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# FEDERAL EDUCATION POLICY IN RURAL AMERICA

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## • TABLE OF CONTENTS •

ACKNOWLEDGMENT .....	<b>i</b>
INTRODUCTION .....	<b>1</b>
A PICTURE OF LIFE AND SCHOOL IN RURAL AMERICA .....	<b>2</b>
DIVERSITY IN RURAL AMERICA .....	<b>4</b>
CURRENT RURAL FEDERAL EDUCATION POLICY .....	<b>6</b>
RURAL FEDERAL EDUCATION POLICY ORGANIZATIONAL LANDSCAPE .....	<b>13</b>
RESULTS OF SURVEYS AND INTERVIEWS .....	<b>15</b>
CONCLUSIONS ON THE UNIQUE CIRCUMSTANCES OF RURAL DISTRICTS .....	<b>23</b>
RECOMMENDATIONS .....	<b>27</b>
APPENDIX A : SUPERINTENDENT SURVEY QUESTIONS .....	<b>33</b>
APPENDIX B : INSIDER SURVEY QUESTIONS .....	<b>38</b>
SOURCES .....	<b>41</b>
ENDNOTES .....	<b>44</b>

## • ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS •

The Rural Opportunities Consortium of Idaho (ROCI) was launched by the J.A. and Kathryn Albertson Foundation of Boise, Idaho during the summer of 2013. Since then, Bellwether Education Partners and a task force of experts led by Dr. Paul T. Hill have been working to foster a better understanding of the issues that affect rural education, inform policy discussions, and bring attention to the unique needs and circumstances of rural school children. A series of reports, published over the next year, will examine issues including migration, technology, human capital, economic development, postsecondary enrollment and persistence, and more. Papers will be posted online at [www.rociidaho.com/research-publications](http://www.rociidaho.com/research-publications).

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### ABOUT ROCI • RURAL OPPORTUNITIES CONSORTIUM OF IDAHO



ROCI brings together some of the nation’s best thinkers to conduct research on the challenges of rural education and identify innovations, programs and models to address them. This effort will inform a national body of work on rural education and explore implications for increasing the educational attainment and economic competitiveness of Idahoans and Americans.

### ABOUT JKAF • J.A. AND KATHRYN ALBERTSON FOUNDATION



The J.A. and Kathryn Albertson Foundation is a Boise-based, private family foundation committed to the vision of limitless learning for all Idahoans. Since 1997, the J.A. and Kathryn Albertson Foundation has invested almost \$700 million in Idaho. The J.A. and Kathryn Albertson Foundation honors the legacy of Joe and Kathryn Albertson, founders of Albertsons grocery store, however it is not affiliated with Albertsons LLC. Grant-making is by invitation-only. For more information, visit [jkaf.org](http://jkaf.org).

### ABOUT BELLWETHER EDUCATION PARTNERS



Bellwether Education Partners is a nonprofit dedicated to helping education organizations—in the public, private, and nonprofit sectors—become more effective in their work and achieve dramatic results, especially for high-need students. To do this, we provide a unique combination of exceptional thinking, talent, and hands-on strategic support.

## • INTRODUCTION •

Many administrators and educators in rural America believe federal education policy is not designed for rural districts, and that consideration of policy's unique impact on rural districts is not a priority. They're not alone in that belief; survey data show that elite national education policy "Insiders" largely agree. Yet rural school districts comprise about half of all American school districts and educate a quarter of American students.<sup>1</sup> These communities and their students cannot be an afterthought.

It's critical that federal policy complement and support the efforts of rural educators. Rural districts face unique challenges, such as maintaining a rich set of course offerings, attracting and retaining teachers, and managing administrative overhead due to their small size and remote geographies. Federal policy can catalyze much needed reform and innovation in rural K–12, some of which will yield lessons that could be extended to districts nationwide.

As in most communities, public district schools educate the majority of rural students. In this paper we focus on federal policies affecting those schools. We first provide context by describing the relevant demographics of rural America. We then take inventory of current federal policies affecting rural districts and describe the landscape of organizations involved in rural education policy. We provide the results of a paired survey given to both superintendents in rural districts and national education policy Insiders, and discuss general results and areas of convergence and divergence. Lastly, we draw conclusions about the unique characteristics of and opportunities for education in rural America and offer a set of recommendations for federal policy action.

## • A PICTURE OF LIFE AND SCHOOL IN RURAL AMERICA •

Approximately 47 million people live in rural America. The number has remained relatively constant in recent decades, even as the total US population has grown.<sup>2</sup> Seventeen percent of rural dwellers live below the poverty line—several percentage points higher than both suburban and urban areas.<sup>3</sup> Rural unemployment rates have recovered at approximately the same pace as urban rates since the Great Recession and are now roughly equal.

In the nation’s early years, farming was the backbone of rural life. Over the last 50 years, however, the number of agricultural workers decreased by half, largely due to productivity gains in farming. Today, service and manufacturing industries employ two-thirds of rural laborers. A recent study by the New York Federal Reserve characterizes the dominant occupation clusters in rural America today as “machinists and makers,” in contrast to

**If current trends hold, most rural students will go on to work in an economy driven by manufacturing and service industries, not agriculture.**

“technicians, engineers, and executives” in urban areas.<sup>4</sup> If current trends hold, most rural students will go on to work in an economy driven by manufacturing and service industries, not agriculture.

Because of their smaller median district size, approximately 50 percent of American school districts are rural, as are 33 percent of the nation’s schools and 25 percent of students.<sup>5</sup> These numbers vary greatly by state. Nearly 80 percent of South Dakota’s schools are rural, while in Massachusetts that number is 6.5 percent. In terms of enrollment, less

than 5 percent of students in Nevada, California, and Massachusetts attend rural schools, compared with more than 50 percent in Mississippi, Vermont, and Maine.<sup>6</sup> Over half of all rural students live in just 11 states, concentrated primarily in Appalachia and the South.<sup>7</sup>

Rural districts vary enormously in size. The largest districts tend to be in the Southeast, though rural school sizes are roughly the same everywhere. In Massachusetts the average rural district size is 730, while in Mississippi it is just over 3,000 students. The reason districts are generally larger in the South, east of the Mississippi River, is because district boundaries there align with county lines. There is less diversity across states at the school level; in Massachusetts the average rural school has 462 students, while in Mississippi that number is 532.<sup>8</sup> Despite stagnant population growth, the net enrollment in rural schools is on the rise. Enrollment grew by 22 percent between 1999 and 2009, and accounted for a full 70 percent of all growth nationwide during that period.<sup>9</sup>

The academic performance of students in rural America is slowly increasing. Between 2007 and 2013, rural students' performance on the National Assessment of Educational Programs (NAEP) increased between three and four points on 4th and 8th grade mathematics and 8th grade reading assessments. Rural students outperformed both town and city students in 2013, and lagged behind suburban students by only two to four points.<sup>10</sup>

## DEFINING "RURAL"

### • Sidebar •

Government agencies and programs classify areas as rural in several ways. The Census Bureau identifies all continuously populated areas and uses them to codify each census block. Each block is coded as an urban area (part of an area with 50,000 people or more) or an urbanized cluster (with population 2,500 to 50,000). Any block not a part of either is considered rural. The Department of Agriculture usually uses its own definitions, often based on the population of counties. A county with fewer than 20,000 residents, for example, is classified as rural for some programs.

Most common education programs use the National Center on Education Statistics (NCES) definition. NCES assigns each school to one of four categories, based on its proximity to a Census Bureau-defined urban center: city, suburb, town, and rural. Each of the four categories has three subcategories. Rural "fringe" areas lie within 5 miles of an urbanized area or within 2.5 miles of an urbanized cluster; rural "distant" areas lie between 5 and 25 miles from an urbanized area or between 2.5 and 10 miles from an urban cluster; and rural "remote" areas are those beyond the limits of the former.

