

Will the NCLB help rural schools?

Advocates fear increased federal resources won't help rural schools

BY JONATHAN R. WATTS HULL

The No Child Left Behind Act offers new opportunities for schools to leverage funding for improved student performance, but some rural education advocates fear that rural schools will not be able to take advantage of the increased federal resources provided in the legislation.

“Overall, we are starting to see that the law was written with Title I schools in urban centers in mind,” says Terri Schwartzbeck, policy analyst with the American Association of School Administrators. “Much of the law does not work as well in rural areas.”

When signed into law last year, Bush administration officials touted NCLB as a major change in federal education policy. It establishes new guidelines for teacher and school accountability and increases to record levels federal aid to education.

It also requires states to set annual yearly progress expectations for all students, including minimum performance standards that rise over 12 years until all students, and each demographic subgroup of students, are performing at proficiency in reading and math.

Schools and districts failing to meet these expectations are subject to sanctions such as providing students with supplemental services, offering school choice, and reconstituting school districts.

The NCLB increased the resources available to schools from the federal government, particularly for reading. It also gives states and local education agencies



greater flexibility in using these funds that are now more specifically targeted to high-poverty schools than previously.

But some rural education advocates are concerned that NCLB may widen the gap between rural and urban school systems.

Highly qualified

A new provision under NCLB, for example, requires every teacher in a school to be “highly qualified” by 2006. While it is up to the states to determine what this term means, it is generally understood that at a minimum it means a teacher must be certified. This poses a serious challenge for rural schools.

“The premium the act places on highly qualified teachers will widen the gap between suburban and hard-to-staff schools,” says Marty Strange, director of the Policy Program for the Rural School and Community Trust. “Wealthier schools will be able to outbid poorer schools even more than they already do. This, in turn, will turn up the pressure on states to resolve the inadequacy and inequity in their various funding systems.”

Mississippi Senator Alice V. Harden, chair of the Southern Legislative Conference Education Committee, concurs. “Everyone wants a quality teacher in every classroom,” she said. “But in Mississippi, we are already facing teacher shortages and, in rural areas, they are very severe. The act also makes it very hard for us to retain our experienced staff who do not fulfill the academic requirements for that standard, but are excellent teachers.”

Harden’s observations hold true across much of rural America. While teacher shortages have abated somewhat this year, thanks in part to a slowing economy and improved recruiting programs, rural areas continue to have difficulty filling teaching positions with qualified teachers. They also have greater difficulty than suburban and urban districts in retaining experienced staff and providing continuing education to help new staff develop professionally.

The invisible quarter

Rural schools in communities with 2,500 residents or fewer account for 25 percent of America’s public schools and educate 14 percent of America’s school

children. When schools and students in towns smaller than 25,000 people are added, the number of schools swells to 43 percent and the number of students to nearly three out of 10 American school children.

Rural students graduate from high school at a higher rate than the national average and rural schools often serve populations with higher incidences of poverty and near poverty.

Given the size of the student population and the scope of the obstacles, the near invisibility of rural education issues has been a long-standing frustration. There was considerable optimism when the NCLB was passed, in no small part because it included the Rural Education Achievement Program, which allows rural schools to transfer federal funds within applicable programs.

The benefits of this flexibility are obvious. Because formula grants are based principally on population, smaller rural schools may receive relatively small amounts of money within each category. Under previous legislation, schools were required to use these funds for the express purposes for which they were distributed, regardless of the fact that the amount a rural school received may be insufficient to accomplish much of anything toward that goal.

The flexibility of REAP allows small



schools to accomplish their priorities in given areas with the federal funds they receive. REAP also released rural schools from many of the “set-aside” requirements associated with categorical funding, such as requirements that a percentage of some funds be used for staff development. “With REAP rural schools can use their funds more efficiently and more purposefully,” says Charles Lovett, who administers REAP in the U.S. Department of Education

For rural schools, perhaps the best part of all was that REAP came with an additional set of funds for grants for districts to supplement the formula funding they already received. Called the Rural Education Initiative, districts are eligible for direct, noncompetitive grants of between \$20,000 and \$60,000, depending on their population. The grants can be used in any of the program areas covered under fund consolidation allowances. In its first year, 4,026 of the 4,700 REAP-eligible districts participated in the program. “These grants were very important for rural schools,” says AASA’s Schwartzbeck. “This amount of funding can go a long way in a small school.”

