

**U.S. Department of Education**

**Written Testimony of Ruth Ryder**

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**Before the Subcommittee on**

**Labor, Health and Human Services, Education, and Related Agencies**

**U.S. House of Representatives**

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Chairman Aderholt, Ranking Member DeLauro, and distinguished Members of the Committee, thank you for the opportunity to share the Department of Education's (Department's) critical work to meet the needs of the 9.7 million students enrolled in rural schools.

We know some challenges can be especially acute in rural areas due to underinvestment, and limited connectivity.<sup>1</sup> The challenges of rural communities are unique. The Department is laser-focused on supporting these communities with funding opportunities, technical assistance, and other support tailored to these settings. I am pleased to share the work underway to support these communities.

**I. Agency Commitment to Supporting Rural Communities**

The Department is one of 20 Federal agencies and regional commissions that make up the [Rural Partners Network](#) (RPN). The RPN, led by the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Rural Development team, works to expand rural prosperity through job creation, infrastructure development, and community improvement. It aims to transform how the Federal government supports rural communities, collaborates with local residents, and amplifies rural priorities with the goal of inclusive, sustainable economic growth at the forefront of its mission.

In 2022, the RPN selected its pilot cohort of community networks located in 10 States and Puerto Rico. 37 community networks in Alaska, Georgia, Kentucky, Mississippi, Nevada, New Mexico, North Carolina, Puerto Rico, West Virginia, and Wisconsin, as well as the San Carlos Apache Tribe, the Tohono O'odham Nation, and the Cocopah Indian Tribe in Arizona are receiving support from the RPN. To support long-term economic success, all community networks will receive place-based community economic development guidance in navigating federal programs, building relationships, and identifying community-driven solutions from local full-time, federal staff.

The RPN is also curating a set of resources to help people living in rural communities navigate programs, elevate rural needs, and access information on what is working in rural communities throughout the nation. Interested stakeholders and community members may visit [Rural.gov](#) for a comprehensive look at the RPN, including program goals, affiliated partners, and activities in pilot communities—with additional resources to come.

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[Some digital divides between rural, urban, suburban America persist | Pew Research Center](#)

Another example of the Department’s commitment to rural engagement and prosperity is the Rural Strategy and Action Team (RSAT), a Department group dedicated to advancing support of rural children and youth. Comprised of Department employees from nine program offices, RSAT meets monthly to discuss rural needs, opportunities, resources, and best practices. It identifies policy and programmatic shortcomings that affect rural communities and, through detailed analysis, presents workable solutions that inform Department leadership and the RPN. Members of RSAT respond to education-related inquiries arising from the RPN and develop new resources to support rural education in geographically isolated areas.

I’m also pleased to share that we recently appointed a new Director of Rural Engagement to continue to build on these efforts. The Director will coordinate the Department’s efforts around these very important issues. The new Director will represent the Department in meetings with stakeholders and other federal agencies. They will also be responsible for leading regular, proactive engagement with rural stakeholders around the country. This includes ensuring their concerns are heard and communicating policy decisions and updates back to them on a consistent basis via roundtables, conferences, webinars, and other events. The Director will develop a cohesive engagement strategy that elevates rural educational needs and opportunities, determine resources and partnerships needed to advance rural education, and identifies and shares rural best practices that exist around the country. Additionally, they will co-chair the Department’s internal RSAT and provide direct support to RPN community networks.

## **II. Unique Challenges for Rural Students**

### Addressing the Digital Divide

We know that learners living in rural areas are among those most impacted by the digital divide. As of 2020, approximately 37 percent of students in rural areas reported having inadequate internet connectivity at home. In September of 2022, The Department’s Office of Educational Technology (OET) published a resource, *Advancing Digital Equity for All: Community-Based Recommendations for Developing Effective Digital Equity Plans to Close the Digital Divide and Enable Technology-Empowered Learning* that discusses barriers faced by learners in rural areas to accessing high-speed internet and technology tools for learning, as well as strategies rural communities have utilized to increase access. This resource supports leaders in developing effective digital equity plans that leverage President Biden’s Bipartisan Infrastructure Law’s \$65 billion for high-speed internet investments to address the needs of learners, families, and caregivers – particularly those living in rural and under-resourced communities. The resource was informed by listening sessions with organizations representing learners furthest from digital opportunities, including those in rural areas, through OET’s Digital Equity Education Roundtables Initiative.