## • DIVERSITY IN RURAL AMERICA •

The image of rural America is often monolithic: older and white. Yet recent research shows that racial diversity is on the rise in rural America. In 2010, 20.4 percent of the rural population was Latino or non-white, up from 17.8 percent in 2000.<sup>11</sup> Of the increase in rural population between 2000 and 2010, over 50 percent was because of the increase in Latino populations, primarily in the South. Nationally, the Latino percentage of the population quadrupled between 1960 and 2010, due in large part to increases in immigration, and is expected to double in the next 50 years, to 31 percent of the total population.<sup>12</sup>

This trend appears in school districts as well. Large portions of the growth in student enrollment are ethnic or racial minorities; for example, between 2000 and 2009 the number of Latino students enrolled in rural schools grew by a staggering 150 percent.<sup>13</sup> Many of those students have limited English proficiency and will likely be enrolled in programs for English language learners (ELLs). In rural Idaho alone, there are just under 8,000 students classified as limited in English proficiency, and it is estimated that one in three Latino students in Idaho lives in a household where the dominant language is not English.<sup>14</sup>

There are also clusters of Native American populations in rural America. In 2010, nearly 54 percent of all Native Americans lived in rural communities, an increase of 7.5 percent since 2000. Population density varies by state. In Idaho, Native Americans make up 1.7 percent of the total rural population in the state, compared to 11.1 percent in South Dakota and 20.9 percent in Alaska.<sup>15</sup>



Nor does rural America have a uniform socioeconomic makeup. Despite an upswing in employment rates, research shows there are pockets of higher-poverty areas in rural regions and links between how rural a county is and its degree of poverty. More than 35 percent of people in rural areas live in high-poverty counties. Similarly, more than 26

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percent of people in rural areas live in persistent-poverty counties, or counties where more than 20 percent or more of the population consistently lived in poverty between the 1980 and 2010 censuses. Poverty rates of nonmetropolitan areas—areas with sparsely populated towns or open countryside—were lowest in the

Midwest and highest in the South in 2012. The concentration of poverty in the South is particularly interesting because nearly 43.1 percent of nonmetropolitan populations lived there as of 2012.<sup>16</sup> These data suggest a high level of socioeconomic diversity in rural communities across regions.

The diversity of rural America creates challenges for education policy: policy in rural communities must be nimble enough to meet the distinct needs of the unique populations within the district. Nationally, English-language learners increased their 4th grade math NAEP scores by 18 points between 1996 and 2013. But the highest average for ELLs is still 24 points behind rural students overall. Low-income students—those who were eligible for free lunch—experienced a growth of 9 points, but still scored 14 points behind the overall average for rural students.<sup>17</sup>

It's widely assumed that Native students are educated through the Bureau of Indian Education (BIE). In practice, however, the BIE only educates 7 percent of Native students. The rest are educated in traditional public schools, and two-thirds of those attend rural schools.<sup>18</sup> Nineteen percent of 4th grade Native students scored Proficient or above on the 2013 NAEP reading assessment, compared with 46 percent of white students and 37 percent of rural students.<sup>19</sup> Only 69 percent of Native students graduate from high school in four years, and only a third of those students are prepared for college-level work.<sup>20</sup>

## • CURRENT RURAL FEDERAL EDUCATION POLICY •

**Most rural initiatives are tacked on to other legislation, as if an afterthought.**

In this paper we consider federal education policy to include federally administered programs as well as state policies spurred by federal law or

regulations. Federal programs include programs like Title I formula grants and Investing in Innovation (i3) grants. Few federal policies, however, focus on rural education directly; most rural initiatives are tacked on to other legislation, as if an afterthought. State policies spurred by federal policy include state testing and accountability systems, college and career standards (often Common Core State Standards), and policies such as teacher evaluation requirements. The federal government has undeniably played a key role in activating state policymaking and setting the agenda for how states address certain issues, though it's impossible to know exactly the extent to which states would have acted alone in these policy areas.

### RURAL FEDERAL EDUCATION POLICY

• Sidebar •

#### 1 LEVEL

- Federal policy
- Federally activated state policy

#### 2 IMPACT

- Direct
- Differential

Policies affecting rural districts can be divided into two categories based on their impact: some are specifically targeted to rural districts, while others have differential impact on rural districts. Examples of specifically targeted programs include

Rural Education Achievement Program (REAP) grants under No Child Left Behind (NCLB) and numerous grants through the US Department of Agriculture. Examples of differential impact programs include the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) Title I, with a formula that disadvantages small rural districts, and early i3 competitive grants, with provisions that uniquely advantaged rural districts. The most relevant components of rural federal education policy include:

## FEDERAL FORMULA GRANTS

The federal government provides significant support to school districts, including rural districts, through its formula grant programs. The vast majority of these programs fall within ESEA and the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA).<sup>21</sup> ESEA grant programs used by rural districts include Title I-A, Title I-C, Title I-D-2, Title II-A, Title II-D, Title III, Title VI-A, and Title VI-B programs. In each of these grant programs, the federal government transfers funds first to the state education agency. State education agencies then issue subgrants to school districts, either as a formula or competitive grant. Arkansas, for example, issues Title II-D technology grants through a competitive process. Both the state education agencies and

**While some states streamline the school district application for multiple grants into a single process, ultimately each grant still has its own requirements for planning, budgeting, and reporting.**

school districts must complete plans for their use of federal funds and fill out an application for each grant. While some states streamline the school district application for multiple grants into a single process, ultimately each grant still has its own requirements for planning, budgeting, and reporting.

Federal formula grant programs create challenges for rural districts in three ways. First, under the largest federal grant program—ESEA Title I, Part A—funding for districts is weighted both by each district’s absolute number of disadvantaged students and by the state’s per-pupil spending level.<sup>22</sup> Both factors disproportionately disadvantage rural districts, which are usually smaller and are more often located in poorer states with lower per-pupil spending. For example, the average Georgia Title I grant is \$1,178 per eligible rural student in contrast to \$1,700 per urban student.<sup>23</sup> Even starker examples can be found across state lines: the Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, school district (with 33.6 percent disadvantaged students) received \$2,242 per student; in contrast, Philadelphia, Mississippi, (with 41.3 percent disadvantaged students) received only \$1,246.<sup>24</sup> The design of formulas is inherently political and tends to favor political power, which today in

Congress is found in suburban districts. Federal mandates also often require services up front while funding flows as a reimbursement, such as with special education and Perkins funding. The shortage in assets requires small rural districts to make different choices about upfront spending.

Federal formula grant programs have the same application and reporting requirements for small districts as for large districts. Yet smaller districts often have fewer administrative staff, with less specific expertise in each grant area, which results in higher administrative overhead per pupil and overall higher per-pupil spending. This trend is not, however, uniform among small rural districts. Smaller districts in Georgia and California receive subsidies of 15 percent or more above the per-pupil spending of larger districts in those states, but smaller districts in Missouri, Illinois, and Ohio operate with less funding than larger districts.<sup>25</sup> Some programs, after going through the formula process, don't provide rural districts with enough resources to genuinely have the intended impact. For example, rural districts may use funds from Title I-C for their migrant populations, Title III for the ELL populations, and Title VII-A for their Native student populations, yet these funds separately provide minimal amounts.

## RURAL EDUCATION ACHIEVEMENT PROGRAM (REAP)

Title VI-B defines the Rural Education Achievement Program (REAP), which is composed of one flexibility program and two grant programs that specifically target rural districts. The flexibility program states that rural districts can reallocate grant funds among programs, with the exception of Title I funds. Districts do not need to apply for this flexibility but must inform their SEA if they intend to use it.

