

Section 5005 Report on Rural Education

Preliminary Report

December 2017

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Introduction

On December 10, 2015, the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) (P.L. 114-95) became law. ESSA primarily reauthorizes the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965 (ESEA), but includes other provisions as well. Among these, Section 5005 requires the U.S. Department of Education (the Department) to:

“review the organization, structure, and process and procedures of the Department of Education for administering its programs and developing policy and regulations, in order to—

“(A) assess the methods and manner through which, and the extent to which, the Department of Education takes into account, considers input from, and addresses the unique needs and characteristics of rural schools and rural local educational agencies; and

“(B) determine actions that the Department of Education can take to meaningfully increase the consideration and participation of rural schools and rural local educational agencies in the development and execution of the processes, procedures, policies, and regulations of the Department of Education.”

Section 5005 also requires the Department to publish a preliminary report containing the information described above and provide Congress and the public with 60 days to comment on the proposed actions. Thereafter, the Department must issue a final report to the Department’s authorizing committees in the U.S. House of Representatives and Senate and carry out each action described in the final report or explain to the authorizing committees the reason for not carrying out any action described in the final report. (See Appendix A for the full text of Section 5005.)

This report constitutes the preliminary report described above. Please note that we have also published a Request for Information in the Federal Register in which we describe this report as well as the specific areas on which we seek comment. We are taking public comment through February 18, 2018 via the following email address: Rural@ed.gov and through the Federal eRulemaking Portal at Regulations.gov. Information on using Regulations.gov, including instructions for accessing agency documents, submitting comments, and viewing the docket, is available on the site under the “Help” tab. Please note that all comments received, including those submitted via the Rural@ed.gov email address, will be public.

After February 18, 2018, we will review and consider the comments submitted in the development of the final report. While we invite comment on the whole report, we particularly encourage comment on the proposed actions, as described in the section of this report titled “Additional Actions the Department Can Take to Increase Rural Stakeholder Input,” which begins on page 15.

The Department's Self-Assessment

The Department's Organization, Structure, Processes, and Procedures

The U.S. Department of Education is a cabinet-level Federal agency with no sub-agencies. The Department consists of 22 principal operating components (POCs) with five White House Initiatives housed within it. Of these POCs, the Office of Elementary and Secondary Education (OESE), the Office of English Language Acquisition (OELA), and the Office of Innovation and Improvement (OII) work almost exclusively in preschool, elementary, and secondary education (PK-12).

The Office of Special Education and Rehabilitative Services (OSERS) houses the Rehabilitation Services Administration (RSA), which primarily assists States in providing vocational rehabilitation and other services to maximize employment for individuals with disabilities, and the Office of Special Education Programs (OSEP), which assists States in providing early intervention services and special education and related services to children with disabilities from birth through age 21.

The Office of Career, Technical, and Adult Education (OCTAE) administers programs, including programs serving local educational agencies (LEAs), that are related to adult education and literacy, career and technical education, and community colleges. While the Office of Postsecondary Education (OPE) is primarily concerned with postsecondary institutions, it also administers training programs for PK-12 teachers and programs designed to increase the number of low-income students who are prepared to enter and succeed in postsecondary education.

Several POCs serve in management, coordination, support, research, and investigation functions, including the Office of the Secretary (OS), the Office of the Deputy Secretary (ODS), the Office of the General Counsel (OGC), the Office of Legislation and Congressional Affairs (OLCA), the Office of Communications and Outreach (OCO), the Office of the Chief Information Officer (OCIO), the Office of the Chief Financial Officer (OCFO), the Office of Educational Technology (OET), the Office of the Under Secretary (OUS), the Office for Civil Rights (OCR), the Office of the Inspector General (OIG), the Office of Management (OM), the Office of Planning, Evaluation and Policy Development (OPEPD), and the Institute of Education Sciences (IES). Federal Student Aid (FSA) administers the federal student financial assistance programs. The Department also has cross-POC teams and groups, including a group that advances the use of evidence-based interventions in competitive grant programs and helps coordinate the planning of program evaluations, a team that is responsible for agency-wide data governance and data management, and a working group on early learning.

Most of the Department's PK-12 funding is awarded to States based on statutory formulas that incorporate data from such sources as the Census Bureau of the Department of Commerce and the Department's National Center for Education Statistics (NCES). For these programs, in general, States then subgrant most of the funding to LEAs.

Competitive grants constitute a smaller portion of the Department’s funding. Less than 10 percent of the Department’s elementary and secondary education funding is awarded competitively. The processes described below for these programs may vary for individual grant programs and for certain types of grants. The processes for research and research training grant competitions, for instance, differ from those described in this section.

Generally, requirements for the Department’s competitive grant programs, including eligibility criteria and programmatic priorities, are established by Congress through legislation. Priorities may give preference to, for example, projects that would serve high-need schools or projects that incorporate evidence-based practices. The Department also may establish its own priorities, which are typically developed through a rulemaking process that includes a period in which we solicit public comment. At the conclusion of this process, the POC administering the grant program will issue a Notice of Final Priorities (NFP) in the Federal Register, containing the priorities developed during the rulemaking process. In consultation with other POCs, the lead POC will then publish in the Federal Register a Notice Inviting Applications (NIA). The NIA describes the program, eligibility criteria, funding availability, and application requirements, including the application deadline.

The office administering a program may provide technical assistance (TA) to aid applicants applying for the grant. This may include training applicants on using the systems to submit the application, preparing the application, obtaining the required information, and other areas. Offices may also contact potential applicants, both directly and indirectly, to notify them of the existence of the grant competition. For each grant competition, the Department selects “peer reviewers,” also known as “field readers,” who are usually individuals not employed by the Federal Government but who are experts or practitioners in the relevant field. Peer reviewers evaluate applications using criteria that are typically established by statute or regulation. A competition may also give priority to certain applicants based on the priorities established in statute or included in the grant’s NFP.

Whether funds are allocated by formula or through a competition, after the Department awards grants, program office staff provide TA and carry out monitoring activities, working with grantees to implement their approved projects. At times, the Department may enter into contracts and cooperative agreements to supply supplemental TA to grantees. TA is also provided through dedicated Department programs such as the Comprehensive Centers.

The National Center for Education Evaluation and Regional Assistance (NCEE) within IES also conducts evaluations, mostly through contracts, of programs and crosscutting topics. One division within NCEE oversees many of these evaluations, but the Regional Educational Laboratories (RELs) within NCEE also conduct and disseminate evaluation studies and other types of studies on topics identified by State and local education stakeholders.