### Teacher Shortages

According to a recent survey by the National Center for Education Statistics, most schools reported starting the 2022-2023 school year short-staffed for both instructional and non-instructional staff, with the most severe shortages for special education personnel.<sup>2</sup> Additionally,

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<sup>2</sup> U.S. Department of Education. School Pulse Panel Survey available at [School Pulse Panel \(ed.gov\)](https://www.ed.gov/school-pulse-panel)

the Department has heard from a number of states about the challenges they face in recruiting and retaining teachers, particularly in high need areas such as rural communities. There are acute challenges in rural communities that affect staffing such as housing, recruiting/attracting new teachers and creating the infrastructure to develop teacher pipelines with educational preparation programs. The pandemic only exacerbated the educator shortages our underrepresented rural districts had previously experienced

In January, Secretary Cardona issued a call to action focused on our priorities to “Raise the Bar in Education” and eliminate teacher shortages. First, to recruit and retain teachers, teachers should be compensated appropriately through a livable wage. Second, to ensure that we are investing in retaining our teachers, the Department supports models that recruit the next generation of teachers. Federal dollars are helping to make this a reality, for example, many districts have used their American Rescue Plan funds to invest in innovative and effective teacher recruitment and preparation strategies, like Grow Your Own programs that enable districts to develop their own paraprofessionals into teachers, and even get high school students on track to becoming teachers. Due to a collaboration with the Department of Labor, nationwide we are seeing more states and districts use teacher Registered Apprenticeship programs to expand these Grow Your Own programs and teacher residency programs and pay individuals for their training to become teachers while earning a certification.

### Chronic Absenteeism

The number of students missing at least 18 days of school a year [doubled](#) to 16 million in 2021-2022 from 8 million students before the pandemic.<sup>3</sup> This means that one out of every three public school children was chronically absent during the second full school year of the pandemic. Re-engaging these students can be especially challenging for students who live far from their school buildings, as is common in rural areas. Across the country, districts are using American Rescue Plan dollars to support these students. In October 2021, the Georgia Department of Education’s Office of Rural Education and Innovation announced a partnership with Graduation Alliance and an investment of \$5 million in Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief funds to support the location, engagement and individual support of up to 50,000 students in rural areas who have disengaged from school or are chronically absent due to COVID-related school disruptions, who are in danger of failing one or more classes, or whose families have requested additional support. Similarly, Colorado launched a Rural Program Development grant with American Rescue Plan funds, to support the development of a wide range of programs that support re-engaging and strengthening student engagement—particularly for those students most affected by the pandemic.

The American Rescue Plan is helping to support rural students across the country. The Department also has programs that provide ongoing support and technical assistance to support rural communities.

### **III. U.S. Department of Education Holistic Approach to Serving Students in Rural Communities**

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<sup>3</sup> More information available at: <https://www2.ed.gov/datastory/chronicabsenteeism.html>

**a. Office of Elementary and Secondary Education Programs –**

I am also pleased to share some programmatic updates from the Division of Rural, Insular, and Native Achievement Programs (RINAP) within the Office of Elementary and Secondary Education (OESE). RINAP administers the Rural Education Achievement Program (REAP), which is designed to help rural school districts that may lack the personnel and resources to compete effectively for federal competitive grants and that often receive grant allocations in amounts that are too small to be effective in meeting their intended purposes. The two initiatives within the REAP are the Small, Rural School Achievement (SRSA) program, which authorizes the Secretary to award formula grants directly to eligible school districts to carry out activities authorized under other specified federal programs, and the Rural and Low-Income School (RLIS) program, which is designed to address the needs of rural, low-income schools. For the RLIS program, the Secretary awards formula grants to State educational agencies (SEAs), which, in turn, award subgrants to eligible local educational agencies (LEAs) either competitively or on a formula basis. The funds are to be used to carry out activities specified in the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965 (ESEA).

In 2022, the Department awarded \$195 million in REAP funds to support approximately 6,200 rural LEAs throughout the United States. These rural LEAs, which meet eligibility criteria for being small and/or low-income, are using their REAP grant funds for a variety of activities, including supporting supplemental teaching and learning activities during the 2022-23 school year. Youth mental health is a priority of the Biden-Harris Administration, and, among many other activities, REAP funds may be used to support school-based mental health services and partnership programs with outside health care entities. REAP funds may also support the training of specialized instructional personnel on trauma-informed practices, and bullying, harassment, and suicide prevention.