REAP outlines two grant programs: the Small Rural Schools Achievement program (SRSA) and the Rural and Low-Income School program (RLIS). SRSA is a district-level formula grant. To be eligible, all schools in a district must have a National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) rural locale code and either have fewer than 600 students or reside in a sparsely populated region. The median size of an SRSA grant is about \$19,000 per district, or \$92 per pupil.<sup>26</sup> The second grant program, RLIS, is available to districts in which all schools have rural locale codes, and in which at least 20 percent of the student body comes from families below the poverty line. The median size of an RLIS grant is about \$57,000 per district, or \$29 per pupil.<sup>27</sup>

A base amount of \$165 million has been appropriated for REAP over the last several years, split equally between the two grant programs. That base amount is distributed proportionally among SEAs based on the number of each state's students who are in districts that are eligible for each program. Generally speaking, northern states receive more SRSA grants

because northern districts are smaller and poverty is less severe. Conversely, states in the South receive more RLIS grants; districts there are larger because they conform to county lines, and rural poverty rates are higher.<sup>28</sup>

The Obama administration's ESEA waivers give rural districts that receive RLIS or SRSA grants additional flexibility with those funds. Districts in waiver states can use RLIS or SRSA funds toward any authorized purpose, regardless of AYP status.<sup>29</sup>

## COMPETITIVE GRANTS

The US Department of Education launched a number of competitive grant programs for school districts and other entities over the past several years. These programs have disparate impact on rural districts in two ways. First, any grant that requires a standalone application requires an administrative time commitment. For example, the 2013 i3 grant application required an estimated 120 hours to complete; the winning applications likely required significantly more time, and many winners employed consultants to help them develop their applications. Rural districts, generally smaller and with fewer administrative

**Rural districts, generally smaller and with fewer administrative staff, often lack the staffing or resources necessary to make investing in such applications either feasible or wise.**

staff, often lack the staffing or resources necessary to make investing in such applications either feasible or wise. Further, if a small rural district does win a competitive grant, the burden of administering, managing, and reporting for federal grants is similarly cumbersome.

The specific criteria of competitive grants, such as the number-of-students-served requirements, often disadvantage rural districts. For example, the initial Race to the Top-District (RTT-D) grant application required applicants to serve a minimum of 2,500 students. Criteria created to favor rural districts do not always have the intended consequences. The 2010 i3 awards gave two competitive preference points for applications intended to serve rural communities. Yet critics pointed out that applicants often add token provisions to earn these bonus points, without an actual intent to focus on rural America.<sup>30</sup>

## E-RATE AND ConnectED

In the Communications Act of 1934, and later in the Telecommunications Act of 1996, Congress formally prioritized nationwide communication infrastructure through the Universal Service Fund (USF). The USF is funded by fees on interstate and international telecommunications and attempts to ensure that individuals have access to telecommunications services at reasonable rates. USF funds four programs, one of which is commonly known as E-rate. The E-rate program subsidizes telecommunications services for eligible schools and libraries. Currently, however, demand for E-rate discounts is much higher than the \$2.3 billion cap allows. The FCC estimates that schools and libraries submitted applications for more than \$5 billion in E-rate discounts in 2013.<sup>31</sup>

In 2013, the Obama administration announced ConnectED, an initiative to catalyze the expansion of digital learning in schools. One of ConnectED's three pillars, the one that holds the most potential for rural schools, focuses on connectivity. ConnectED proposes, through modernizing the E-rate program, to provide 99 percent of schools with access to high-speed broadband Internet within five years. Another crucial pillar is teacher training, which would invest in developing teachers to use technology to improve student outcomes. A recent report from the Institute for Evidence-Based Change found that most districts in Idaho lack resources for the required infrastructure and educator training to implement new technology well.<sup>32</sup>

## FEDERALLY FUNDED RESEARCH

The Education Sciences Reform Act of 2002 (ESRA) put in place the modern architecture of federally funded education research. The act created the Institute of Education Sciences and authorized two research programs within its jurisdiction: National Research and Development Centers (R&D Centers) and Regional Educational Laboratories (RELs).<sup>33</sup> R&D Center grants are awarded primarily to universities, commonly for five years at \$2 million per year, to study a specific topic such as scaling up effective schools. RELs are run through third-party contractors such as WestEd, who are charged with conducting regionally focused research and helping policymakers use research in their decisions. The ESRA also authorized both national and regional "comprehensive centers" to provide technical assistance to state education agencies and school districts; there are currently seven national comprehensive centers and 15 regional centers.

Of the ten R&D Centers in the US, one has focused specifically on rural education issues since 2004—first operating out of the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, and then out of the University of Nebraska, Lincoln, since 2009.<sup>34</sup> Some of the RELs and regional comprehensive centers—such as those located in Appalachia—focus on rural issues in the sense that the clients to whom they provide customized research and technical assistance are disproportionately rural. And the 1996 and 2001 REL contracts required that 25

**Overall there is still a limited amount of research on rural school districts, and its applicability for superintendents is unclear.**

percent of the entire lab program budget be dedicated to rural district services.<sup>35</sup> Yet overall there is still a limited amount of research on rural school districts, and its applicability for superintendents is unclear.

## IMPACT AID AND PAYMENT IN LIEU OF TAXES

The Impact Aid and Payment in Lieu of Taxes (PILT) programs—out of, respectively, the Department of Education and the Department of the Interior—provide supplemental funds to schools that either incur additional costs or lose revenue due to the presence of the federal government. Impact Aid, funded at \$1.2 billion in FY2013, is paid to approximately 9 percent of districts nationwide. Districts are eligible if either 400 students or 3 percent of their enrollment is “federally connected” in some way, such as students with parents in the US military or students living on federal Indian reservations. Districts are also eligible if federal lands such as military bases and federal forests constitute at least 10 percent of the net property values within their borders.<sup>36</sup> Many districts rely heavily on Impact Aid, with some—often in rural areas—receiving 50 percent or more of their total funding through the program.<sup>37</sup>

PILT, which allocated \$401 million in FY2013, is a similar program to compensate local governments for foregone property taxes due to the presence of federal property, like national parks and forests.<sup>38</sup> Funds originally flow to counties, which distribute a portion to other local governments such as school districts. Many states have laws that specify the portion of PILT funds that must flow through to school districts.<sup>39</sup> As with Impact Aid, the allocation of funds is highly concentrated in states with a large federal government presence; six states receive more than half of the total payments.<sup>40</sup>

## OTHER AGENCY PROGRAMS

A number of agencies outside of the Department of Education, such as the Department of Agriculture (USDA) and the Department of the Interior (DOI), operate programs to support rural development and infrastructure, including schools. While a number of these programs, such as USDA's Community Facilities program, technically do make funds available to rural districts, in practice only a small number of schools use those funds.<sup>41</sup> Usually, the grant and loan amounts that rural schools and districts would be eligible for are not large enough to incentivize large numbers of schools to participate in the program.<sup>42</sup>

## FEDERALLY ACTIVATED STATE POLICY

The federally activated state policies described earlier—in the areas of accountability, testing, teacher evaluations, and standards—have differential impact in rural America. These policies require investment at both the district and school levels, such as purchasing a bank of computers on which to administer new statewide tests, creating a new assessment rubric and data storage systems for teacher evaluations, and updating curriculum to comply with the new standards. The per-pupil overhead costs of these investments can be much higher in rural districts and schools, both of which are smaller on average.



## • RURAL FEDERAL EDUCATION POLICY ORGANIZATIONAL LANDSCAPE •

The current landscape of national organizations working on rural education policy, and their impact on policy, is limited. A variety of organizations in the education sector touch on rural work—including advocacy groups, research institutes, foundations, and membership associations—but the majority of organizations direct their efforts to regional

**The piecemeal system in which rural education is addressed restricts the amount of meaningful policy change that can occur.**

or local issues. For example, the Iowa Governor’s STEM Advisory Council and State Employee Credit Union Partnership East both focus on the distribution of educators in rural districts, but their efforts are bounded by the state lines of, respectively, Iowa and North Carolina. As a

result, the piecemeal system in which rural education is addressed restricts the amount of meaningful policy change that can occur. Organizations with their sights on regional issues cannot fully capitalize on the benefits of a national, unified message for rural education, such as increased attention, support, and political capital.

Many states with significant rural populations have their own rural education associations, which focus on policy design and advocacy within their state—for example, the Idaho Rural Schools Association, the Missouri Association of Rural Education, and the Texas Rural Education Association. Only a handful of organizations, such as the Rural School and Community Trust and the National Rural Education Association, concentrate on rural education policy nationally. Most national attention goes to urban or suburban issues.

A bill that would have created an Office of Rural Education Policy in the US Department of Education—intended to coordinate rural education activities within the department and advise the secretary on the unique needs of rural schools—failed to get through committee during the 111th and 113th Congress. This seems to suggest that the urban- and suburban-focused narrative in federal education policy limits organizations' ability to catalyze change.

## • RESULTS OF SURVEYS AND INTERVIEWS •

We surveyed two key groups of stakeholders—superintendents in Idaho and national elite education policy “Insiders”—about their perspectives on rural education. The goal of our surveys was twofold: to gather information, particularly from superintendents, on how federal policy both helps and hinders rural districts; and to find areas of convergence and divergence of viewpoints between superintendents and Insiders.