Authorized for \$300 million by Congress, REAP was funded in fiscal 2002 at just over half of that amount. While the budget submitted by President Bush to Congress for fiscal 2003 increases overall spending on education by \$2.8 billion, it zeros out funding for REAP. The U.S.

Resources on the Internet

The Rural School and Community Trust

www.ruraledu.org

ERIC Clearinghouse on Rural Education and Small Schools

www.ael.org/eric/

U.S. Department of Education, Rural Education Achievement Program (REAP)

www.ed.gov/offices/OESE/reap.htm

American Association of School Administrators

www.aasa.org

Organizations Concerned About Rural Education

www.ruralschools.org

Department of Education contends that changes made in the 2002 reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act eliminated the need to fund discrete categorical programs like the two rural education programs.

Indeed, states are required to demonstrate that rural schools receive an equitable portion of the federal funds. The reauthorized legislation targets a greater percentage of program funds directly to local school districts and provides all districts, particularly rural ones, with greater flexibility in the use of federal funds.

The flexibility afforded rural schools in NCLB and the expanded grant opportunities are an indication that there is an interest in providing relief to rural areas. The law's move to resolve some of the inappropriateness of scale in categorical federal education funding is viewed by most rural education advocates as a positive step. "But," says Strange, "the fact that [REAP] was not funded indicates rural issues are still not a part of the ideology."

Other challenges

Rural schools face other challenges with the new legislation as well. Among them is the use of test scores to determine school performance. In the larger schools found in many urban and suburban districts, the number of students taking an assessment at a given grade may exceed 100. Small rural schools may have fewer than 10 students in one grade. The small sample size makes it very possible for one poor test taker to distort the performance of the entire grade. Furthermore, due to the small sample size, splitting out student performance by demographic subgroups, as required by the NCLB, may serve to identify some individual students, something not allowed under the law.

"No Child Left Behind recognizes in its accountability system the problem of subgroups so small that they are not reliable, but not when the school is small," says Strange. "All standardized testing assumes a large sample. With small schools, the stakes for each individual test-taker are much higher. There is a real risk of schools being misclassified under the act. Small schools don't have enough students to play the game."

The small sample size for many rural



schools poses a dilemma. For test results to be statistically relevant, the sample size must be large enough to account for any variation in performance not related to student skills and knowledge. How statistical reliability is established is important. Because schools are the unit held accountable under NCLB, Strange worries that the statistical sample may be set at the school level, meaning that only a minimum number of students across all grade levels and not a minimum level at each grade. "This points to another issue," says Strange. "Test data can be a part of an accountability system, but should not be a big part. A problem with the No Child Left Behind Act is that it narrows down the measurement of whether a student is getting an education."

The sanctions established in the new federal law pose unexpected hardships for rural districts as well. Under the NCLB, school districts are required for two years to offer either intra- or interdistrict transfers to students in schools that fail to meet student performance targets for each identified subset of students.


Sen. Harden worries how the school choice requirements will play out in rural areas because schools serve large geographic areas.

"In some rural districts, the choice option is unrealistic. Putting a rural child

on a bus and shipping her to a school 30 miles into the next county is not an option that will work for that student," said Harden. "The focus on choice removes the community from the solution. Targeting resources to help the students do better close to home should be the goal."

AASA's Schwartzbeck agrees. "In rural areas, the reality is there may be no choices."

In addition to a limited number of options for choice, students in failing schools may find they have very few options for supplemental education services, also required by the new education law for students in schools that fail to meet their targets. Finding tutoring, reading support and other student services in rural areas for students in schools identified as needing support is an enormous challenge.

Most rural advocates agree the higher profile rural schools have garnered in recent years has been a positive step. The problem remains, however, that urban issues continue to dominate the national debate on education policy. Translating the increased visibility into rural-tailored policy remains an elusive goal for many rural education advocates. 

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