In fiscal year (FY) 2023 we estimate that we will award approximately 4,200 SRSA grant awards, which, by volume, is approximately 55 percent of the grants annually awarded by OESE. In response to feedback from rural education stakeholders the Department committed to simplifying and improving the SRSA grant application process beginning with the FY 2019 grant cycle.<sup>4</sup> Direct feedback from SRSA grantees indicates that the team's efforts to simplify the application process and provide topical, streamlined technical assistance navigating the application process have led to increases in participation in the program as well as general satisfaction with the application process.

Each year REAP makes iterative improvements to the application process. The FY 2023 SRSA grant application, which is open through April 14, 2023, builds on prior efforts. First, school district data is pre-populated into the application (e.g., applicant's physical address, contact information, and Unique Entity ID (UEI)) to support the applicant school district in completing the application as quickly and easily as possible. The FY 2023 application also includes the SAM.gov UEI expiration date so that applicants have it as a reference to ensure their UEI registration remains active in SAM.gov. Finally, the Department created an SRSA Post-Application information document to provide school district administrators with concise next steps, links to helpful resources, and answers to REAP's most frequently asked questions relating

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<sup>4</sup> For more information see: <https://www2.ed.gov/about/inits/ed/rural/rural-education-report.pdf>

to the SRSA application process. On average, the application for funding that took over three hours to complete in FY 2019 now takes approximately ten minutes to submit.

Another office within RINAP implements the Alaska Native Education Program, which in September 2022 announced 28 new grants totaling \$35 million that will fund innovative projects that recognize and address the unique educational needs of Alaska Natives. Many of these grant dollars will support Alaska Native students and families living in some of the most rural communities in Alaska.

I would also like to bring to your attention work funded by the Department's Institute of Education Sciences (IES). Through IES' National Center for Education Research (NCER), the Center for Education Policy Research at Harvard University launched the National Center for Rural Education Research Networks (NCRERN),<sup>5</sup> and the University of Missouri in partnership with the University of Virginia and the University of Montana created the National Center for Rural School Mental Health (NCRSMH).<sup>6</sup> NCRERN works to build the capacity of local educational agencies to employ evidence-based continuous improvement strategies in rural schools. NCRERN's work will also apply rigorous research to identify and evaluate "best practices" available for increasing student attendance and improving high school students' learning and preparation for careers and postsecondary education that will be disseminated to rural communities. NCRSMH partners with rural schools in Missouri, Virginia, and Montana to develop a comprehensive set of teacher and student surveys, tools, interventions, and professional development materials to help identify, prevent, and intervene in mental health concerns among students.

Additionally, IES' National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) has been taking steps to improve the availability of rural education data and resources. NCES is in the process of updating its report on rural education, which was last released in 2007, and has developed a new resource hub called "Education Across America." The website is designed for those interested in the condition of education in the country's diverse geography—its cities, suburbs, towns, and rural areas. Currently, the resource hub serves as a central repository of tabulations produced by NCES. Future releases will include indicators and summary reports that focus on specific locales. Rural areas will be highlighted first and foremost. Furthermore, NCES will continue to maintain the education geographic services. These education geographic services, such as the locale lookup tool and boundary files, provide information about school and school district demographic, economic, and geographic characteristics.

#### **b. Additional Grants in OESE Supporting Rural Communities –**

OESE also administers several competitive grant programs that support rural communities in meeting the holistic needs of students.

##### Full-Service Community Schools

The Full-Service Community Schools (FSCS) program provides support for the planning, implementation, and operation of full-service community schools that improve the coordination,

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<sup>5</sup> More information available at <https://www.rural.gov/blog/regional-comprehensive-centers>

<sup>6</sup> More information available at <https://www.rural.gov/blog/building-partnerships-support-mental-health-needs-diverse-rural-schools-national-center-rural>

integration, accessibility, and effectiveness of services for children and families, particularly for children attending high-poverty schools, including high-poverty rural schools.