Prior to developing the surveys, we conducted informal interviews with 11 superintendents of rural districts in Georgia, Minnesota, Ohio, Colorado, Montana, and Kentucky. We also interviewed staff from five rural education stakeholder groups, such as the Rural School and Community Trust and the National Rural Education Association. We used interview responses to get a better idea of the challenges facing rural superintendents and to inform our superintendent and insider surveys.

We developed two separate but overlapping surveys for Idaho superintendents and Insiders. The surveys are available in Appendix A and Appendix B. Approximately 110 superintendents received the survey through the Idaho Association of School Administrators, with a 51 percent response rate. To reach national policy elites, we surveyed the Whiteboard “Education Insiders” panel. Through a proprietary model, Whiteboard Advisors, a DC-based education consulting firm, regularly surveys 50–75 policy leaders at the state and national levels, including administration and Capitol Hill officials and key education leaders. We embedded some of our questions in one of the Whiteboard surveys. These results are directionally representative and an important contribution to the discussion about rural issues, but readers should also bear in mind that they come from two relatively small sample surveys of special populations.

The surveys, all conducted online, included questions on topics such as the greatest challenges facing rural districts; perceptions of restrictive and burdensome policies and programs; and attitudes towards distance learning, district consolidation, and charter schools. The survey for the Insiders was somewhat abbreviated but covered the same topics.<sup>43</sup>

Perhaps the most prominent finding from the survey results was that, while rural America is markedly different from other parts of the country, policy decisions don't reflect that reality. The overwhelming majority of Idaho superintendents (92 percent) and most Insiders (83 percent) agreed or strongly agreed with the statement, "Life in rural America is significantly different from life in urban/suburban America." Yet 80 percent of superintendents and 78

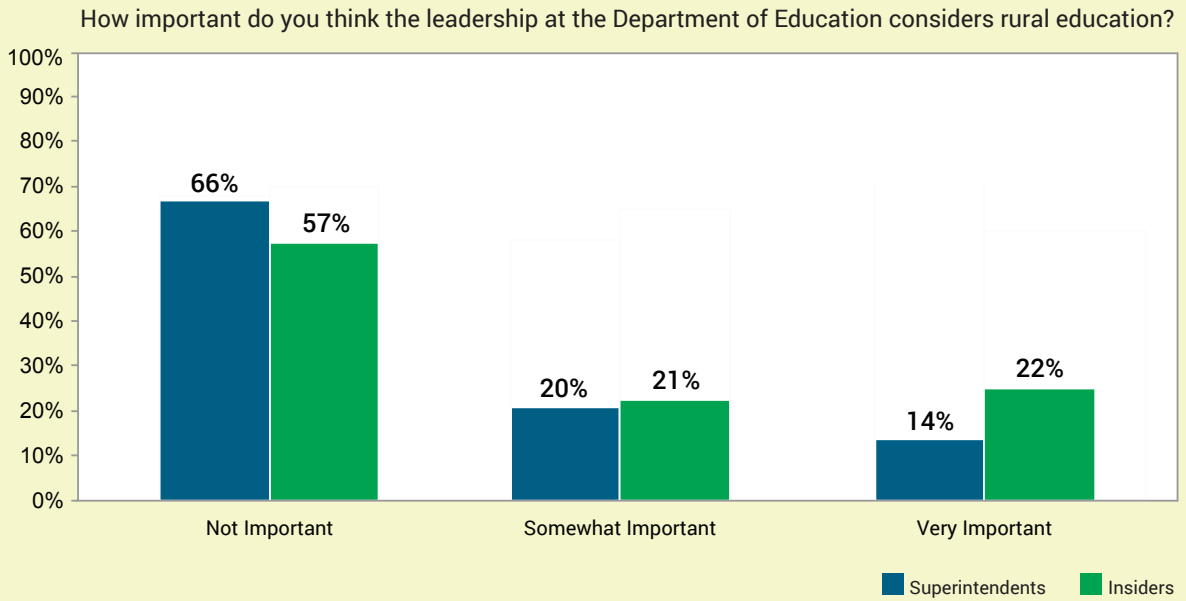
**"None of the people making decisions about rural education spend time in rural America to better understand the problem."**

percent of Insiders claimed that most education policies are designed primarily for urban and suburban districts and are poorly suited for rural districts. As one respondent said, "None of the people making decisions about rural education spend time in rural America to better understand the problem."

Neither Insiders nor superintendents believe that rural education is a national priority. The majority of both groups—66 percent of superintendents and 57 percent of Insiders—said they believe rural education is "not important" to the leadership at the US Department of Education. Only 14 percent of superintendents and 22 percent of Insiders said it was "very important" for the department, in their view (see Figure 1).

• Figure 1 •

### PERCEPTION OF IMPORTANCE OF RURAL EDUCATION TO US DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION



Superintendents and Insiders differ on what they think are the biggest issues facing rural districts, as shown in Figure 2. Many superintendents indicated the primary issues were logistical. One superintendent said, “I would support federal policy that is easier to implement and track. I find it difficult, with limited secretarial support, to meet timelines and federal information requirements in a timely manner.” The disparity in viewpoints is particularly

obvious here. On a scale of one to 10, Insiders ranked “lack of flexibility about how federal dollars can be spent” and “paperwork and compliance”—two of the top three issues for rural superintendents—as, respectively, the seventh- and ninth-most important issues. Part of this disparity may be a consequence of Insiders’ focus on new potential policy reforms and superintendents’ focus on the perils of implementation.

**“I find it difficult, with limited secretarial support, to meet timelines and federal information requirements in a timely manner.”**

• Figure 2 •

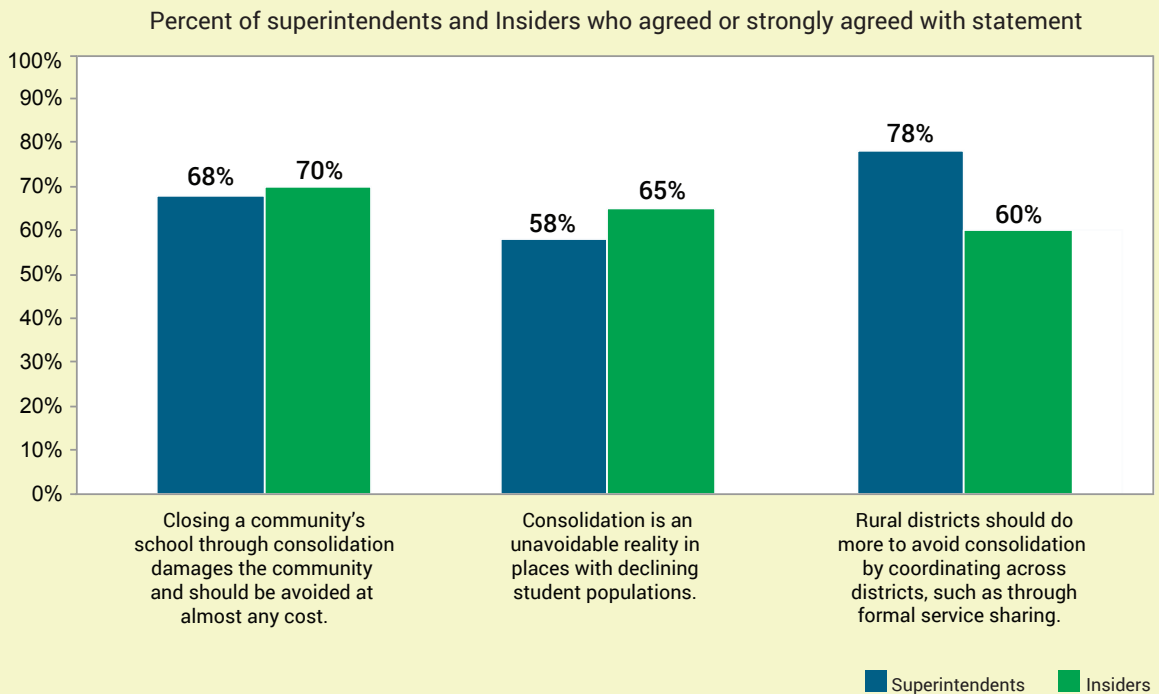
**RANKING OF TOP THREE ISSUES FACING RURAL DISTRICTS**  
*Superintendents and Insiders disagree on the primary issues facing rural school districts*

Primary issues facing rural districts, according to superintendents	Primary issues facing rural districts, according to Insiders
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1 Lack of “full federal funding” for special education</li> <li>2 Paperwork and compliance requirements</li> <li>3 Lack of flexibility about how federal dollars can be spent</li> </ol>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1 Recruiting teachers</li> <li>2 Retaining teachers</li> <li>3 Lack of school and classroom technology</li> </ol>

On other topics, Insiders and superintendents were more closely aligned. The majority of both groups agreed that closing a community’s school through consolidation should be avoided at almost any cost, but both groups also think that consolidation may be an unavoidable reality (see Figure 3). One potential solution, which the majority of both groups agree should be an option, is to provide compensatory revenue to small districts to help avoid consolidation. The differences are generally slight, but Insiders were more likely to exhibit stronger opinions—about preventing consolidation at all costs and providing compensatory funding—than superintendents.

