivery systems. To compensate for the challenges facing rural schools, REAP awards two types of formula grants; one extended directly to eligible school districts, or local educational agencies (LEAs), and a second grant goes to state education agencies (SEAs).

The Small, Rural School Grant Program awards formula grants directly to eligible school districts. The Rural and Low-Income School Program is designed to address the needs of rural, low-income schools. Federal formula grants are awarded to State educational agencies which in turn award subgrants to eligible school districts.

Challenges: While the REAP program received a modest increase in funding, the federal commitment to rural schools and districts still does not meet the law's requirement. In addition, technical assistance to apply for these grants does not serve all school districts that need such support. Many rural districts currently do not apply for this reason.

Recommendation: Continue bipartisan support for formula grants through the REAP program and provide funding and application technical assistance that fully meets the needs of eligible rural school districts.

QUALIFIED TEACHER RECRUITMENT AND RETENTION

Challenges: Many rural communities across the country face deep challenges meeting their needs to hire qualified educators. Isolated rural communities can be challenging places to teach, and challenging places in which to attract educators. Lack of economic opportunities for families of educators can also be a challenge to recruitment. With communities nationwide facing shortages of educators, this crisis seems likely to continue in rural communities unless targeted actions are taken to improve recruitment, induction, and career-long professional support.

Recommendation: Strong, positive public policy for recruiting and supporting educators in rural communities should be supported. These policies should focus on encouraging promising p-12 students to consider careers in education, encouraging ‘grow-your-own’ recruitment from within the community, induction and mentoring, including teacher residencies to help prepare educators for the (culture and) unique needs of rural communities. The ‘grow-your-own’ strategy should be implemented to help rural communities develop programs that allow them to support local community members, including education support professionals, who wish to pursue becoming certified teachers of record. In addition, policymakers must consider the whole range of issues that may impact an educator’s ability to choose to teach in a rural community, including availability of housing, adequate salary levels, professional development opportunities, teacher leadership opportunities that do not require leaving the classroom or that provide hybrid assignments, technology as a tool for greater connection with other professionals, reasonable class size and other support, and a healthy school climate.

INVESTMENT IN BROADBAND INFRASTRUCTURE

OCRE recognizes that as increasing amounts of teaching and learning are powered by technology, the availability of quality broadband is essential for the future of rural schools to fulfill their roles and responsibilities in educating the next generation.

Challenges: The investment in broadband-capable infrastructure that can be leveraged for learning in rural communities.

Recommendation: OCRE recommends that federal financing initiatives ensure that all rural students have sustainable access to robust, reliable, and affordable broadband services both at school and home. Investments in broadband infrastructure must be in addition to the successful Universal Service Funds, and must be structured in such a manner as to ensure the programs are complementary and cannot be used as a way to justify cuts or programmatic changes to Universal Service Funds.

FY 2018 BUDGET

Rural school proponents and educators are genuinely concerned about the unintended consequences of 2018 budget proposals on rural education and rural communities.

Challenges: Federal funding for rural schools is insufficient to meet the needs of students as the annual costs of education continue to rise particularly in rural area with limited resources. Rural school districts are frequently disadvantaged in formula programs and in the ability to apply for competitive grants. Rural school districts are concerned about the long-term impact of funding cuts and stagnation due to the strict discretionary spending caps under the Budget Control Act. Rural School districts are frequently disadvantaged in formula programs and in the ability to apply for competitive grants.

Recommendation: The Administration and Congress should fund federal programs that support rural school districts and libraries at authorized levels. This includes prioritizing the Rural Education Achievement Program, Title I, IDEA, Impact Aid, Indian Education, Secure Rural Schools Funding, and E-Rate. Federal funding for these critical federal programs ensures equity for rural students by enabling access to a high-quality public education.

OCRE is concerned about proposals to divert formula funds, either in the form of new competitive grants, private school vouchers or tuition tax credit scholarship initiatives. School choice options are limited in rural communities.

CAREER AND TECHNICAL EDUCATION

Challenges: CTE provides secondary and postsecondary students with the necessary curriculum, technical and leadership skills required to be successful throughout a student's career. The local economy benefits from having qualified individuals trained and available to join the local community workforce.

Recommendation: The House Education and the Workforce Committee unanimously adopted a bipartisan bill The Strengthening Career and Technical Education for the 21st Century Act (H.R. 2353) to reauthorize the Perkin's Career and Technical Education program. OCRE supports the passage of this legislation and respectfully requests the Senate Health Education, Labor and Pensions Committee to pass a comparable bipartisan bill.

RURAL EDUCATION RESEARCH

Challenges: Research focusing on innovative practices, opportunities for student success, and unique challenges facing rural schools and districts is in short supply. Increasingly, federal programs require an "evidence-based-designation" that disadvantages rural providers due to the difficulty of conducting Randomized Control Trials (RCT) in rural settings. New strategies and investments are needed to build a solid and reliable research base.

Recommendation: Research funding and related-research support should be situated in the Institute of Education Sciences (IES) at the US Department of Education to advance the body of knowledge, and increase the quality of research on rural schools and education in rural areas. OCRE strongly suggests further that IES be in the appropriate location within the Department of Education to support rigorous, peer-reviewed research on rural schools and education in rural areas. There is a need for major investments in research focused on rural education. The Rural Health Policy Office in the Department of Health and Human Services is a solid model to emulate in the creation of the IES rural education research.