The ESEA directs the Department to use at least 15 percent of available FSCS funding to award grants to eligible entities to carry out activities in rural areas. The ESEA also directs the Department to prioritize making awards to grantees that serve REAP eligible school districts.

In FYs 2018 and 2019, the Department used a competitive preference priority to award grants to serve rural communities; in FY 2022, the Department used the authorizing language to create an absolute priority for applicants that propose to serve two or more schools eligible for the Title I, Part A schoolwide program and include a school district that satisfied the requirements under REAP. Since the 2018, this program has served 79,522 students in 130 rural schools.

### Promise Neighborhoods

The purpose of the Promise Neighborhoods (PN) program is to significantly improve the academic and developmental outcomes of children living in the most distressed communities of the United States, including ensuring school readiness, high school graduation, and access to a community-based continuum of high-quality services. The program serves neighborhoods with high concentrations of low-income individuals; multiple signs of distress, which may include high rates of poverty, childhood obesity, academic failure, and juvenile delinquency, adjudication, or incarceration; and schools implementing comprehensive support and improvement activities or targeted support and improvement activities under section 1111(d) of the ESEA.

By statute, the PN program competition prioritizes funding rural communities, which ensures that a portion of the PN funds is set aside for those communities. The PN program is currently funding 7 communities that applied under the rural priority. These grants are located in Kentucky, Mississippi, and South Carolina, with Kentucky and Mississippi having multiple communities receiving grants. The total planned grant amount for these rural grantees is \$143,792,400.

Additionally, the PN program provides comprehensive technical assistance to rural grantees. This includes leadership development for key project staff and results-based accountability training to ensure that grantee leaders can use data effectively to identify and meet their communities' needs.

While the pandemic created a challenging environment for our grantees, many of the rural grantees were able to use their funds to improve community and family engagement through the use of technology. Previously many events were held in person because of inadequate internet access in rural areas. This limited the number of families who could participate due to lengthy commutes. Grantees pivoted, working with partner school districts and community organizations to improve internet access that allowed them to recreate these events virtually. Many events and programs have remained virtual so that they are accessible to more families and have increased knowledge of the program.

### Impact Aid

The Impact Aid Discretionary Construction Grant Program provides grants to eligible Impact Aid school districts to assist in addressing their school facility emergency and modernization needs. These school districts have a limited ability to raise local revenue for capital improvements because they have large areas of federal land within their boundaries. As a result, these districts face difficulties in responding when their school facilities are in need of emergency repairs. In the last six years, 100 percent of Impact Aid Discretionary Construction funds have gone to rural districts for construction projects that remediate urgent health and safety problems for students, staff and administrators. This program makes approximately \$18 million in awards every other year. Recent grants have fixed leaking roofs, broken heating and cooling systems, and inadequate fire suppression systems, and shored up foundations cracking from the effects of climate change. Grant funds have also been used to build a new school building, to replace a building that would have cost more to renovate than to demolish, and to construct a new building. Rural districts in particular struggle to find funds to improve aging school buildings, and the Impact Aid Discretionary Construction program is the only competitive program in OESE that is dedicated to addressing this need.

#### Title I, Part C – Migrant Education Program (MEP)

The Migrant Education Program (MEP) funds academic and supportive services for the children of families who migrate to find work in the agricultural and fishing industries. The Office of Migrant Education does not collect any specific data to identify whether a migratory child lives in a rural area; however, many migratory families do reside in rural areas due to the nature of their work in the agricultural and fishing industries. With support from the MEP program, migratory children can receive instructional services (such as educational activities for preschool-age children and instructional support in elementary and secondary schools, including tutoring before and after school) and support services (educationally related activities, including advocacy, for migratory children; health, nutrition, and social services for migratory families; necessary educational supplies; and transportation).

#### High School Equivalency Program (HEP) and College Assistance Migrant Program (CAMP)

HEP helps migratory and seasonal farmworkers (or their children) who are 16 or older and not currently enrolled in school to obtain the equivalent of a high school diploma and, subsequently, to gain employment or begin postsecondary education or training. Additionally, CAMP assists students who are migratory or seasonal farmworkers (or their children) who are enrolled in their first year of undergraduate studies at an institution of higher education. While HEP and CAMP do not have a specific data indicator for rural students, a significant number of the total students served by these programs come from rural areas or have immediate family members from rural areas.