To implement the statutory provisions governing its programs, the Department sometimes issues regulations. To issue regulations, the Department must undertake a rulemaking process. Typically, this consists of the Department issuing a notice of proposed rulemaking in the Federal Register, considering and incorporating comments from stakeholders and the public in general, and publishing final regulations in the Federal Register. At times, we develop regulations through negotiated rulemaking, in which the Department engages with a committee of diverse

stakeholders who consider and discuss issues for the purpose of reaching consensus in the development of a proposed rule. In addition to rulemaking for both formula and competitive programs, the Department sometimes issues guidance related to particular programs, topics, or legal provisions. Regulations, however they are developed, carry the force of law. Guidance, on the other hand, is non-binding and does not create or impose new legal requirements.

The Department's Efforts to Solicit and Incorporate Input From and Address the Unique Needs of Rural LEAs

The Department recognizes the importance of the issues facing rural schools. Virtually every aspect of the Department's work – including PK-12 education, higher education, special education, career and technical education, adult education, English learners, research, innovation, and educational technology – touches rural communities.

In 2016, the Department began a self-assessment designed to evaluate its efforts with respect to rural schools and LEAs. The self-assessment involved analyzing the manner and extent to which the Department includes input from rural stakeholders, schools, and LEAs in the decision-making process and steps the Department takes to address the needs of rural schools.

This self-assessment involved an analysis of each of the POCs within the Department that are involved in rural education and the actions and methods each of them uses to take into account the circumstances of rural schools and LEAs. It also included outreach to rural stakeholders designed to determine the main issues facing rural schools and LEAs; to gauge the Department's efforts to solicit and incorporate input to address the needs of rural stakeholders, schools, and LEAs; and to gather ideas for ways the Department can enhance how it solicits and incorporates input from rural stakeholders.

Soliciting Input

As part of the self-assessment, in 2016 the Department began a series of listening sessions. These listening sessions built on ongoing efforts of the Department and its POCs to engage rural stakeholders and to address the unique needs and challenges of rural schools and LEAs. Rural stakeholder listening sessions resumed after the transition to the new Administration and have continued into the current year. Since the beginning of 2016, the Department has held dozens of listening sessions across the country, engaging hundreds of rural stakeholders.

Often these sessions occurred in the stakeholders' own schools and communities. But listening sessions have also been conducted via conference call, in virtual meetings, and in the Department's Washington, D.C., offices. (Appendix B contains a list of some of the listening session dates and locations.)

The various listening sessions inform discussions about Department programs, policy, procedures, processes, and regulations to ensure that the needs of rural stakeholders, communities, schools, and LEAs are meaningfully considered. The sessions also inform recommendations for steps the Department can take to increase the consideration and participation of rural stakeholders in these areas outlined later in this report.

In addition to the listening sessions, the Secretary and senior staff regularly meet with stakeholders to discuss relevant issues and ensure that policy decisions are informed by stakeholder concerns. Frequently these stakeholders represent rural communities, schools, and LEAs. In one example, the Secretary launched her Rethink School Tour by visiting rural schools

in Wyoming. During the visits, she conducted listening sessions with teachers, administrators, parents, students, and other stakeholders. In another example, the Secretary and Acting Under Secretary held a listening session with members of the Rural Community College Alliance in the Department's Washington, D.C., offices.

Department staff frequently engage with rural stakeholders using multiple media – in-person, over the phone, and virtually. They host convenings and webinars covering issues relevant to rural LEAs. Staff regularly attend conferences of organizations involved in rural education and host roundtable discussions with rural stakeholders. Roundtables are conducted both at rural sites and virtually. In addition, Department staff frequently host rural stakeholders who are attending conferences in or visiting the Washington, D.C., area.

The School Ambassador Fellowship (SAF) program brings a cadre of outstanding teachers, counselors, and principals into the Department to contribute their education expertise and experience to the national education dialogue and in turn facilitate discussions with educators across the country. In almost every year of the program, one or more of the School Ambassador Fellows have been from rural schools, and the Department has benefited from their unique perspectives.

The Department also conducts significant research on rural issues. Thirteen of the research partnerships in the current (2017-2022) contracts of the RELs that are part of IES are dedicated specifically to providing technical assistance and original research to States and districts on issues affecting rural schools. This research is also of benefit to POCs. The law requires that at least 25 percent of the aggregate funding for the 10 RELs be dedicated to rural issues.

The Department has used listening sessions, outreach and engagement, research, and its internal self-assessment to collect input that has informed policy decisions and helped in the development of recommendations for actions to increase the consideration and participation of rural stakeholders in the Department's decision-making process.

The State of Rural Education and Its Challenges

The Department's listening sessions highlighted the unique challenges facing rural schools, LEAs, and communities. This work confirmed many issues of which the Department was already aware but also provided valuable insight into other areas of concern among rural stakeholders.

According to NCES, 28 percent of public elementary and secondary schools are in rural areas, serving 18 percent of the Nation's students enrolled in public elementary and secondary schools.¹

While rural students perform well on some measures compared to their peers in other locales, other measures indicate rural areas may be falling behind. Rural fourth- and eighth-grade students outperformed their counterparts in cities and towns on NCES's 2015 National

¹ Public elementary and secondary school enrollment, number of schools, and other selected characteristics, by locale: Fall 2011 through fall 2014, https://nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/d16/tables/dt16_214.40.asp.

Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) in Mathematics, Reading, and Science. However, there was no significant difference between rural students' performance and those of their peers in cities and towns on the 12th-grade assessments in Mathematics and Reading. Rural student performance on the NAEP in the fourth and eighth grades trailed that of suburban students in Math and Reading, with no significant difference between rural and suburban students on the fourth- and eighth-grade Science Assessment.²

The percentage of rural adults 25 and over who have graduated from high school is roughly equal to the national average and exceeds those of city and town adults. Yet the percentage of adults in cities and towns who have earned a Bachelor's degree or higher exceeds the percentage of rural adults with this level of education by more than 10 percentage points.³

While rural LEAs face many of the same obstacles confronting urban districts (such as high rates of childhood poverty, difficulty recruiting and retaining effective teachers and administrators, and limited access to quality health care), these frequently can be exacerbated by the remoteness and small size of rural districts.