SCHOOL FACILITIES

Challenges: Facility problems continue to be a rural education issue. Minimal bonding authority (capacity) financing limits many rural school districts from building, renovating, and modernizing schools.

Recommendation: Congressman Scott (D-VA) ranking member of the House Education and the Workforce Committee is sponsoring, with other Members, H.R. 2475 *The Rebuild America's Schools Act of 2017* which creates grant and tax credit bond programs to assist local school district efforts to build, renovate, and repair modern school facilities as well as enhance broadband availability in rural communities. Modern schools in rural communities are essential to the economic and social stability of rural communities. OCRE recommends the investment in school facilities as an integral component of our nation's infrastructure. Modern schools are essential to the economic and social stability of rural communities.

SECURE RURAL SCHOOLS

Challenges: The reauthorization of the Secure Rural Schools (SRS) program expired in 2015 and needs to be reauthorized. SRS payments are based on historic precedent and agreements established in 1908 removing federal lands from local tax bases and full local economic activity. SRS has provided a stable source of funding for more than 720 counties in over 4000 school districts serving nine million students in national forest communities. Rural forest counties rely on SRS to support classrooms, retain high-quality teachers, support staff, and essential education programs. SRS funding also sustains local jobs in rural counties supporting forest communities' road, transportation, infrastructure, social and health service needs. The 115th Congress must act to extend and fund the Secure Rural Schools program.

Recommendation: H.R.2340 introduced by Congresswoman Mc Morris Rodgers (R-WA) and S. 1027 sponsored by Senators Hatch (R-UT) and Wyden (D-OR) extend the Secure Rural Schools and Community Self-Determination Act. **OCRE supports the reauthorization of SRS.** OCRE recommends that Congress act on H.R. 2340 and S.1027 to extend the Secure Rural Schools program.

INDIAN EDUCATION

Challenges: Strengthen and support the government's federal trust responsibility toward the education of Native students in the Department of Education and the Bureau of Indian Education.

Recommendation: Re-elevate the position of the Director of Indian Education to the Assistant Secretary level at the U.S. Department of Education. OCRE strongly suggests it is essential to put in place a centralized position, reporting to the Secretary, to ensure that the unique education needs of Indian children are being considered. OCRE recommends strengthening the existing memorandum of understanding with the US Department of Interior to support increased and meaningful collaboration and coordination strategies to improve the academic achievement for Native students as well as encouraging consistent and regular communication between the Bureau of Indian Education (BIE) and the US Department of Education in maintaining student records on dropouts and transfers from BIE schools to public schools and likewise from public schools to BIE schools.

BEST PRACTICES DISSEMINATION NETWORK

Challenges: There is a need for a nationally-based mechanism or network under which rural schools can disseminate best practices or programs/curricula to the rural school community. The Office of Rural and Community Engagement has identified "best practices" as one of their priorities. OCRE supports and encourages the development of a dissemination network/clearinghouse to identify "best practices" approaches/programs/curricula with proven results that could be shared nationwide.

In many cases schools in rural communities are faced with the challenge of attracting and retaining teachers in hard-to-fill subject areas including the sciences, language arts and special education. They also are at a disadvantage when competing for grants from federal, state, and private sources, as most rural schools do not have experienced grant writers. A challenge is that too many times innovative and creative approaches to learning are seldom shared with other schools and communities looking for ideas. There continues to be a need for a nationally-based mechanism or network under which rural schools can disseminate best practices or programs/curricula to the rural school community.

Recommendation: OCRE supports a Best Practices Dissemination Network in the US Department of Education as a Clearinghouse to identify "best practices" approaches/programs/curricula with proven results to be shared nationwide. A "best practices" Clearinghouse that reaches out to schools in rural areas seeking examples of what works and then effectively disseminates those examples to schools in rural areas through a Clearinghouse to identify and disseminate "best practices" would be a good start.

OFFICE OF RURAL EDUCATION POLICY

Challenges: Many Administrations have recognized that the US Departments of Agriculture and Education have unique roles in addressing gaps in services to rural populations and communities.

Recommendation: OCRE continues to support the establishment of an Office of Rural Education at the US Department of Education. Attention to rural schools and their students has been sporadic. As a result, policy-makers and educators lack the information they could rely on to understand rural school problems and to craft research-grounded solutions. The Administration has re-created the White House Rural Task Force in the Department of Agriculture. OCRE encourages continued efforts toward improving and better coordinating the needs of schools serving students in rural communities as a goal of this task force. The primary responsibility of the Office of Rural Education will be to ensure the needs of rural school districts and the students they serve are met when policy decisions are made in the US Department of Education and other federal agencies.

OCRE Members include: AASA, The School Superintendents Association, American Farm Bureau Federation, American Library Association, Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, National Association of Development Organizations, National Association of Federally Impacted Schools, National Education Association, National Farmers Union, National Forest Counties and Schools Coalition, National Grange, National Rural Electric Cooperative Association, National School Boards Association, Rebuild America's Schools, Rural School and Community Trust, Save the Children