• Figure 3 •

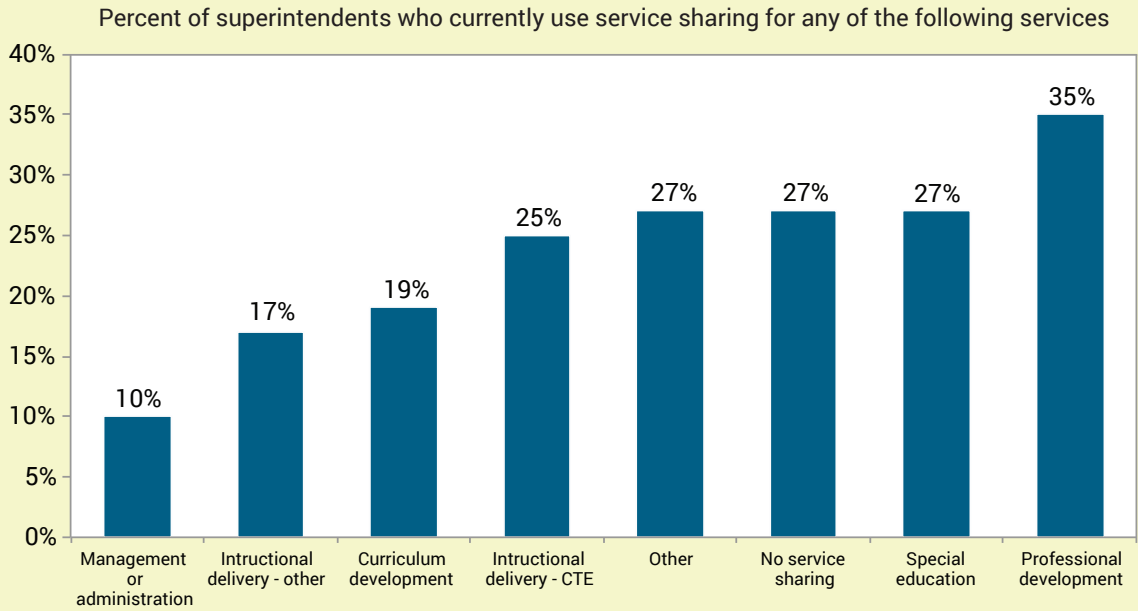
## PERCEPTION OF DISTRICT CONSOLIDATION



Sharing services is another potential way to avoid consolidation, one that both groups favor. The overall reaction to service sharing was positive: 94 percent of superintendents said they were interested in, or already are, sharing administrative, financial, or instructional services. Sixty percent of Insiders agree or strongly agree that rural districts should do more service sharing. Currently, less than a third of superintendent respondents do not participate in some kind of service sharing (see Figure 4). Only 11 percent of superintendents viewed service sharing negatively, citing reasons such as it's a hassle and not worth the trouble, or it's one step towards consolidation that they'd rather avoid. While the response was generally in favor, a number of superintendents noted—using the open-ended response option provided with the question—that the cost savings may be minimal and that the distance from other districts makes it difficult to share services effectively.

## SUPERINTENDENT INVOLVEMENT WITH REGIONAL SERVICE SHARING

• Figure 4 •



Technology, such as distance and online learning, has been offered as a solution for rural districts with limited resources and capacity. For the most part superintendents view

**The majority of superintendents cite cost as the primary barrier to online learning options, while most Insiders cite the lack of infrastructure.**

distance learning positively: 60 percent say it is an opportunity to provide offerings they otherwise couldn't. Barriers to effective implementation, however, stand in the way. The majority of superintendents cite cost as the primary barrier to online learning options, while most Insiders cite the lack of infrastructure (see Figure 5).



• Figure 5 •

### RANKING OF TOP THREE ISSUES WITH IMPLEMENTATION OF ONLINE LEARNING

*Superintendents and Insiders disagree on the issues districts face implementing distance or online learning*

Issues with implementation of online learning, according to superintendents	Issues with implementation of online learning, according to Insiders
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1 Cost</li> <li>2 Quality of the content available</li> <li>3 Alignment with curriculum and standards</li> </ol>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1 Technology infrastructure</li> <li>2 Cost</li> <li>3 Access to school and classroom technology</li> </ol>

Recruiting and retaining teachers is frequently cited as a challenge for rural districts. The Insiders’ responses reflected concern about this; as shown in Figure 1, they listed recruiting and retaining teachers as the top two issues facing rural districts. Superintendents, on the other hand, ranked teacher issues in the middle of their ranking of challenges, indicating that while recruiting and retaining teachers may be a problem it’s not as substantial

as other issues. A number of superintendents indicated frustration with the ESEA “highly qualified teacher” requirements. One respondent said, “In our small schools teachers must teach several subjects. The highly qualified requirements are limiting our ability to place very capable people in positions where they could be very successful.”

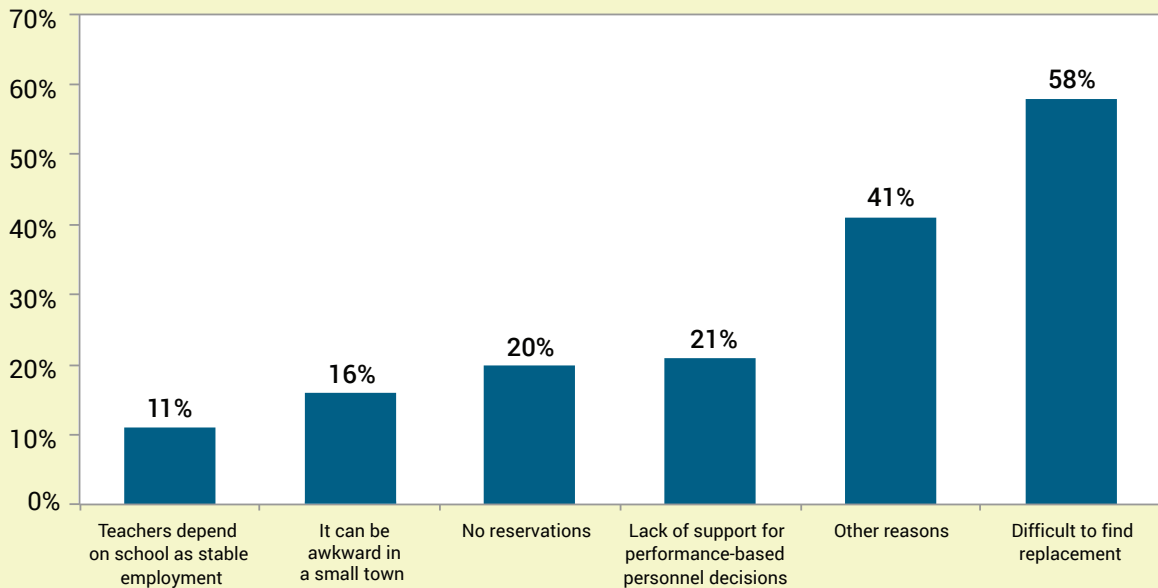
**A number of superintendents indicated frustration with the ESEA “highly qualified teacher” requirements.**

To better understand teacher quality issues in rural districts, we asked which reservations a superintendent would have about firing a low-performing teacher. Twenty percent of the superintendents said they would not hesitate to fire a low-performing teacher, regardless of the consequences; most respondents, however, expressed concerns (see Figure 6). As one respondent put it, “[Replacing a teacher is] not just difficult, [it’s] almost impossible in certain subject areas.” Another noted, “With all that said, we get rid of bad teachers. It is not fair to those doing a good job [to not do so].”