Rural schools and LEAs often see themselves at a distinct disadvantage compared to their urban and suburban counterparts during grant competitions. While many large districts may have dedicated grant-writing staff, many rural districts (due to small staff and frequent turnover) lack personnel with the knowledge and experience to complete complex grant applications.

In addition, more often than their counterparts in other locales, rural districts lack access to reliable broadband Internet access, causing additional difficulties in applying for grants, providing classroom instruction, and administering programs. Even in those areas where connectivity for the schools themselves is not an issue, schools are often the only locations where students are able to get online, making completion of assignments and research more difficult.

Some of the other difficulties typically unique to rural areas include transportation challenges resulting from longer distances between students' homes and their schools; fewer career options and apprenticeship opportunities for students; the inability to attract, train, and retain teachers and principals in communities with fewer amenities and activities than urban and suburban areas; a tax base more susceptible to fluctuations caused by changes in local and regional economic conditions; and an inability to offer the advanced coursework that better prepares students for college and careers.

Adding to these challenges is the reality that each rural community is distinct. There are vast contrasts between rural communities in different States, and even within States. Communities in Appalachian West Virginia are very different from those in the Nevada desert. Circumstances in the mountains of western Colorado vary greatly from those in the plains of the eastern part of the State. Some rural communities are among the poorest in the Nation while others lack sufficient

² Data generated using NAEP Data Explorer, <https://nces.ed.gov/nationsreportcard/naepdata/>.

³ Percentage distribution of adults age 25 and over, by highest level of educational attainment, age group, and 4-category locale: 2015, <https://nces.ed.gov/surveys/ruraled/tables/b.3.c.-1.asp>.

workers to fill the available jobs. Rural communities occupy every point on the boom-and-bust cycle. “Rural” is not a monolith but a compilation of thousands of unique communities and circumstances.

Incorporating Input

As we discuss in greater detail below, even before completing the self-assessment, the Department took steps to increase the consideration and participation of rural stakeholders in the Department’s decision-making process.

During a recent reorganization, the Department created the Office of Rural and Community Engagement (ORCE) within OCO. This office focuses on expanding interaction and engagement with rural LEAs, schools, and communities. ORCE supports the Department’s efforts to ensure greater internal and external awareness of rural education needs and contributes to the internal deliberations on policy development, communications, and technical assistance that impact rural education. Members of ORCE organized, scheduled, and participated in a number of the listening sessions with rural stakeholders.

IES’ National Center for Education Research (NCER) issued a request for applications for FY 2018 funding to support a National Research and Development Center on Improving Rural Education (Rural Center). The mission of this Center will be to examine how to build the capacity of rural schools to use high-quality, scientific research to improve student educational outcomes.

The Secretary of Education is a member of the Task Force on Agriculture and Rural Prosperity, created by President Trump in Executive Order 13790. The purpose of the Task Force is to identify legislation, regulations, and other policy changes that can have a positive impact on the economy and quality of life in rural communities, with a focus on areas involving multiple agencies.

The Secretary also serves as vice-chair of the President’s Task Force on Apprenticeship Expansion, whose mission is to identify strategies and proposals to promote apprenticeships. The Department’s outreach to rural stakeholders revealed that workforce development and career readiness programs are an important focus for rural communities.

Addressing the Unique Needs

Department staff engage in efforts to help ensure that rural stakeholders, schools, and LEAs are considered in the development of the Department’s processes, procedures, policies, and regulations, and that rural LEAs and schools are aware of programs and grants that affect them. Efforts on behalf of rural LEAs and communities occur both within the Department and with other agencies.

Intra-Agency Efforts

In developing programs and policies, the Department values the input of rural stakeholders and gathers their input through a variety of strategies. The Department publishes information about grants, programs, and requests for public comment on regulations and other Department actions in the Federal Register. Relevant information is also posted on Department websites. The Department website contains a [Rural Education Resource Center](#) section.

In addition to publishing this information on websites and in the Federal Register, the Department regularly coordinates with rural stakeholders in the development of regulations and rulemaking, during notification and TA associated with grants, and in conjunction with other Department activities. For example, the IES research centers, NCER and the National Center for Special Education Research (NCSER), began a series of technical working group (TWG) meetings in 2012 to invite feedback from diverse stakeholder groups (such as practitioners, researchers, and policymakers) to increase the rigor and relevance of the research IES supports. On December 8, 2014, IES held a TWG meeting focused on Rural Education Research that included 10 experts in the field of rural education. The TWG provided input on research needs in this field and how research could be more relevant and useful to rural communities. The discussion at this meeting helped inform the FY 2018 Request for Applications for the Research and Development (R&D) Center on Improving Rural Education (the Rural Center mentioned in the previous section).

In addition to gathering input as it develops policies and programs, the Department employs a variety of methods to improve awareness, TA, and support for grants and programs that affect rural schools and LEAs. For example, the Department's Office of School Support and Rural Programs (SSRP) within OESE administers the Rural Education Achievement Program (REAP). REAP includes two separate grant programs focused on rural school districts – the Small, Rural School Achievement (SRSA) and Rural and Low-Income School (RLIS) programs. These constitute the Department's only grant programs specifically targeting rural schools and LEAs.

SSRP provides support and TA for rural SEAs and LEAs both during the REAP grant application submission process and after the grant awards are made. Outreach efforts by SSRP recognize the unique challenges and TA needs facing rural schools and LEAs. During 2015 and 2016, OPEPD and SSRP engaged in a comprehensive review and analysis of the procedures employed for administration of SRSA and RLIS. This review included communication with national rural organizations, Department offices, and SEA and LEA grantees. Additionally, SSRP funded a study by the Policy and Program Studies Service, within OPEPD, to examine State and district perspectives regarding REAP as of 2014–15 (prior to the passage of ESSA), including recommendations for improving program operations. The resulting report was titled [Study of Experiences and Needs of Rural Education Achievement Program Grantees](#). As a result of input received from various stakeholders and a review of formal research studies, the Department implemented improvements in several areas of the program – including targeted TA, revision of the REAP webpage, and adjustment of the annual grant timeline to allow more timely disbursement of funds.

The Department supplements TA provided by its offices with contracts to supply TA, including assistance in addressing application and implementation challenges, data collection, and performance reporting. The Comprehensive Centers Program helps increase SEA capacity to assist districts and schools, especially low-performing schools, to improve student achievement. The Department has established a number of rural school efforts through its Comprehensive Centers Program.

