



## **National Rural Education Advocacy Coalition**

### **2009 Legislative Agenda**

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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 consider the unique needs of rural schools as one-size-fits-all policy can often have devastating effects.

NREAC believes direct funding America's public schools 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 the intent of both 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, provide leadership and provide resources. The federal government should supplement and support, rather than dictate, state efforts in education.

#### ***Focus on Rural Schools and Funding***

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 small and rural areas. NREAC encourages Title I funds to be focused on percentages of students in

poverty to help ensure that poor school districts, no matter how small, receive their fair share of assistance. All school districts participating in Title I should receive a minimum amount of assistance under Title I.

Due to the Census Bureau's own admission that their estimates are inaccurate for population sizes under 20,000, NREAC supports the use of locally audited free/reduced lunch eligibility as a poverty indicator.

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.

### **Title I**

NREAC believes that poverty has an impact on student achievement. Rural schools are community centers. As community centers, these schools should work cooperatively in their effort to overcome and help mitigate the effects of poverty by working with other agencies and efforts, such as health care and housing.

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 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 recommends that the reauthorized law require the Department of Education to develop rules that ensure equity by guaranteeing states and school districts consistency of application and transparency of administration. The reauthorization should emphasize that the federal government's role is not to set curriculum or make local education decisions, tasks that should be left to states and school districts.

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 impacts 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, with an emphasis on growth, improvement and closing achievement gaps. These assessments should provide teachers with timely, instructionally useful data . NREAC supports the use of federal incentive money to encourage states to develop formative and summative assessments.

NREAC supports the assessment of students in multiple-curricula areas, beyond the current assessments that over-emphasize mathematics and English language arts at the expense of science, social studies, and other curricular areas. At the same time, NREAC cautions against the possible impacts this expansion could have on how schools are held accountable and urges these elements be used as part of a comprehensive approach.

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 and other subgroups 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 rural teachers face when teaching in multiple subject areas or students with special needs.

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.

### ***Assistance for High Schools***

NREAC believes 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 with 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.

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 the establishment of a minimum guaranteed grant size.

*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 efforts to provide local schools districts with funds to address the new and ongoing safety and drug-related challenges in rural America. NREAC believes that the Safe and Drug Free Schools Program should continue as a stand-alone program and that the program should be free of any state set-asides in funding so that 100% of the program dollars flow to local districts to maximize the local impact.

NREAC supports legislative efforts to create and expand opportunities for afterschool programs in rural areas. NREAC believes any afterschool programs operated from the federal level must consider the needs of rural schools and ensure equitable distribution of those programs to maximize participation by students in rural communities.

*Title V*

NREAC supports the Education Innovative Block Grant as a critical source of flexible money for local districts to nurture new programs and test ideas.

NREAC recommends increasing the percentage of funding that flows directly to school districts under the Education Innovative Block Grant, as well as 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. NREAC opposes 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 support for students in rural America.

NREAC supports the Rural Education Achievement Program Reauthorization Act (*update with bill numbers as available*). NREAC opposes 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 REAP.

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.

#### **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 increasing the current \$2.25 billion funding cap for the program to meet increasing demand for technological services in 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 (*update with bill number as available*).

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 with the ultimate goal of reaching universal access to broadband coverage. Build out to public schools should be a central part of any comprehensive national broadband plan.

#### **Secure Rural Schools and Communities Self-Determination Act**

NREAC recognizes the challenges of rural school districts located in federal forest counties and supports the safety net created in the Secure Rural Schools and Communities Self Determination Act. However, we believe that schools in federal forest communities should have greater funding stability and therefore NREAC proposes the creation of a standalone program to provide a consistent source of funding to make up for the lack of taxing authority on federal forest lands.

#### **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 and accessible for geographically isolated districts. NREAC encourages the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services to work with states and local school districts to ensure more streamlined application process and a uniform and reasonable methodology for claiming reimbursement for Medicaid-eligible services across the country.

NREAC strongly opposes the steps that CMS has taken to eliminate school-based administrative and transportation Medicaid claiming. NREAC supports the continuation of a moratorium against any changes by the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services in school-based Medicaid claiming.

NREAC supports the Protecting Children’s Health in Schools Act, which would include expansion of Medicaid claiming to 504 students and the creation of a uniform methodology for claiming.

### **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. NREAC believes nutrition policy is best addressed at the local level and opposes any federal over-reach into nutrition policy.

NREAC supports efforts to increase the reimbursement rate for child nutrition and school lunch programs. In addition, NREAC would support the elimination of the reduced price lunches and the inclusion of those students under the free lunch program.

NREAC supports the use of cross-eligibility between federal programs for the purposes of enrollment in order to increase efficiency in the program and maximize the programs’ abilities to better identify and serve all eligible students.

NREAC supports efforts for the creative expansion of ‘farm to school’ food programs and efforts.

### **Vouchers and Charter Schools**

NREAC supports strong, high-quality public school systems and continues to oppose efforts to extend federal support to private schools. 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.

NREAC supports charter schools that are chartered by public school districts and are required to meet the same state and federal requirements as public schools.

### **School Construction, Renovation and Modernization**

NREAC believes the role of federal government in Qualified Zone Academy Bonds is to assist in the financing and building of schools that meet the needs of local communities. NREAC supports the expansion of the QZAB program. 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 supports the establishment of a new bonding authority for new construction. Rural schools should be given special consideration to ensure they receive a proportionate share of any new bonding authority.

NREAC supports the establishment direct funding of school districts to meet school modernization, renovation and new construction needs through formulas with a minimum funding level.

**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.

NREAC encourages federal support for comprehensive early childhood programming and its associated costs, including transportation and facilities. In addition, NREAC supports efforts to create and expand early childhood opportunities in rural communities.

**Office of Rural Education**

NREAC supports the creation of an office of rural education at the U.S. Department of Education. This office would serve as a clearing house for all the federal education programs that rural school districts should have access to. In addition, the office would work to ensure that the needs of rural communities are met and taken into consideration during the development of new programs and policies under the Department.