### SUPERINTENDENT RESERVATIONS ABOUT FIRING A LOW-PERFORMING TEACHER

• Figure 6 •

Percent of superintendents who say they would have reservations about firing a low-performing teacher for any of the following reasons



## • CONCLUSIONS ON THE UNIQUE CIRCUMSTANCES OF RURAL DISTRICTS •

Understanding the unique circumstances of school districts in rural America is requisite to crafting unique solutions to the issues they face. Fundamentally, by definition “rural” implies lower population density. Any time people gather in rural America they travel greater distances and form smaller groups. In public education, this means rural students must either travel long distances to larger schools or attend smaller schools that are

**Understanding the unique circumstances of school districts in rural America is requisite to crafting unique solutions to the issues they face.**

close to home. Stark examples of this contrast are a small one-room elementary school in Montana with only seven students from the surrounding farms, and a high school in rural Utah that students travel as far as 67 miles to attend.<sup>44</sup>

Low population density means rural districts struggle with “scale.” Rural schools and districts are usually smaller than their urban and suburban counterparts, with fewer teachers and staff. They are less able to allow individuals to specialize, for example, in administering free and reduced-price lunch, in applying for federal grants, or in teaching molecular biology.

### SCALING INSTRUCTION AT THE SCHOOL

Unless we require students to travel farther to larger schools, there are few options to address scale using a traditional lecture-based pedagogy. Options at the margins include, for example, a group of school districts in northern Minnesota that arranged to share a science teacher

among several schools. In such an arrangement, the teacher commutes to various sites throughout the week. While the commute time is longer for the teacher, it saves the cost and community disruption involved in transporting the students themselves to classrooms further from home. The schools in northern Minnesota also use AV technology to project their shared teacher into multiple classrooms in other remote schools. These options are obviously impractical in places that are especially remote, particularly in the American West and Alaska.

**Rural districts could allow students to drive their own learning, through either self-guided software or project-based learning.**

Using technology, however, much more could be done to ameliorate the issues of scale with instruction.<sup>45</sup> Rural districts could allow students to drive their own learning, through either self-guided software or project-based learning. It is not feasible to have a physics teacher in every high school in America, no

matter how small or how remote. But that expertise and high-quality instruction can be provided through a digital channel, with other teachers physically present in school serving as coaches and mentors while not themselves conducting the lecture.<sup>46</sup> Schools such as Carpe Diem, Summit Denali, and Grant Beacon Middle School blend digitally-delivered individualized curriculum with teacher interaction. There are dozens of examples of similar schools in existence already today.<sup>47</sup>

An increased reliance on technology will still leave a substantial need for teachers in rural America. Administrators in rural areas report greater difficulty filling teaching vacancies than do their urban and suburban counterparts, especially in the areas of English and foreign-language instruction.<sup>48</sup> In our own survey of superintendents, difficulties recruiting teachers ranked as the issue of fourth-greatest concern. Research has identified that chief among the issues affecting the rural teaching profession are lower pay, geographic isolation, and having to teach across multiple topic areas.<sup>49</sup> The most common strategies invoked to address these problems include “grow your own” training programs, especially those targeted at current paraprofessionals, and increasing pay for teachers to competitive levels, especially in hard-to-staff subject areas.

Another fairly drastic alternative for rural education would be to remove the need for rural students to gather in a physical place altogether by transitioning to solely online learning. This shift is already happening to some extent, with more than 200,000 students going to school only online, at a virtual school.<sup>50</sup> While this option clearly works well for some families and some students, it’s not a feasible option for all. Some families and students prefer a physical school experience, and some students need the structure and support of a traditional school.

## SCALING ADMINISTRATION AT THE DISTRICT

It's important to distinguish between scale at the school and district levels. Schools are the point of educational delivery and must therefore be in close proximity to those being served, whereas district administrative functions are mostly unconstrained by geography. Tasks such as applying for formula and competitive grants and reporting on special education do not require direct contact with students. Research shows that large districts are more efficient in these administrative tasks than small districts; extremely small districts of 500 students or fewer are especially disadvantaged.<sup>51</sup> Large districts are able to hire people who develop expertise in one area, such as special education—and, as mentioned, there is less per-pupil overhead in large districts.

**Consolidation is a deeply emotional and highly contested issue. Rural communities draw much of their sense of identity from their district and their schools.**

At first this might seem to suggest consolidation of rural districts—that is, achieving administrative economies of scale by combining schools into larger merged districts. However, consolidation is a deeply emotional and highly contested issue. Rural communities draw much of their sense of identity from their district and their schools.

They report that anger at neighboring communities for “taking their school” can result in feuds that last for decades, further straining the rural social fabric. Even if the intent is to consolidate only districts and not schools, the news of consolidation can still be painful, and rural citizens know that district consolidation often leads eventually to school consolidation. Our survey responses, both from superintendents and Insiders, provide further evidence of the opposition to consolidation.

Fortunately, small rural districts are increasingly achieving administrative scale by using service sharing arrangements as an alternative to consolidation.<sup>53</sup> Forty-five states have a formal system of service sharing agencies, which serve some 80 percent of all school districts nationwide.<sup>54</sup> In addition, many districts partake in other informal arrangements. The net budget of all formal service sharing agencies nationwide is \$14.7 billion dollars per year.<sup>55</sup> In highly rural states such as Vermont, all but a few districts report using some form of service sharing.<sup>56</sup> Some of the most common services shared are materials and supplies purchasing, professional development, financial management, technical services, transportation, and special education.<sup>57</sup> Our survey responses show that superintendents have strong interest in doing even more through shared service arrangements.

## BROADBAND INTERNET AS THE FOUNDATION

Both offering curriculum online in schools and increasing administrative service sharing in districts will require significant broadband connectivity. The forthcoming assessments for the new Common Core State Standards also envision and require a substantially more robust IT infrastructure than exists today. A school full of students concurrently streaming online video or participating in virtual simulations would require a very large pipe, well beyond the 100 megabits/second per 1,000 students targeted for 2014–15 by the State Education Technology Directors Association.<sup>58</sup> Such an instructional model would likely require speeds closer to 1 gigabit/second, which is the association's target for 2017–18. With regard to administrative functions, most modern software is designed as cloud software, meaning commands are executed remotely over the Internet through a web browser.<sup>59</sup> In service sharing between districts, it's even more likely that such cloud platforms would be used. High-speed Internet access is thus also critical for facilitating administrative scale.

## • RECOMMENDATIONS •

Based on the inventory of current federal policy, our survey of issues facing rural districts, and our conclusions about the basic nature of problems facing districts in rural America, we suggest several directions for the future of federal education policy.

### GENERAL FEDERAL POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

Policymakers should continue to make use of both elements of the REAP program. The flexibility program is useful because the smaller pots of money available under each ESEA Title program mean it's harder to use them for their desired effect. The grant programs are justifiable because there are generally fewer programs for which rural districts are eligible. The current separation into two REAP grant programs—SRSA targeted at small rural schools and RLIS targeted at low-income rural schools—should also be maintained, as they are well suited to the different contexts of rural districts in the North and the South, respectively.

The Impact Aid and PILT grant programs should also be maintained. They were formed on the belief that the federal government should be a “good neighbor to local communities,” where it displaces their usual (mostly property) tax revenue mechanisms.<sup>60</sup> While these programs are easy targets during budget cuts, given that they are paid to a relatively small portion of communities and often in rural areas, the districts who receive the funds are legitimately burdened by the federal government's presence and deserve fair redress.

Federal research efforts receive mixed reviews from rural educators. This largely owes to the variance within the regional education labs, comprehensive centers, and other initiatives. While those issues should be a focal point of larger reforms to federal research efforts, it's important

that attention to rural issues and needs be maintained so that rural issues are not subsumed by the focus on politically powerful suburban and urban communities.