The Department is creating a Community of Practice (CoP) dedicated to addressing the needs of rural schools. This CoP will focus on differentiated support for rural school improvement, and the resources will focus on effective communication for stakeholder engagement in rural education as well as designing and launching sustainable rural collaboratives.

The Department recognizes that connectivity challenges exist in rural areas and, in addition to employing communication methods to work around these challenges, is also assisting rural schools and LEAs to find solutions. OET, for example, provides resources to inform rural schools and LEAs of methods of obtaining and implementing technology to enhance learning – such as case studies that help rural schools and LEAs identify technology best practices to fit their needs and that demonstrate effective strategies for rural and remote schools to leverage technology to benefit students. OET also recently published an update of the [Building Technology Infrastructure for Learning Guide](#), a roadmap for schools and districts looking to modernize the technology infrastructure needed for digital learning. This guide includes examples of Federal programs that rural schools can leverage to support school broadband connectivity and home Internet connectivity for students.

The Department strives to maximize its outreach to eligible entities. When OELA publishes the NIA for its Native American and Alaska Native Children in School (NAM) program, for instance, in addition to publishing in the Federal Register, OELA sends announcements to listservs, to current grantees, to collaborating agencies, to tribal organizations and governments, and through the National Clearinghouse for English Language Acquisition (NCELA) and OELA websites. OELA holds pre-application webinars for potential applicants; facilitates grantee initiated and monitored community of learning forums; conducts annual TA workshops with project directors; holds webinars on specific topics; and conducts training on grant management for grantees to build their capacities.

On an ongoing basis, the Department conducts outreach to State and local elected officials in rural areas, as well as organizations that represent officials involved in education, such as the Council of Chief State School Officers (CCSSO) and the School Superintendents' Association (AASA). Department staff also communicate with groups that represent rural education stakeholders not in elected office. POCs will also contact rural stakeholders directly as well as through governmental and non-governmental organizations. These organizations, which contain significant numbers of rural members even when their memberships are not exclusively rural, are frequently the best vehicles for contacting schools and LEAs among their membership. For example, when OII published the NIA for its Education Innovation and Research (EIR) program, program staff conducted extensive outreach to ensure that the field, including rural stakeholders, knew about this opportunity. OII notified the National Rural Education Association (NREA) and the Rural School and Community Trust of the competition and sent email blasts to their members announcing the competition. The program staff also sent notices directly to the NREA State and

regional representatives announcing the program and to an American Education Research Association interest group in rural education research. The program staff held two pre-application workshops in Washington, D.C., and posted all materials and a recording of one of the workshops on the EIR program website. Additionally, staff addressed applicant questions submitted by phone and email and regularly updated a robust frequently-asked-questions document throughout the application period.

Inter-Agency Coordination

The Department communicates and coordinates with other Federal agencies whose programs have an impact on rural education and schools, even when the focus of the programs is not exclusively rural. Examples include coordination with the Department of Agriculture, which operates the school lunch program, the Department of the Interior, which operates and funds schools through the Bureau of Indian Education, and the Department of Health and Human Services, with which we have developed strategies for recruiting and serving hard to reach populations.

The Department works with the Department of Labor in implementing the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA), which aims to improve collaboration among adult education, secondary education, vocational rehabilitation, and other workforce development programs administered by multiple Federal agencies. Additionally, the Department collaborated with the Department of Housing and Urban Development to develop the ConnectHome playbook. ConnectHome helps to increase access to broadband Internet for low-income households. The Department also collaborates with these and other agencies on rural-specific initiatives by sharing information about programs and upcoming events. In addition, the Department is a member of the Broadband Interagency Working Group and co-chairs the Broadband Research and Development Task Force. These groups work across agencies and programs to assist efforts to increase broadband access in both rural and non-rural communities.

(See Appendix C for more information on the Department's offices and the ways in which its programs have reached rural areas.)

Actions the Department Can Take to Increase Rural Stakeholder Input

Recent Actions the Department Has Taken to Increase Rural Stakeholder Input

Even before completing its review and analysis and in response to many of the concerns expressed at the listening sessions, the Department took a series of actions, outside of the outreach and engagement efforts described above, to increase rural stakeholder input. These actions, which began before the completion of this report, are designed to meaningfully increase the consideration and participation of rural schools and LEAs in the development and execution of the Department's processes, procedures, policies, and regulations.

Create the Office of Rural and Community Engagement. The Department created this unit, within OCO, to coordinate and expand the Department's outreach and communications with rural education stakeholders, parents, communities, and faith-based organizations plus other national, State, and local organizations representing the rural education constituency. ORCE collaborates with Department staff who operate programs with direct relevance to rural LEAs (REAP, Impact Aid, and other Department programs) to ensure effective dissemination of information and coordination with the rural education community. The ORCE team has conducted many of the listening sessions that have informed Department policy with respect to rural stakeholders, communities, schools, and LEAs.

Participate in the Interagency Task Force on Agriculture and Rural Prosperity. This Task Force was created by Executive Order 13790, issued by President Trump on April 25, 2017. The Secretary is a member of this Task Force, which is led by the Secretary of Agriculture and includes most cabinet-level officials as well as the heads of several other executive departments, agencies, and offices. The Department is represented on all four workgroups of the Task Force – Quality of Life; Innovation, Technology and Data; Rural Workforce; and Economic Development. The purpose of the Task Force is to identify legislation, regulations, and other policy changes that can have a positive impact on the economy and quality of life in rural communities, with the focus on areas involving multiple agencies. Identifying improvements to “strengthen and expand educational opportunities for students in rural communities, particularly in agricultural education, science, technology, engineering, and mathematics” is one of the stated goals of the Task Force. The Task Force will produce a list of recommendations to achieve the goals set forth in the Executive Order. Instructions given to members of the Task Force and its workgroups direct them to engage with rural stakeholders and consider the input from these stakeholders when evaluating issues, setting priorities, and making recommendations.

Serve as vice-chair of the President's Task Force on Apprenticeship Expansion. President Trump created this Task Force by Executive Order 13801 on June 15, 2017. The Secretary of Labor chairs the Task Force, with the Secretary of Education joined by the Secretary of Commerce as vice-chairs. The mission of this Task Force is to “identify strategies and proposals to promote apprenticeships, especially in sectors where apprenticeship programs are insufficient.” In the Department's listening sessions, rural stakeholders frequently identified skills development and workforce readiness programs as key areas of focus for rural communities.

