

Testimony before the Senate Education Committee regarding the impending reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act and its impact on rural schools.

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Thank you for the opportunity to talk to you this morning about Congressional reauthorizing of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, or as it has come to be known, "No Child Left Behind". Given the impact this law has on the children of Pennsylvania, and the policy implications it has for state and local governments, I commend you highly for taking the time and interest to be informed on these very important issues.

I am speaking to you today as the Executive Director of the Pennsylvania Association of Rural and Small Schools (PARSS), and in another capacity as well. PARSS is a member of the National Rural Education Advocacy Coalition (NREAC). The other members are the majority of the nation's rural education organizations. As the name implies, this organization advocates for the interests of the country's rural public schools and their students, before Congress and the US Department of Education. It is my honor to serve as the Chair of this coalition.

Rural schools are a vital part of the American public education system, serving over 30 percent of the nation's students. PARSS and the National Rural Education Advocacy Coalition is strongly encouraging Congress to take into consideration the unique needs of rural schools as one-size-fits-all policy can often have devastating effects.

Elementary and Secondary Education Act

We advocate a fundamental transformation of the federal role in education as defined by the Elementary and Secondary Education Act and believe 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.

We support a federal role that is consistent with both the intent of the 2001 reauthorization of success for each child and the original 1965 statute to improve outcomes for low-income children.

It is also our belief 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, providing leadership and providing resources. The federal government should supplement and support rather than dictate state efforts in education.

Title I

The terms of the basic agreement between school districts and the federal government under ESEA, must be clearer and fairer. School districts should enter into a contractual relationship with the federal government to provide services to eligible students based on the cost of activities required by ESEA. This contractual relationship must have maximum flexibility to ensure that local districts, especially in rural America, can help increase the student achievement for each child.

To help clarify the federal role in public education, Title I students should be considered as a separate subgroup and schools/ school districts should be held accountable to the terms of the contract with the federal government for their success.

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.

PARSS believes that poverty has an impact student achievement. Schools are partners in the effort to overcome and help mitigate the effects of poverty by working with other agencies and efforts, such as health care and housing.

Through NREAC we are recommending that the reauthorized law require the US Department of Education to develop rules that guarantee states and school districts consistency of application and transparency of administration, with an emphasis that the federal government's role is not to set curriculum or make local education decisions, which should be left to states and school districts.

We also recommend 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.

Accountability and Assessment

States should be responsible for determining the type and frequency of assessment, including the use of growth or progress models. Students should be treated as individuals under such assessment systems and with an emphasis on growth, improvement and closing achievement gaps. The progress states are making advancing each student's achievement level should be evaluated by 2014.

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.

States and school districts should have the responsibility for identifying, assessing, and evaluating English Language Learners based on their individual needs and reporting the results.

Collaborative Leadership for Improving Student Outcomes

PARSS 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 that face multiple subject and other types of teachers in rural America.

We reaffirm the benefit of parental advisory committees at Title I schools. Parents are a critical partner in ensuring the success of each child. ESEA should continue to support the development of processes that engage and support parents as partners. However, the nature of parental engagement should not be prescriptive, but rather encourage and allow local district innovation.

PARSS does not support the requirement of voluntary or any other type of national standards. Standards and curriculum decisions should be made at the state and local level.

Through the national advocacy coalition, PARSS is strongly recommending that Congress authorize and fund the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) to conduct an oversample of rural schools. This oversample will help provide useful insight into the performance of students in rural America.

Focus on Rural Schools

PARSS 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 rural areas. NREAC encourages all Title I funds to be focused on percentages of students in poverty. All school districts participating in Title I should receive a minimum amount of assistance under Title I.

PARSS believes that 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 D

Education technology funds should continue to be distributed on a formula basis to ensure parity for rural schools. PARSS recommends that a minimum guaranteed grant size be established.

Title IV

PARSS supports the role that Safe and Drug Free Schools plays in fighting ongoing and new challenges in rural America, such as methamphetamine labs. We believe that 100 percent of the funding under Safe and Drug Free School Act should flow directly to local school districts to ensure the maximum benefit at the local level. In addition, PARSS supports the inclusion of school resource officers as an allowable use under this program.

PARSS supports the role of after school programs such as 21st Community Learning Centers and encourages increased funding and that rural schools be guaranteed a proportionate share of funding.

Title V

PARSS recommends increasing the percentage of funding that goes directly to school districts under the Education Innovative Block Grants and recommends a minimum guaranteed grant size be established

Title VI – Rural Education Achievement Program

PARSS 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, PARSS supports increased funding for REAP to continue to support students in rural America.