Department of Education competitive grant programs have proven successful in pushing states and districts to adopt much-needed reforms. Federal policymakers should continue to use this tool, but adapt it to better suit rural districts. Educational service agencies (also known as service cooperatives, BOCES, etc.) and informal groups of small districts should be allowed and encouraged to compete in all federal grant competitions. The concept of providing bonus points for rural applicants—acknowledging that they have unique needs and lower economies of scale in crafting grant applications—is also reasonable, though lessons from the i3 awards suggest that the bonus points should only be awarded where applicants show a true commitment to serving rural America.<sup>61</sup>

Finally, the Title I formula, weighted based on absolute numbers of students and state spending levels, is unfair to rural districts, which usually have fewer students and are often in states with lower levels of funding.<sup>62</sup> Federal policymakers have worked to better target federal education dollars toward low-income students. Future reauthorizations of ESEA should continue this work and adjust this formula to ensure equity for rural districts, and to help rural districts in states where larger school districts have lower net levels of disadvantaged students. Policymakers can also raise the minimum floor on the state spending levels used in the weighting formula.

## ENCOURAGE RURAL SCHOOLS TO FULLY EMBRACE BLENDED LEARNING

Rural school districts must join the growing collection of districts around the nation that are embracing technology to transform pedagogy. Blended learning is not a panacea, but it does offer the potential for districts to overcome traditional time, space, and fiscal constraints on teaching and learning. Many districts embrace blended learning, both due to staffing cuts, which force them to use technology to fill expertise gaps, and to better meet the individual

**Blended learning is not a panacea, but it does offer the potential for districts to overcome traditional time, space, and fiscal constraints on teaching and learning.**

needs, interests, and proficiency levels of their students. Rural schools are well positioned to follow suit, and even to lead this transformation, given their ancillary challenges attracting teachers and offering ample curricular variety.

The advent of blended learning does not mean there is no longer a place for physical schools. On the contrary, rural America should not, and indeed could not, be educated entirely using



virtual schools. Schools are a cornerstone of rural communities and have significance extending beyond academics.

Federal policy should encourage this transition to blended learning in any way possible. Most important, policymakers should ensure that policies on assessment and enrollment do not work at cross-purposes with blended learning initiatives and provide a rigorous but expeditious waiver process where there are conflicts. Federal programs should recognize competency-based progression—which is critical for successful blended learning—rather than seat time.<sup>63</sup>

Federal policymakers can also encourage blended learning by attaching stipulations to ESEA waivers and competitive grant programs. Future competitive grant programs should include an emphasis on blended learning models, much like the recent Breakthrough Schools: D.C. competition launched through the foundation-sponsored Next Generation Learning Challenge.<sup>64</sup> Competitions and fiscal incentives are critical to helping build capacity for blended learning initiatives and prodding policymakers to move in this direction.

Uniform standards, such as the Common Core State Standards adopted by more than 40 states, are also helpful in the transition to blended learning and should continue to be encouraged. Common standards allow those creating digital software and curriculum to better serve teachers by giving them a shared taxonomy through which to connect their offerings with teacher needs.

Blended learning can also help address the concerns of rural teachers that they are spread too thin. Because much direct instruction and expertise can come through digital channels, it allows teachers to mentor and coach students rather than present original material through lecture.

## ENCOURAGE RURAL DISTRICTS TO FULLY EMBRACE ADMINISTRATIVE SERVICE SHARING

**The superintendents we surveyed and interviewed are highly enthusiastic about sharing services.**

To the extent possible, rural school districts should seek to use service cooperatives, such as educational service agencies and BOCES, to share services. Service sharing would be particularly helpful in the areas of financial management, special education

administration, professional development design, and curriculum development. The superintendents we surveyed and interviewed are highly enthusiastic about sharing services.

Federal policy could enable and encourage service sharing in two ways. First, as previously suggested, policymakers can allow rural service cooperatives to compete in competitive federal grant competitions on behalf of the districts they represent—and perhaps even consider special awards or bonus points for those service-sharing groups in some circumstances. This step would allow districts to allocate resources collectively to the pursuit of grants, which they might not have the staff capacity to do individually. The Department of Education could also sponsor a new competitive grant program specifically around service sharing in rural areas.

Second, federal and state policymakers should consider facilitating a reduction in reporting requirements by allowing service cooperatives to apply for, and report on, formula grants and programs on behalf of multiple rural districts. For example, if a service cooperative is using ESEA Title III funds on behalf of several districts to coordinate English-language instruction, that service cooperative could be allowed to manage the Title III application and reporting requirements on behalf of participating districts. This would significantly reduce the burden on rural districts, addressing the concerns of rural district leaders who say the administrative requirements of the ESEA Title programs are difficult to manage and stretch staff thin.

## EXPAND BROADBAND ACCESS

**Federal policy should continue to prioritize the expansion of broadband access to small rural districts, aiming for a level of connectivity that would allow students to stream online video for blended learning.**

The future of rural schools in a digital age hinges on the availability of high-speed Internet access. Rural schools need reliable broadband to access content and implement higher-quality assessments for students. Federal policy should continue to prioritize the expansion of broadband access to small rural districts, aiming for a level of connectivity that would allow

students to stream online video for blended learning.<sup>65</sup> Policymakers should ensure that efforts of the various federal broadband initiatives—ConnectED/E-rate, the Connect America Fund, Connect to Compete, the Broadband Technology Opportunities Program, and others—are well aligned to serve rural needs. Policymakers should also invest in providing educators the skills and support they need to use broadband access to improve student outcomes. The FCC should continue to play a role in coordinating broadband access strategy.<sup>66</sup> Because blended learning involves students doing work at home, and because out-of-school time increasingly augments what happens in the classroom, the scope of broadband access should not be limited to schools; students need fast Internet access at home as well.

## ATTRACT TEACHERS TO RURAL AMERICA

As previously discussed, the primary issues teachers report with regard to teaching rurally are a sense of isolation, lower pay, and feeling stretched across many topics and ages. While there isn't much that policymakers can do to change the isolation of rural life, they can strive to highlight its positive elements—which are an attraction for many. Messaging aimed at graduates of specifically targeted feeder institutions, which currently produce more teachers than there are jobs available, could establish pipelines for moving young talent into rural America. Stories of these placements could then be used in future communications efforts

**Messaging aimed at graduates of specifically targeted feeder institutions, which currently produce more teachers than there are jobs available, could establish pipelines for moving young talent into rural America.**

to normalize the idea of teaching rurally after graduation. Rural districts can also emphasize the flip side of the concern about teachers being too stretched: opportunities for teachers, especially younger teachers, to take on additional responsibilities, projects, and opportunities that they would not be able to in larger districts.

With regard to pay, our largely local education funding system, combined with a smaller tax base in most of rural America, means paying competitively will be difficult. The federal government, however, could help take some of the financial sting out of the decision to teach in rural America—even if largely symbolic. Ideas for doing so include a tax credit for the cost of moving expenses; tax incentives to help rural teachers with the purchase of a home; and expanding the eligibility criteria for the Teacher Loan Forgiveness program to include more rural teachers and schools (not just math, science, and special education teachers employed at high-poverty schools, as it is currently constructed).<sup>67</sup>

## REMEMBER NATIVE AND ELL STUDENTS

Native and ELL students' outcomes are currently far below those of their white peers and rural students generally. To be sure, aspects of improving education for these students are the standard fare of education reform—challenging standards and high expectations, teacher effectiveness, and rigorous curriculum. But given the history of Native Americans in America and the challenges English-language learners face, there are also unique issues demanding cultural sensitivity that rural educators and federal policymakers must keep in mind. Too often these students are left out of the rural conversation or considered someone else's problem.

**Too often rural education in general is considered someone else's problem.**

Indeed, too often rural education in general is considered someone else's problem. Rural education is rarely a priority; few federal initiatives address it directly. That is due, in part, to the urgency surrounding

urban districts. Yet Insiders lack a clear picture of the issues rural superintendents face, and rural communities are becoming increasingly diverse while failing their minority student populations. Future policy must address rural education while accounting for the unique circumstances in which rural districts exist.