Issue grant competition for the Improving Rural Education Center. The mission of this center, funded through IES as one of four National Research and Development Centers, will be to examine how to build the capacity of rural schools to use high-quality, scientific research to improve student education outcomes. The Rural Center will (1) conduct research on a major problem or issue in rural education that involves local stakeholders and relates to their needs; (2) develop and test a practical tool or strategy to support the conduct and use of research by school personnel in rural settings; and (3) develop a statistical or methodological procedure or product that will help rural education researchers strengthen their ability to produce accurate, reliable, and useful research.

Additional Actions the Department Can Take to Increase Rural Stakeholder Input

In addition to these recent actions, there are others the Department can take to meaningfully increase the consideration and participation of rural schools and rural LEAs in the development and execution of the processes, procedures, policies, and regulations of the Department.

Create a formal intra-agency rural workgroup within the Department. This group would be led by the ORCE and have representatives from all program offices that have rural initiatives. While each of the Department's offices employ a number of the methods described in this report to engage rural stakeholders, the use of the range of methods, both among offices and among various programs within the same office, has been inconsistent. The workgroup would assist the offices in developing outreach strategies to enhance the consideration of rural stakeholders in the development of Department policy and procedures as well as increasing the participation of rural schools and LEAs in relevant programs. The workgroup would assist in coordinating listening sessions with rural stakeholders, sharing best practices, identifying which methods of communication are most effective in reaching and involving rural stakeholders in different rural areas, and increasing the reach of information into rural communities. The offices involved in the workgroup would use these strategies to maximize awareness of programs and TA among rural schools and LEAs, identify methods of improving and simplifying the grant application process, improve technical assistance (including to areas without reliable Internet access), and identify other means of increasing the participation of rural stakeholders.

Continue and expand rural listening sessions. ORCE would continue to host listening sessions with diverse rural education stakeholders across the country. The sessions would be conducted virtually, by conference call, in rural schools and communities, and in conjunction with conferences and other events where rural stakeholders are present. The purpose of these sessions would be to invite input, comments, and recommendations about Department policies, processes, initiatives, and priorities. The listening sessions would also focus on specific issues that concern rural schools and LEAs. ORCE would also facilitate meetings to allow rural stakeholders to collaborate and share best practices on common issues as well as facilitate discussions between rural stakeholders and other units within the Department. These listening sessions would be part of an internal feedback loop with information gathered during the sessions synthesized and shared internally to assist the Department's offices in improving their efforts to include rural input.

Explore ways to simplify the grant application process. In keeping with the Department's efforts to simplify and streamline applications, this review would examine the Department's policies for processing applications to determine to what extent they can be simplified or made less onerous for applicants, including applicants from rural areas. Specific areas to address would include: how to ensure technical issues do not preclude applications from being accepted and reviewed (the Secretary's April 27, 2017, announcement related to page limits and formatting in grant applications is an example of these types of efforts), streamlining application requirements to make them less burdensome, ensuring that notices and application instructions are written in plain language, and improving guidance on complex and potentially confusing sections of applications.

Provide appropriate training to rural schools and LEAs. This would help ensure that rural applicants have the knowledge, skills, and abilities to apply for Department grants. TA would include development of presentations addressing the basics of applying for and receiving Department grants. For example, many potential applicants in rural schools and LEAs lack the capacity (staff size) to learn the processes required to apply for and use Department grant funds. Specific areas of training needs include completing competitive and formula grant applications using grants.gov, completing the requirements for the General Services Administration's System for Award Management, maintaining an active DUNS number, and accessing grant funding with the Department's "G5" system. The Department has already experienced success with this type of approach. Between January 2016 and June 2017, the SSRP conducted multiple webinars for hundreds of rural LEAs, with over 4,000 participants, focusing on the process of applying for a formula grant through grants.gov. This training was positively received and provided critical step-by-step instructions that grantees followed and resulted in their successful application submission.

Explore options for working with other Federal agencies and commissions. These partnerships would implement and build upon the upcoming recommendations of the Interagency Task Force on Agriculture and Rural Prosperity and the President's Task Force on Apprenticeship Expansion. Several Federal agencies (such as the Department of Agriculture, the Department of Health and Human Services, the Department of Labor, and the Department of the Interior) also have experience with the unique challenges and needs of schools and LEAs in rural areas. These collaborations could include models based on workgroups within the Task Forces as well as bi-agency and multi-agency groups based on specific recommendations and requirements.

Develop a comprehensive communication plan. The plan would be designed to expand awareness of the Department's grants and initiatives that are applicable to rural schools and LEAs. This plan could include enhancing the Department's rural webpage, newsletter, and other communication products. This communication plan would target schools and LEAs in rural areas. Many potential grantees in rural schools and LEAs are unfamiliar with grant opportunities, may not spend grant funds in a timely manner, and may be unaware of many of the Department's initiatives. Several issues contribute to this limited awareness, including limited staff capacity and frequent turnover of administrative staff. A comprehensive communication plan, using successful strategies that are currently employed by the Department, would assist rural schools and LEAs in overcoming these challenges.

Appendices

Appendix A – Section 5005 of the Every Student Succeeds Act, P.L. 114-95 (enacted December 10, 2015)

SEC. 5005. Review Relating to Rural Local Educational Agencies.

(a) Review and Report.--Not later than 18 months after the date of enactment of this Act, the Secretary of Education shall--

(1) review the organization, structure, and process and procedures of the Department of Education for administering its programs and developing policy and regulations, in order to--

(A) assess the methods and manner through which, and the extent to which, the Department of Education takes into account, considers input from, and addresses the unique needs and characteristics of rural schools and rural local educational agencies; and

(B) determine actions that the Department of Education can take to meaningfully increase the consideration and participation of rural schools and rural local educational agencies in the development and execution of the processes, procedures, policies, and regulations of the Department of Education;

(2) make public a preliminary report containing the information described in paragraph (1) and provide Congress and the public with 60 days to comment on the proposed actions described in paragraph (1)(B); and

(3) issue a final report to the Committee on Health, Education, Labor, and Pensions of the Senate, and the Committee on Education and the Workforce of the House of Representatives, which shall describe the final actions developed pursuant to paragraph (1)(B) after taking into account the comments submitted under paragraph (2).

