



NREAC Rural Education and ESEA Briefing on Capitol Hill June 18, 2007

Participants:

Dave Campbell, Superintendent, Olivet Community Schools, Olivet, MI
Bill Mathis, Superintendent, Rutland Northeast Supervisory Union, Brandon, VT
Kevin Mitchell, Superintendent, Park County School District 1, Powell, WY
James Morton, Superintendent, Prairiland Independent School District, Pattonville, TX
Steve Rosenthal, Superintendent, Shoreline Unified School District, Tomales, CA

Moderated by:

Joe Bard, Executive Director, Pennsylvania Association of Rural and Small Schools, Harrisburg, PA and
Chair, NREAC

On Monday, June 18, 2007, the National Rural Education Advocacy Coalition, in conjunction with the Senate Rural Education Caucus, held a briefing of the implications of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (currently known as No Child Left Behind) on rural education. More than 60 House and Senate staff listened to a panel discussion of five superintendents moderated by Joe Bard, executive director of the Pennsylvania Association of Rural and Small Schools and Chair of the NREAC. This briefing was critical because it was the first time there was a dedicated meeting to discuss ESEA from the rural perspective.



Each of the five superintendents was assigned a different area of ESEA to focus on for their remarks. James Morton of Prairiland Independent School District of Texas started out with an overview of what makes rural schools unique. He shared the multiple roles and responsibilities of school superintendents in small schools as well as the cost inefficiencies and concerns with funding formulas. Mr. Morton emphasized to the congressional staff present that children have a right to have an education no matter where they live.

Bill Mathis of the Rutland Northeast Supervisory Union in Vermont was the panel's expert on funding ESEA. Most of his comments were focused on the discrimination against rural schools in the Title I funding formula. This is a provision that allows school districts to receive their Title I dollars based on their percentage of poor students or raw number of poor students, whichever generates the highest allocation. Dr. Mathis also raised concern that growth measures were not going to be the magic bullet without making additional adjustments in the law.



The superintendent of Shoreline Unified School District in California, Steven Rosenthal, took an opportunity to focus on the impact of assessment issues in the law. Shoreline Unified School District has 700 students K-12 and runs its buses over 1,000 miles per day. Fifty-two percent of its student population is Hispanic. Mr. Rosenthal shared that assessment provides a good way to gauge success but the current system is goes overboard. Adequate Yearly Progress sets up a punitive system instead of one that encourages success. In

addition, Mr. Rosenthal stressed that we must allow time for English language learners to gain knowledge of English before they are expected to be tested on content in English. In the case of special education, he explained that the current rules conflict with the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act and when parents choose to opt out their disabled children from the assessments, those scores still count against the district.

Big Horn County School District in Wyoming is a small school district of 600 students over 500 square miles that is facing the ever-present reality of declining enrollment. Superintendent Kevin Mitchell, now with the Park County School District, explained his experience when two of his schools were deemed “In Need of Improvement.” The school improvement process is very laborious and rural schools have little capacity to research appropriate interventions. In addition, to get rural parents involved in the school, especially those so geographically vast, schools need to provide food and daycare options. This makes it difficult to get parent and community involvement in the school improvement process.



Dave Campbell of Olivet Community Schools in Michigan took the opportunity to address the issues surrounding the highly qualified teacher requirements of NCLB. He outlined the challenges of recruiting and retaining teachers in rural schools and that the current highly qualified requirements make it even more difficult. “It is an uphill battle to hang onto teachers,” he shared. Teachers are expected to teach more subjects and therefore require more preparation and salaries structured to meet those demands, said Campbell, adding that loan forgiveness would be a helpful incentive. Mr. Campbell also shared a desire to have colleges and universities cap the number of social studies and physical education teachers. He said that higher education currently is overproducing graduates in these areas and not producing enough in areas such as math and science.

Following the presentation by the panel, there was an opportunity for an engaging question-and-answer period with the staff present. One of the first issues raised was the role of technology in addressing rural education concerns. James Morton shared that while it can help, it is not the solution because students still need one-on-one work with teachers. Concern over the loss of Title I funding in so many districts was also discussed. All panel participants had experienced this loss of funding and they focused on the identification of poverty in rural areas. According to the panel, census poverty is a faulty measure for school districts, especially in counties where there is more than one district in a county.

Other issues that were raised in the question-and-answer period ranged from the disconnect between federal mandates and funding, to overcoming retention issues for teachers, to measuring student achievement. The briefing ended with a discussion of best practices for rural school improvement. Overall, the panel offered congressional staff an opportunity to learn directly from educators in rural America. AASA hopes that the conversation that occurred will positively influence the debate on ESEA reauthorization and the law’s impact on rural schools.