



FORWARD

F A R M B U R E A U®

CONFRONTING THE ISSUES

Rural Schools AFBF Policy Development May 2008

Issue: The “No Child Left Behind Act of 2001” (NCLBA) is expected to be up for reauthorization in 2009. A discussion of what needs to be changed will focus AFBF efforts on lobbying for the specific needs of rural schools.

Background: In 1965 Congress passed the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA), establishing four titles to provide funds for public school districts, school libraries, supplemental services, research, and state departments of education. NCLBA is the latest reauthorization of ESEA.

School districts are dependent on local property tax revenues. Rural property owners pay a higher tax rate than Americans in more densely populated areas. This does not translate into more money available to rural school districts (RSDs), making them more dependent on federal dollars than urban and suburban districts.

Current funding formulas used in Title I of the NCLBA penalize small RSDs. The formulas favor districts with high poverty rates and explicitly targets schools with larger enrollments. While salaries of staff and cost of facilities, transportation and food service vary across the country, the difference is not so great that RSDs are able to afford the same level of service as their urban/suburban counterparts.

The NCLBA’s goal to ensure all students receive an adequate education is worthy, but the requirements are often logistically difficult and prohibitively expensive for RSDs to achieve the goal. The Act’s one-size-fits-all requirements do not address the varied challenges faced by the country’s diverse rural areas.

The NCLBA includes provisions for academic content standards and yearly academic assessments with which RSDs have difficulty complying. The Government Accountability Office finds economically disadvantaged students in rural areas often lack the resources at home or in their communities (such as libraries) to achieve academic success. These students need more time and resources at school than other students in order to meet the prescribed proficiency standards. The result is additional expenses to the school district.

The Act mandates states develop an Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) system to track student assessment scores and determine the adequacy of schools. Progress or regression is determined by comparing scores between years. Schools receiving Title 1 funds and not making adequate progress are required to provide supplemental educational services. Small schools are often misidentified (positively or negatively) because of statistical unreliability caused by class size fluctuations that have nothing to do with the quality of instruction in the schools.

Like urban and suburban school districts, RSDs serve students who require special education services and, increasingly, students for whom English is a second language. The test scores of these students are used to calculate a school’s AYP. To achieve a positive AYP the school district must invest in additional staff and services to insure acceptable assessment scores for these students.

Rural Schools (continued)

It is often more difficult to recruit qualified teachers to rural areas than to urban/suburban areas. RSDs face huge obstacles meeting the NCLBA's highly qualified teacher (HQT) requirements that teachers be licensed or certified and meet state requirements designed to demonstrate competency in the subject they teach. Teachers in rural areas are often required to teach multiple subjects and have little access to professional development programs to help them meet the HQT requirements for their assigned subjects. Often programs that are available are a great distance from the RSD, which may or may not have adequate Internet service.

The U.S. Department of Education has faced criticism for not providing adequate funds for implementing the NCLBA, resulting in unfunded mandates to the nation's schools. These unfunded mandates make it even more difficult for RSDs to meet the requirements of the NCLBA leading to RSDs losing needed federal dollars.

Questions:

What role should the federal government have in determining education policy and priorities?

What are the most significant challenges faced by rural schools?

How should the federal government assist rural schools in overcoming those challenges in light of the unique nature of each rural area of the nation?

What changes are needed in the No Child Left Behind Act to accommodate the unique challenges faced by rural schools?

Farm Bureau Policy:

Policy 112 - States' Rights

Lines 12-14: We oppose federal legislation which mandates programs unless federal funding for such programs is provided on a continuing basis through existing state and local agencies.

Policy 149 - Education

Lines 1-4: We believe that educational policy is primarily a local and state issue. Reforms to improve educational quality can best be formulated at these levels of government. We support less federal control and more local control of our schools.

Lines 5-8: We oppose unfunded mandates. We oppose national mandates on local curricula and school boards. The No Child Left Behind program should be reviewed due to the vast implications of the program on children, family and school systems.