#### Education Innovation and Research

The Education Innovation and Research (EIR) Program provides funding to create, develop, implement, replicate, or take to scale entrepreneurial, evidence-based, field-initiated innovations to improve student achievement and attainment for high-need students and to rigorously evaluate such innovations. The EIR program is designed to generate and validate solutions to persistent

educational challenges and to support the expansion of effective solutions to serve substantially larger numbers of students.

For FY 2022, the Department held three EIR grant competitions: Early-phase, Mid-phase, and Expansion. All three competitions included two competitive preference priorities that aligned with the Administration's acknowledgment of the timely and urgent needs in Pre-K-12 education related to addressing the impact of COVID-19 and promoting equity. The Early-phase and Mid-phase competitions included absolute priorities for STEM and social and emotional learning skills. EIR also has a statutory requirement that at least 25 percent of funds be awarded to rural applicants.

Across the FY 2022 Expansion, Mid-phase, and Early-phase competitions we awarded \$38,931,114 to projects serving rural areas and funded \$18,296,561 in non-competing continuation awards to projects serving rural areas. In addition, multiple other applicants plan to serve some rural schools but did not meet the program's definition of "rural." The EIR program has often exceeded the 25 percent statutory set-aside for rural applicants and has successfully worked within the Department and externally to recruit and encourage novice rural applicants to apply for the grants. For example, the program has targeted outreach toward REAP grantees, programs within the Office of Indian Education, as well as external rural organizations and networks. This rural outreach strategy has also included recruitment of peer reviewers, to deepen the Department's bench of peer reviewers with experience working in and/or supporting education in rural settings.

#### School Climate Transformation Grant

The School Climate Transformation Grant – local educational agency (LEA) program allows school districts to develop and adopt, or expand to more schools, multi-tiered systems of support, such as Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports, that guide the selection, integration, and implementation of evidence-based practices for improving school climate and supporting student social and emotional well-being. Research shows that students who learn in safe, inclusive, and supportive learning environments are more likely to improve academically, participate more fully in the classroom, and develop skills that will help them be successful in school and in life. In FY 2019, the Department prioritized supporting certain communities that would uniquely benefit from this program, including establishing an absolute priority for LEAs located in rural areas or serving Tribal communities. Of the 69 FY 2019 grantees funded under this program, over 40 percent (29 grantees) met this absolute priority.

#### Mental Health Service Professionals Demonstration Grants

The Mental Health Service Professional Demonstration Grant Program provides competitive grants to support and demonstrate innovative partnerships to train school-based mental health service providers for employment in schools and LEAs. The partnerships with institutions of higher education must include one or more high-need LEA or a State educational agency on behalf of one or more high-need LEA and REAP eligibility was one way for applicants to demonstrate high-need.

#### Innovative Approaches to Literacy (IAL)



The IAL program supports high-quality programs designed to develop and improve literacy skills for children and students from birth through 12th grade in high-need LEAs and schools. The Department intends to promote innovative literacy programs that support the development of literacy skills in low-income communities. The FY 2023 competition includes a competitive preference priority for applicants proposing to serve rural communities.

#### Out-of-School Time Career Pathway program

The Out-of-School Time Career Pathway program provides grants to SEAs that, in partnership with eligible entities in the State, will provide students expanded options to participate in a career pathway program, outside regular school hours or as part of an expanded learning program. The FY 2020 competition included a competitive preference priority for rural communities, and all grantees that received an award addressed the rural priority.

#### Office of Indian Education

For school year 2022-2023, the Office of Indian Education (OIE) issued 1,276 Indian Education formula grants impacting over 424,300 Native students across 38 states with a total disbursement of \$109,855,141. These grants provide an annual distribution of funds to help meet the unique cultural, language, and education needs of Indian students and help ensure that all students meet the challenging academic standards in their State. Approximately 35 percent of the school districts that receive funds are small and rural, which tells us that rurality is not the exception, but rather the norm for many of our Native communities.