## • APPENDIX A : SUPERINTENDENT SURVEY QUESTIONS •

1. Please rank the following issues, in order of relevance for your district.
  - a. Lack of “full federal funding” for special education
  - b. Poor information on federal grant opportunities
  - c. Difficulty competing for federal grant dollars
  - d. Difficulty recruiting teachers
  - e. Difficulty retaining teachers
  - f. Paperwork and compliance requirements
  - g. “Risk” of high-cost/low-incidence special education students
  - h. Lack of flexibility about how federal dollars can be spent
  - i. Lack of school and classroom technology
  - j. Lack of access to broadband Internet
2. What federal policy programs or initiatives do you believe require the most administrative and paperwork time for your district to comply with? (open-ended)
3. Which of the following aspects of your district’s work require the most administrative time? (pick three)
  - a. Testing and accountability
  - b. Teacher evaluations
  - c. Special education
  - d. Standards and curriculum
  - e. School lunch
  - f. Applying for and complying with grants
  - g. Other (please indicate)

4. Please list federal programs and regulations that restrict your district from doing what you would otherwise do. (open ended)
5. Which of the following policy areas does your district find most restrictive? (pick three)
  - a. Testing and accountability
  - b. Teacher evaluations
  - c. Special education
  - d. Standards and curriculum
  - e. School lunch
  - f. Applying for and complying with grants
  - g. Other (please indicate)
6. If the federal government could do one thing to improve the quality of education for rural students, what would you suggest they do? (open-ended)
7. To what extent do you agree with the following:  
(strongly agree/strongly disagree, 1 through 5)
  - a. Life in rural America is significantly different from life in urban/suburban America.
  - b. Most education policies are primarily designed for urban and suburban districts and are often poorly suited to rural districts.
  - c. Choosing to live in a rural community means gaining some benefits but losing others. People should realize that rural schools are different than urban or suburban ones in their offerings.
8. How important do you think the leadership at the Department of Education considers rural education? (rate 1 through 10, 1 being not important and 10 being very important)
9. Would you have reservations about firing a low-performing teacher for any of the following reasons? (check all reasons that apply)
  - a. It can be awkward in a small town or school community where you regularly interact with people in non-work settings.
  - b. There is lack of support for performance-based personnel decisions in the community.
  - c. It would be difficult to find a replacement teacher.
  - d. People depend on the schools in our community as a stable place of employment.
  - e. Other (please specify)

- 10.** Please describe the extent to which you agree with the following statements:  
(strongly agree/strongly disagree, 1 through 5)
- Lack of computers, tablets, and/or software is a barrier to effectively delivering general education in rural America.
  - Lack of high-speed Internet connectivity is a barrier to effectively delivering general education in rural America.
  - Lack of technology in general is a barrier to adopting college- and career-ready standards (CCSS or other) in rural America.
- 11.** Please rank the following issues as to how much of a concern they are for you when thinking about online learning options:
- Quality of the content available
  - Cost
  - Ability to deliver given our technology infrastructure
  - Alignment with our curriculum and standards
  - Ability of our teachers to integrate online offerings into our instructional program
- 12.** Describe your attitude toward distance learning: (pick one)
- It's an opportunity for us to provide offerings that we otherwise couldn't.
  - I'm neutral; it doesn't and won't have a strong impact on my district.
  - I'm worried that online schools will compete for my students, further forcing me to eliminate offerings.
- 13.** Describe your feelings on rural district consolidation:  
(strongly agree/strongly disagree, 1 through 5)
- Closing a community's school through consolidation damages the community and should be avoided at almost any cost.
  - Compensatory revenue should be provided to small districts to help them avoid consolidations.
  - Consolidation is an unavoidable reality in places with declining student populations.
  - Rural districts should do more to avoid wholesale consolidation by coordinating across districts and pooling resources wherever possible, such as through formal service sharing agreements (e.g., BOCES).
  - Other (please specify)

- 14.** On a scale of 1-10, with 1 being very unfavorable and 10 being very favorable, what is your impression of public charter schools?
- 15.** Which of the following statements comes closest to how you see public charter schools as having a role in your community?
- Charter schools are another way to provide options for students within public education.
  - Charter schools are largely irrelevant to the work we do.
  - Charter schools are a source of competition, because there are so few students.
- 16.** Which of the following federal programs/grants do you participate in? (check all that apply)
- REAP spending flexibility
  - REAP Small Rural Schools Grant (SRSA)
  - REAP Rural and Low-Income School (RLIS) Grants
  - Other federal grant programs (please specify)
- 17.** If you receive REAP grant dollars, on what do you spend those dollars?
- Teacher salaries
  - Technology
  - Buildings/maintenance
  - Other (specify)
- 18.** Are you involved in any sort of regional or multi-district service sharing agreement? If so, for what service areas? (check all that apply)
- No service sharing
  - Curriculum development
  - Instructional delivery—CTE
  - Instructional delivery—other
  - Professional development
  - Special education
  - Management or administration
  - Other (please specify)



- 19.** Which of the following most accurately represents your attitudes toward multi-district service sharing agreements in your community? (check all)
- a. I'd like to share administrative/financial services across districts, or already am.
  - b. I'd like to share instructional services across districts, or already am.
  - c. I hadn't previously considered sharing services.
  - d. It wouldn't really be helpful, we're managing just fine.
  - e. It would be a hassle and not worth the trouble.
  - f. It's one step toward consolidation and I'd rather avoid it.
- 20.** Please share any other thoughts you have about the current or potential role of federal policy in rural education. (optional)

## • APPENDIX B : INSIDER SURVEY QUESTIONS •

1. Please rank the following issues, in order of relevance for rural districts:
  - a. Lack of “full federal funding” for special education
  - b. Poor information on federal grant opportunities
  - c. Difficulty competing for federal grant dollars
  - d. Difficulty recruiting teachers
  - e. Difficulty retaining teachers
  - f. Paperwork and compliance requirements
  - g. “Risk” of high-cost/low-incidence special education students
  - h. Lack of flexibility about how federal dollars can be spent
  - i. Lack of school and classroom technology
  - j. Lack of access to broadband Internet
2. What federal policy programs or initiatives are the most burdensome for rural districts, either in terms of restricting possible action or in requiring administrative resources?
3. If the federal government could do one thing to improve the quality of education for rural students, what would you suggest they do?

4. Please rate the extent to which you agree with the following statements:  
(strongly agree/strongly disagree, 1 through 5)
  - a. Life in rural America is significantly different from life in urban/suburban America.
  - b. Most education policies are primarily designed for urban and suburban districts and are often poorly suited to rural districts.
  - c. Choosing to live in a rural community means gaining some benefits but losing others. People should realize that rural schools are different than urban or suburban ones in their offerings.
5. How important do you think the leadership at the Department of Education considers rural education? (rate 1 through 10, 1 being not important and 10 being very important)
6. Please describe the extent to which you agree with the following statements:  
(strongly agree/strongly disagree, 1 through 5)
  - a. Lack of computers, tablets, and/or software is a barrier to effectively delivering general education in rural America.
  - b. Lack of high-speed Internet connectivity is a barrier to effectively delivering general education in rural America.
7. Please rank the following issues as to how much of a concern they are for rural districts when thinking about online learning options:
  - a. Quality of the content available
  - b. Cost
  - c. Ability to deliver given our technology infrastructure
  - d. Alignment with our curriculum and standards
  - e. Ability of our teachers to integrate online offerings into our instructional program
8. Describe your perceptions of rural districts' attitude toward distance learning: (pick one)
  - a. Rural districts likely see distance learning as an opportunity to provide offerings that they otherwise couldn't.
  - b. Rural districts are likely neutral; distance learning doesn't and won't have a strong impact on rural districts.
  - c. Rural districts are likely worried that online schools will compete for an already shrinking number of students, further forcing them to eliminate offerings.

9. Describe your perceptions of rural districts' attitudes towards rural district consolidation: (strongly agree/strongly disagree, 1 through 5)
- a. Closing a community's school through consolidation damages the community and should be avoided at almost any cost.
  - b. Compensatory revenue should be provided to small districts to help them avoid consolidations.
  - c. Consolidation is an unavoidable reality in places with declining student populations.
  - d. Rural districts should do more to avoid wholesale consolidation by coordinating across districts and pooling resources wherever possible, such as through formal service sharing agreements (e.g., BOCES).
  - e. Other (please specify)

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