(b) Implementation.--Not later than 2 years after the date of enactment of this Act, the Secretary of Education shall--

(1) carry out each action described in the report under subsection (a)(3); or

(2) in a case in which an action is not carried out, provide a written explanation to the Committee on Health, Education, Labor, and Pensions of the Senate and the Committee on Education and the Workforce of the House of Representatives of why the action was not carried out.

Appendix B – Sample of Listening Sessions

February 29, 2016
Virtual Session
Rural Investing in Innovation (i3) stakeholders

June 22, 2016
Appalachian Higher Education Network
Kingsport, TN

June 24, 2016
Texas Rural Education Association
Ft. Worth, TX

July 7, 2016
National rural education advocates
Washington, D.C.

July 11, 2016
New York Rural Schools Association
Cooperstown, NY

August 19, 2016
Virtual Session
Rural New York stakeholders

September 8, 2016
Virtual Sessions
(1) Rural Kentucky stakeholders &
(2) Rural Idaho stakeholders

Week of September 12, 2016
Virtual Sessions
(1) Rural Oregon stakeholders &
(2) Four corners region stakeholders

September 16, 2016
Virtual Session
Rural Ohio stakeholders

September 19, 2016
New Deal District educators and students
New Deal, TX

September 19, 2016
Olton High School educators and students
Olton, TX

September 19, 2016
Lubbock Christian University
Post-secondary educators, superintendents, educators, paraprofessionals, and parents
Lubbock, TX

September 20, 2016
Plainview Independent School District educators and students
Plainview, TX

September 21, 2016
Rural superintendents Region 17
Lubbock, TX

September 22, 2016
Texas Education Agency
Austin, TX

September 26, 2016
Indiana Small and Rural Schools Association
Indianapolis, IN

September 28, 2016
Arts in Education Conference
Arlington, VA

October 13, 2016
Rural Ohio student teachers
Columbus, OH

October 19-21, 2016
FFA National Convention
Indianapolis, IN

October, 2016
Virtual Listening Sessions
(1) Rural Alaska
(2) Rural Idaho
(3) Mississippi

April 20, 2017
Students, parents, teachers, administrators, and other stakeholders
Van Wert, OH

April 25, 2017
Mississippi State University faculty
Washington, DC

May 4, 2017
Conference call
National Rural Education Association
Washington, DC

June 28-29, 2017
Appalachian Higher Education Network
Daniels, WV

July 18, 2017
Rural Community College Alliance
Washington, DC

Appendix C – Department Offices and Programs of Relevance to Rural Schools and Rural Local Educational Agencies

The Department administers many programs that are particularly important for rural schools and LEAs. In each of these programs, the Department takes steps to specifically address issues unique to rural schools and LEAs. The following is a description of a sample of these programs organized by the Department offices that administer them. This is not meant to include all of the Department's work related to rural areas, but rather is meant to provide an overview of the Department's programs and offices that are most relevant to rural schools and students.

Office of Elementary and Secondary Education (OESE)

The Office of School Support and Rural Programs (SSRP)

SSRP within OESE administers two formula grant programs under the Rural Education Achievement Program for students attending small and rural LEAs across the country. The programs are the Rural Low-Income School (RLIS) program and the Small, Rural School Achievement (SRSA) program. The RLIS and SRSA grant programs were created to address the unique needs of rural schools and rural LEAs. LEAs receiving funds under these programs may use their awards to support a broad array of local activities to support student achievement.

- **RLIS.** Supports rural LEAs that serve large numbers of low-income students. The Department makes allocations to State educational agencies (SEAs), which in turn make sub-grants to eligible LEAs in their respective States. In FY 2016, 43 States awarded 1,942 RLIS sub-grants to eligible LEAs.
- **SRSA.** Supports very small rural LEAs (i.e., LEAs with an average daily attendance under 600 students). The Department awards SRSA grants directly to eligible LEAs. SRSA-eligible LEAs also qualify for a special fund-use authority (known as REAP-Flex) that allows them to use specific Federal formula funds to support local activities under an array of Federal programs in order to assist them in addressing local academic needs more effectively. In FY 2016, 4,251 LEAs received SRSA grants from the Department.

SSRP also operates the Comprehensive Centers Program. The Department awarded discretionary grants for 22 Comprehensive Centers to help increase SEA capacity to assist districts and schools, especially low-performing districts and schools, in meeting student achievement goals. By statute, the Department is required to establish at least one center in each of the 10 geographic regions served by the Department's regional education laboratories. The competition also established a number of specialty centers that focus on specific education issues. Grantees are required to develop five-year plans for carrying out authorized activities that address State and regional needs.

The Department has established a number of rural school efforts through its Comprehensive Centers Program. The Northwest Comprehensive Center developed NW RISE, a network for rural schools to collaborate, in conjunction with SEAs and Boston College. The North Central Comprehensive Center helps to support and improve rural LEAs' access to digital learning content as part of the Wyoming Digital Learning Plan, along with the University of Wyoming.

Office of State Support (OSS)

OSS administers Titles I, II, and III of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965 (ESEA), among several other programs. In general, these programs provide supplementary financial assistance to States and LEAs to enable them to improve the academic achievement of their elementary and secondary students.

Several programs administered by OSS have features that are of particular importance to rural LEAs.

- **Title I, Part A (Improving Basic Programs Operated by Local Educational Agencies).** Title I, Part A provides financial assistance to LEAs and schools with high numbers or high percentages of children from low-income families to help ensure that all children meet challenging State academic standards. The Title I, Part A statute and regulations permit an SEA to combine the allocations that the Department determined using Census poverty data under each of the four Title I formulas for LEAs with less than 20,000 total residents (“small LEAs”). Using an alternative source of poverty data approved by the Department to re-evaluate each small LEA’s eligibility for Title I, Part A funds under each formula, the SEA then redistributes funds under each formula among eligible small LEAs based on those alternative data. The Department approved the requests of eleven SEAs seeking to use alternative data for small LEAs.
- **Title III, Part A (English Language Acquisition, Language Enhancement, and Academic Achievement):** LEAs may apply to their SEA for Title III subgrants to serve English learners (ELs) in their LEAs. These subgrants are awarded to LEAs by formula based on the number of English learners in the LEA. Each subgrant must be at least \$10,000. Those LEAs with an insufficient number of ELs in their LEA to qualify for a subgrant, including rural LEAs, may apply to SEAs in consortium with other LEAs for a Title III subgrant.