### **c. Office of Postsecondary Education Grants**

#### Gaining Early Awareness and Readiness for Undergraduate Programs (GEAR UP)

GEAR UP provides grants of up to seven years to states and partnerships to provide services at high-poverty middle and high schools. GEAR UP grantees typically serve an entire cohort of students beginning no later than the seventh grade and follow the cohort through high school. GEAR UP funds are also used to provide college scholarships to participating students. The FY 2021 competition included an invitational priority for applicants that would serve students located in rural communities. In FY 2021, three of the four successful state applicants addressed this priority along with seven of the 27 successful partnership applicants. In FY 2022, the Department awarded grants to additional applicants from the FY 2021 competition, including two additional state applicant and four additional partnership applicants.

#### Rural Postsecondary and Economic Development Grant Program

The Rural Postsecondary and Economic Development Program supports rural students in accessing and completing postsecondary education. This program received FY 2022 appropriations under the Fund for the Improvement of Postsecondary Education and awarded 16 grants in June 2022. Specifically, the grants are used to implement strategies and programs to increase the rates of postsecondary enrollment, persistence, and completion among rural students through the development of high-quality career pathways aligned to high-skill, high-wage, and

in-demand industry sectors and occupations in the region. For FY 2023, Congress provided \$45,000,000 for competitive grants to institutions of higher education and other public and private non-profit organizations and agencies.

#### **d. Office of Special Education and Rehabilitative Services (OSERS)**

The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act of 2004 (IDEA) authorizes formula grants to states provides for discretionary grants to states, locals, institutions of higher education, and non-profit organizations to build and support SEA and LEA capacity to implement the IDEA Parts B and C. Many of these grant-supported activities generate knowledge and provide services of interest and utility to professionals, families, and children with disabilities across all regions of states, inclusive of rural communities. Among the authorized grants programs, two provide significant support to the rural special education systems and the children and families they serve.

##### Community Parent Resource Centers (CPRC)

Community parent resource centers are parent training and information centers, operated by local parent organizations, that help ensure underserved parents of children with disabilities, including low-income parents, parents of children who are English learners, and parents with disabilities, have the training and information they need to enable them to participate effectively in helping their children. Community parent resource centers are required to establish cooperative partnerships with the parent training and information centers in their states. The Office of Special Education Programs within OSERS has awarded 27 CPRCs, 12 of which have defined rural communities as their service area.

##### State Personnel Development Grants (SPDG)

The SPDG program focuses on professional development needs. Awards are provided only to State Education Agencies. Each state must spend at least 90 percent of its funds on professional development activities, including the recruitment and retention of qualified special education teachers. No more than 10 percent of the state's funds can be spent on state activities, such as reforming special education and regular education teacher certification (including recertification) or licensing requirements and carrying out programs that establish, expand, or improve alternative routes for state certification of special education teachers. The Network hosts monthly meetings for a community of practice, States with Small Populations. Currently, approximately ten states actively participate in this activity.

##### Appropriations under the Education of the Deaf Act (EDA), the Act to Promote the Education of the Blind, and the Helen Keller National Center Act (HKNCA)

OSERS Office of the Assistant Secretary administers appropriations under the EDA and the HKNCA. The EDA appropriations support partnerships between The Alabama Institute for Deaf and Blind (AIDB) and Gallaudet University (Gallaudet University Regional Center South and Regional Early Acquisition of Language), National Technical Institute for the Deaf (NTID

Regional STEM Center and Southeastern Interpreter Guidance Network), and American Printing House for the Blind (Center for Assistive Technology Training). These partnerships focus on supporting southeastern states and greatly impact deaf, blind, and DeafBlind students in rural areas. Some of the AIDB partnerships are currently expanding to serve rural communities in the Pacific Northwest.

Since 1969, HKNC is the only national program providing comprehensive vocational rehabilitation services to youth (16 and older), working-age adults, and seniors (55 and better) with combined hearing and vision loss (DeafBlind). HKNC serves 10 regions across the country, which include rural communities, through virtual assessments and in-person training opportunities. The Technology Employment Achievement and Mastery (TEAM) supports working-age adults who require further work-readiness skills in order to obtain employment. TEAM utilizes an online customer service training program that teaches on-the-job skills such as conflict resolution, resolving customer disputes and effective communication techniques. HKNC also is the largest participant in the DeafBlind Equipment Distribution Program. These services are most requested in rural areas.

