



## **NREAC 2021 Legislative Agenda**

### **For 2021, NREAC identified the following major federal advocacy priorities:**

1. Preserve critical federal funding for rural public schools.
2. Expand and improve federal programs to address educator shortages in rural communities.
3. Ensure rural schools have access to equitable emergency funding and resources to respond to the COVID-19 pandemic.
4. Protect rural schools from privatization schemes.

### **COVID-19 Federal Education Priorities:**

- NREAC supports a significant fiscal investment designed to flexibly allow local education leaders to make the decisions and implement the plans necessary to safely open and operate schools for students and staff. This should be a blend of education stabilization funding as well as investment in key categorical programs, including Title I and IDEA.
- NREAC supports the establishment of a commission to study the impact of allocating COVID-19 relief funds through Title I of ESEA to determine whether using Title I inequitably impacted student per-pupil funding between urban and rural districts and offer recommendations to address these potential inequities on the federal level.
- NREAC supports a high bar for states asking to waive their maintenance of effort requirement coupled with a need to ensure any maintenance of effort flexibility for states is similarly available for districts.
- NREAC supports additional flexibility to state and local education agencies to suspend, reduce and/or redesign assessment and accountability.
- NREAC supports an explicit investment of \$12 billion to address the digital divide, funding administered to and through the E-Rate program to support schools in their work to connect students to the internet.
- NREAC supports flexibility for state and local education agencies to expand, revise, and modify school academic calendars to best address disruptions caused by COVID-19. At the local level this could include, but is not limited to, extended day, broader access to summer learning, expanded integration of online learning, and year-round school, among others.
- NREAC supports an expansion of existing employer liability protections to public schools.
- NREAC supports clarification that federal aid can be used to cover staffing absences necessary to keep students and other staff safe.
- Any effort to reopen schools during the pandemic is dependent upon the availability of school personnel. Therefore, federal efforts to support local education agencies with their teacher and staffing needs must include:

- Increased annual investment in Title II of ESSA, which is critical to ongoing educator development and training needs to ensure educators have the professional knowledge to adjust their teaching to changing learning environments predicated by the pandemic.
- Establishing a commission to address the long-standing educator shortage exacerbated by the pandemic.
- Support efforts addressing student learning loss through deployment of support teachers and tutors.

### **Funding for Rural Schools**

- NREAC urges Congress to increase funding to the Rural Education Achievement Program, with a specific increase to Rural Low-Income School program. Moreover, NREAC supports an examination of RLIS data to determine the impact of changing the poverty metric used to determine the overall allocation of program dollars.
- NREAC supports increased federal investment in rural education research, as well as a focus on the central challenges facing rural communities.
- NREAC urges Congress to maintain formula grants to provide a more reliable stream of funding to local school districts.
- NREAC supports a federal role that prioritizes investment in IDEA and Title I, recognizing them as the federal flagship initiatives. In light of the failure of federal and state governments to maintain special education funding, districts should be provided greater flexibility to meet the needs of all students.
- NREAC supports additional federal investment in K-12 education to support rural schools in its response to COVID-19 and related economic conditions. NREAC supports significant investment in both state fiscal stabilization funds and the Every Student Succeeds Act Title I and Individuals with Disabilities Education Act categorical funds. NREAC opposes unfunded mandates from the Administration or Congress.
- NREAC believes any competitive funds slated for a 'rural set-aside' or 'rural-only' competition should instead be directed to the Rural Education Achievement Program, a proven formula program that supports rural school innovation. If competitive funds must exist, these competitive funds should cover the cost associated with grant application and management expenses for rural communities.
- NREAC opposes any across-the-board cuts and the elimination of key education programs.
- NREAC urges Congress to maintain other critical funding streams for rural schools. In particular, REAP, Title II Part A, 21st Century grants, Perkins Career and Technical Education, E-Rate, Regional Education Laboratories, must continue at a minimum of FY20 levels.
- NREAC supports the reauthorization and re-funding of the Secure Rural Schools program on a permanent basis.

### **Priorities for the Higher Education Act Reauthorization**

- NREAC supports the preservation and expansion of federal grant and loan forgiveness programs that support teachers, especially those that encourage teachers to work in rural districts.
- NREAC supports efforts at the federal level to assist rural districts in addressing teacher and other school personnel shortages through loan forgiveness programs targeted at rural communities and districts.