Office of Impact Aid Programs (IAP)

IAP administers the grant programs in Title VII of the ESEA that are designed to assist LEAs with decreased property tax revenues due to the presence of non-taxable Federal land. Roughly 40% of the LEAs that receive Impact Aid grants are rural LEAs, many of which are educating children living on Indian lands.

The Impact Aid program administered by IAP has features that are of particular importance to rural LEAs.

- **Indian Lands** – LEAs that have students residing on Indian lands receive additional funding based on the number of such students. Many of these LEAs are rural.
- **Statutory Formula Provisions that May Aid Rural LEAs** – The Learning Opportunity Threshold (LOT) is a multiplier that advantages LEAs that have a high percentage of federally connected children – children of members of the uniformed services, children

who reside on Indian lands, children who reside on Federal property or in federally subsidized low-rent housing, and children whose parents work on Federal Property – and that have a high percentage of their annual expenditures funded by Impact Aid.

- **Construction Program** – Impact Aid has two grant programs – one formula and one discretionary – for construction-related expenses if qualifying LEAs meet the very specific eligibility criteria under either program.

Office of Indian Education

The Office of Indian Education administers the programs under Title VI, Part A of the ESEA (Indian Education). A significant percentage of Native American students residing on Tribal lands attend rural public schools or tribal schools located in very rural areas. The 1972 Indian Education Act was the landmark legislation establishing grant programs to provide a comprehensive approach to meeting the unique needs of American Indian and Alaska Native students. Current Title VI-A programs include the formula grants to LEAs and tribal schools, a competitive grant program for professional development to increase the number of Native American teachers in schools serving Native students; a competitive grant program for developing tribal educational agencies (STEP); a competitive demonstration grant program focused on community solutions to improve outcomes for native youth (Native Youth Community Projects), and a new competitive grant program for native language instruction (NAL@ED). In addition, the ESSA amendments to the ESEA established new requirements intended to improve communication and consultation between LEAs and Indian Tribes.

Office of Migrant Education (OME)

OME administers the Migrant Education Program (MEP), Title I, Part C of the ESEA. The MEP provides Federal funds allocated by formula to SEAs based on each State's per-pupil expenditure for education and the number of eligible migratory children, age 3 through 21, residing within the State.

States use MEP program funds to identify eligible children and provide education and support services. These services include: academic instruction; remedial and compensatory instruction; bilingual and multicultural instruction; vocational instruction; career education services; special guidance; counseling and testing services; health services; and preschool services.

Due to the nature of the type of work done by their families, migratory children are for the great majority of their educational career enrolled in and attending schools located in rural communities. The use of MEP program funds by State and local educational agencies should reflect joint planning among local, State, and Federal educational programs serving migratory children. MEP services are determined through a State-specific comprehensive needs assessment and should be integrated with services provided by other local, State, and Federal programs.

Office of Career, Technical, and Adult Education (OCTAE)

OCTAE administers and coordinates programs that are related to adult education and literacy, career and technical education, and community colleges. Several OCTAE efforts have features that are of particular importance to rural LEAs.

- **Adult Education and Family Literacy Act (AEFLA).** AEFLA is Title II of the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA), and is the primary Federal program that provides foundational skills below the postsecondary level and English literacy instruction for out-of-school youth, adults, and English learners. AEFLA authorizes a number of activities that are relevant for rural areas, such as supporting the use of technology for the improvement of teaching, learning, professional development, and productivity. AEFLA national leadership activities administered by OCTAE provide a variety of resources, activities, and professional development opportunities and training for adult education practitioners, such as the Literacy Information and Communication System (LINCS).
- **The Carl D. Perkins Career and Technical Education Act of 2006.** OCTAE administers this statute, which provides States and eligible subrecipients funding to provide career and technical education (CTE) to students in LEAs and postsecondary institutions, including those in rural LEAs. A provision in the Perkins legislation allows a State to use up to 10 percent of its available funding for eligible recipients as reserve funding that may be used in rural areas as a supplement to a Federal Perkins allocation.
- **Native American Career and Technical Education Program (NACTEP).** The NACTEP provides grants to improve CTE programs that benefit Native Americans and Alaska Natives, many of whom attend programs in rural areas.
- **Tribally Controlled Postsecondary Career and Technical Institutions Program (TCPCTIP).** The TCPCTIP provides discretionary grants to two tribally controlled postsecondary career and technical institutions that do not receive assistance under the Tribally Controlled Colleges and Universities Assistance Act or the Navajo Community College Act. The current TCPCTIP grantees are located in rural communities.

Office of Innovation and Improvement (OII)

OII supports educators across the country to develop, learn from, and scale new and effective approaches to serving our Nation's highest-need students. These teachers and school leaders, along with their partners in LEAs and nonprofit organizations are at the forefront of building the tools and strategies that enable all our students to succeed. Through partnerships with schools, LEAs, nonprofit organizations, and States, OII drives education innovation both by seeding new strategies, and by bringing proven approaches to scale.

Several OII programs have features that are of particular importance to rural LEAs:

Education Innovation and Research (EIR). The EIR program is the successor program to the Investing in Innovation (i3) program. EIR is focused on the creation, development, implementation, replication, or scaling of entrepreneurial, evidence-based, field-initiated innovations to improve student achievement and attainment for high-need students; and to rigorously evaluate those innovations. EIR held its first competition in FY 2017 and 36 percent of EIR funds went to applicants serving rural areas.

- **Promise Neighborhoods.** The Promise Neighborhoods program is newly authorized under ESSA 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 Department must use at least 15 percent of the available funds to award grants to eligible entities that propose to carry out the Promise Neighborhoods activities in rural areas, contingent on receipt of a sufficient number of applications of sufficient quality.
- **Teacher Quality Partnership (TQP) Program.** The TQP program aims to increase student achievement by improving the quality of teachers by enhancing the preparation of prospective teachers and the professional development activities for current teachers; holding teacher preparation programs at institutions of higher education (IHEs) accountable for preparing talented, certified or licensed and effective teachers; and recruiting effective individuals, including minorities and individuals from other occupations, into the teaching force. In the most recent TQP grant competition held in FY 2016, the competition included a competitive priority that addressed serving students in rural areas.
- **STEM Initiatives.** STEM learning teaches relevant, real-life skills that help develop problem-solving abilities. The STEM office has focused on lifting up and celebrating STEM programs in rural schools and colleges. In October of 2016, the STEM office hosted a STEM in Early Education Summit in Romney, West Virginia in a particular effort to reach rural early childhood educators in rural Appalachia.