#### **IV. Technical Assistance for Rural Communities**

##### Rural, Insular, and Native Achievement Programs (RINAP)

To improve technical assistance to rural communities, the Department recently created an SEA work group for its Rural Education Achievement Program (REAP) State Coordinators, which meets on a quarterly basis. The structure and focus of this work group followed the advice of REAP State Coordinators, who in June 2020 provided the Department feedback during a listening session on how to better understand local, rural concerns regarding education during the COVID-19 pandemic. As a result, during SEA work group meetings the REAP team shares program updates and policy guidance (such as the Department's 2022 notice inviting applications to fund projects that support high-need school districts seeking to improve school-based mental health services), while also providing a venue for resource sharing, questions, and nationwide collaboration. RINAP also conducts regular oversight and monitoring activities, hosts webinars for states and school districts related to the administration of the SRSA application and presents regularly at national conferences, such as the National Forum to Advance Rural Education and the National Association of ESEA State Program Administrators annual conference. In addition, RINAP hosts an annual technical assistance meeting for the Insular Areas and the Republic of Palau to provide guidance on topics such as the allowable use of funds and building staff capacity, as well as periodic project director meetings for the Alaska Native Education and Native Hawaiian Education programs. Events such as these help ensure that grantees are aware of, and have access to, Department technical assistance resources and other opportunities for support.

##### Regional Educational Lab Program (REL)

The Department's Institute for Education Sciences supports 10 regional labs that partner with educators and policymakers nationwide.<sup>7</sup> For nearly 60 years, the RELs have collaborated with

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<sup>7</sup> For more information see: <https://ies.ed.gov/ncee/rel/>

school districts, state departments of education, and other education stakeholders to help generate and apply evidence, with the goal of improving learner outcomes. REL work is change-oriented, rigorous, and high-leverage, supporting consequential local, regional, or statewide decisions about education policies, programs, and practices. RELs contribute to the growing body of research on how experiences within the nation’s education system differ by context and student group, thereby impacting outcomes and identifying potential solutions.

The RELs are statutorily required to “develop strategies to utilize schools as critical components in reforming education and revitalizing rural communities in the United States,” and “report and disseminate information on overcoming the obstacles faced by educators and schools in high poverty, urban, and rural areas.” The Education Sciences Reform Act requires that at least 25 percent of the aggregate funding for the 10 RELs be dedicated to rural issues.

The current cycle of RELs began their work in 2022 and are thus in the beginning stages of developing and providing their supports to all partners (including those representing rural communities). Several examples of these ongoing supports are described on the REL program website, which includes a topic page for rural education that includes a database of products and supports the RELs have provided to rural schools since 2017.<sup>8</sup>

In Alaska REL Northwest is partnering with the district to implement evidence-based strategies to continuously monitor and improve working conditions toward increased teacher retention to ensure all students are consistently served by qualified educators for the Alaska’s Improving Teacher Retention and Recruitment in Rural and Remote Schools Partnership. Like many school districts in Alaska, the Lower Kuskokwim School District has a pressing need to attract and retain educators in a variety of positions throughout the rural, remote district. In Mississippi, The Mississippi Adolescent Literacy Partnership creates a collaborative environment where stakeholders and REL Southeast staff bridge contextual knowledge and expertise with use of research and evidence-based practices that support the improvement of adolescent literacy skills.

### Unlocking Career Success Community of Practice

As part of the Secretary’s Unlocking Career Success initiative, an initiative designed to blur the lines between high school, college, and career, the Office of Career Technical and Adult Education is setting up a community of practice (COP) for rural districts who have exemplary programming or initiatives within one of the four keys of the initiative: dual enrollment, work-based learning, workforce credentials, and career advising and navigation.<sup>9</sup> The objectives of the COP are to provide a small group setting for influential education leaders to discuss the four keys, to source exemplars for national distribution, to discuss problems of practice and problem solve, and finally, to provide a regular touchpoint and feedback loop between the Department and rural districts nationwide.

### **Conclusion –**

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<sup>8</sup> For more information see: <https://ies.ed.gov/ncee/rel/topics?topics=Rural+Schools&page=1>

<sup>9</sup> For more information see: <https://cte.ed.gov/unlocking-career-success/>

In closing, the Department has a multifaceted approach to address the needs of students in rural communities. Our goal is to ensure that funding is reaching the communities in need and that there is technical assistance available tailored to the unique needs of rural students. I welcome the opportunity to answer your questions.