- NREAC supports increased funding to the Teacher Quality Partnership grant program, the only federal initiative dedicated to strengthening and reforming educator preparation at institutions of higher education and opposes the elimination of the program or cuts to its funding.
- NREAC supports the preservation of existing authorization and funding for the TRIO program. NREAC supports increased funding for TRIO programs so it can better serve students in rural schools.

### **Focus on Rural Schools at The U.S. Department of Education**

- NREAC requests that the U.S. Department of Education consider the needs and capacity of rural schools when proposing new regulations, guidance, and technical assistance, and to ensure that any regulations issued are consistent with the spirit and scope of the law.
- NREAC urges the U.S. Department of Education to consider the administrative burden of data collection on rural districts. Specifically, the Department should exempt rural school districts from annually responding to the Civil Rights Data Collection and return to a sampling methodology that ensured they were not submitting data annually.
- NREAC recommends that the U.S. Department of Education create an Office of Rural Education Policy to ensure policies, programs and funding streams consider the capacity of rural schools.
- In accordance to President Obama's Executive Order 13575, NREAC supports the creation of a White House Rural Council to better coordinate Federal programs and maximize the impact of Federal investment to promote economic prosperity and quality of life in our rural communities.
- NREAC opposes the reauthorization of the D.C. voucher program, efforts to privatize or redirect federal funds to private schools, voucher programs for military-connected children, attempts to incentivize federal tax credits for donations to private schools, and proposals to create educational savings accounts for students.

### **Education Technology**

- NREAC believes access to high-speed internet is critical for providing equitable access to learning for students in rural schools. As such, NREAC strongly supports maintaining E-Rate as an element of the Universal Service Fund in its current funding structure. Moreover, NREAC supports increased flexibilities for the allowable uses of E-rate to enable rural schools to utilize education technology that best meets the needs of their communities.
- NREAC supports efforts at the federal level to address the digital divide through expanded access to connectivity at home: including efforts to improve infrastructure for broadband access and increased bandwidth, as well as incentives for providers to continue to expand connectivity options in hard-to-reach or high-cost areas.
- NREAC believes any investment in rural education technology and connectivity in response to the COVID-19 pandemic must be run through the E-Rate program.

### **Safe and Healthy Schools**

- NREAC believes all school districts have a responsibility to maintain a safe and healthy learning environment for students, but geographic and economic challenges in rural communities make this reality more difficult.

- NREAC strongly supports efforts to streamline the paperwork associated with Medicaid claiming as it disproportionately hinders small and rural districts from participating in the Medicaid program and providing critical health and mental health services to children.
- NREAC supports flexible federal formula funding streams to channel resources to rural school districts for school safety that recognize the unique safety needs of each community and school.
- NREAC believes Congress must provide sustained funding to address the increasing mental health needs of children in rural areas including incentivizing the exploration and expansion of teletherapy in rural schools.
- NREAC does not support one-size-fit all policies.

### **School Nutrition**

- NREAC supports reimbursing schools when federal food service requirements result in loss of revenue.
- NREAC supports flexibilities to non-congregate feeding requirements associated with the summer food service program.
- NREAC recommends giving districts the option to waive out unfunded federal food service requirements.
- NREAC believes all licensing and certification requirements for school nutrition workers are a state responsibility.
- NREAC opposes efforts to increase the administrative burden around eligibility for free and reduced lunch verification.
- NREAC supports the U.S. Department of Agriculture Farm to Table Program.
- NREAC does not support changes made to the Community Eligibility Provision eligibility threshold.
- NREAC supports an increase in reimbursement for the national school lunch and school breakfast programs.
- NREAC opposes any attempts at turning school nutrition funding into a block grant or consolidated funding stream.

### **Other Priorities**

- NREAC supports efforts to ensure any infrastructure proposal in Congress must include funding for modernizing or maintaining rural school facilities.
- NREAC supports a greater federal investment in early education through the coordination and support of new and already existing school-based and community partnerships.
- NREAC supports increased funding and access to career and technical education (CTE) in high school and post-secondary programs.