Office of Postsecondary Education (OPE)

OPE works to strengthen the capacity of colleges and universities to promote reform, innovation and improvement in postsecondary education, promote and expand access to postsecondary education, increase college completion rates for America's students, and broaden global competencies that drive the economic success and competitiveness of our Nation. While the OPE programs are not structured to give a preference to rural populations, educational institutions from rural areas are not excluded from applying and are given the same consideration as other applicants in a given grant competition.

GEAR UP is a discretionary grant program designed to increase the number of low-income students who are prepared to enter and succeed in postsecondary education. GEAR UP provides six-year grants to States and partnerships to provide services at high-poverty middle and high schools. The discretionary funds provided through this program are not given solely to rural populations, but applicants from rural institutions are not excluded from applying. Under 20

U.S.C. § 1070a–22, the Department takes into consideration, to the extent practicable, the distribution of grant awards between urban and rural applicants.

Office of English Language Acquisition (OELA)

OELA provides national leadership to help ensure that ELs and immigrant students attain English proficiency and achieve academic success. In addition to preserving heritage languages and cultures, OELA is committed to promoting opportunities for biliteracy or multiliteracy skills for all students.

Native American and Alaska Native Children in School (NAM) is a grant program that provides funds for eligible entities to provide instructional services to Native ELs. While the NAM grant does not specifically target rural areas, most of the native communities are in rural areas and 70% of the 2016 grantees are located in rural areas.

Institute of Education Sciences (IES)

The work of IES is conducted through four centers. Each addresses the needs and characteristics of rural schools and rural LEAs.

The Institute’s authorizing legislation, the [Education Sciences Reform Act of 2002](#), includes specific requirements regarding rural education research, evaluation, and statistics. For example, the law requires that at least 25 percent of the aggregate funding for the 10 RELs be dedicated to rural issues. In addition, the research centers are charged with supporting at least eight national research and development centers at any given time, and one of the ten topics of research that these centers are to address is rural education. Finally, the statistics center is charged with collecting, analyzing, cross-tabulating, and reporting information by specific categories such as rural status when appropriate and useful.

The National Center for Education Evaluation and Regional Assistance (NCEE)

NCEE conducts objective large-scale evaluations of education programs and practices supported by Federal funds; provides research-based technical assistance to educators and policymakers; and supports the synthesis and the wide spread dissemination of the results of research and evaluation throughout the United States. NCEE’s 10 Regional Educational Laboratories (RELs) are charged with forming research-practice partnerships with LEAs, SEAs, and others to use data and research to improve academic outcomes for students. The law requires that at least 25 percent of the aggregate funding for the 10 RELs be dedicated to rural issues.

The vast majority of the RELs' work is driven by the research-practice partnerships. Under the current contracting cycle (2017-2022), the REL program has several research partnerships that are focused specifically on rural students, schools, and districts. RELs in the Appalachia, Central, Midwest, Northwest, Southeast, Southwest and West regions have established a total of 13 partnerships with research agendas concentrated on addressing rural needs: Kentucky Rural College Readiness Partnership (REL Appalachia); Rural Education Research Alliance (REL Central); Iowa Learning and Technology Networked Improvement Community and Midwest Career Readiness Research Alliance (REL Midwest); Alliance for American Indian/Alaska Native Success, Mountain West State Executives Dialogue Collaborative and Networked Rural Washington College Success Collaborative (REL Northwest); Florida Career Readiness and Improving Schools in Mississippi (REL Southeast); Oklahoma Rural Schools Research Alliance (REL Southwest); and Arizona Partnerships for Education and Career Success, California Rural Partnerships Alliance and Central Valley (CA) Rural Education & Health Alliance (REL West).

It is important to note that not all of the RELs' rural work is covered by these particular partnerships; other partnerships across all of the RELs also conduct specific research and technical assistance projects of interest to rural stakeholders. For example, many RELs have statewide studies and projects in States that are largely rural.

The Research Centers: the National Center for Education Research (NCER) and the National Center for Special Education Research (NCSEER)

NCER and NCSEER support field-initiated research through discretionary grant programs. Since 2002, the research centers have supported 25 research projects that are solely focused on rural schools and nearly 150 research projects that include both rural and non-rural schools. NCER supports some of this work through the Education Research Grants Program (CFDA 84.305A) and NCSEER supports this work through the Special Education Research Grants Program. Both programs support a wide range of studies designed to shed light on current problems in education and to develop and test interventions to improve student education outcomes, including those that address issues important to rural schools.

In FY 2018, NCER is requesting applications for a new Research & Development (R&D) Center on Improving Rural Education that will consider how to build the capacity of rural schools to use high-quality, scientific research to improve student outcomes, as envisioned by ESSA.

The National Center for Education Statistics (NCES)

NCES is the primary Federal entity for collecting and analyzing data related to education. NCES conducts a wide array of surveys designed to meet the needs of national, State, and local policy makers and education practitioners. Surveys are designed to be nationally representative and include important data for rural areas of the country, as well as for cities, suburbs, and towns. Major NCES reports typically feature data for rural areas, and NCES maintains a [rural education website](#) to highlight the most critical materials.

Office of Special Education and Rehabilitative Services (OSERS)

Office of Special Education Programs (OSEP)

OSEP is dedicated to improving results for infants, toddlers, children and youth with disabilities from birth through age 21 by providing leadership and financial support to assist States and, through them, LEAs, in making available a free appropriate public education (FAPE) to children with disabilities ages 3 through 21,⁴ and to assist early intervention service (EIS) programs in making available early intervention services to infants and toddlers with disabilities from birth through age two and their families.⁵ Each State must ensure that such services are made available in all geographic areas of the State, including rural areas. OSEP maintains a substantial network of [Technical Assistance and Dissemination](#) resources.

- **Community Parent Resource Centers (CPRCs).** CPRCs provide parent information and training services to parents of children with disabilities within a geographically defined community. As part of the Parent Center network, CPRCs collaborate with the Parent Training and Information Centers which are located in all States, the Freely Associated States, and the Outlying Areas, and which serve all families within their State. OSEP has awarded grants to nearly 30 CPRCs, several of which have rural communities in their service areas, including Mission Empower (Pennsylvania); Arkansas Support Network (Arkansas); Project Empower of Northwest Florida (Florida); Pervasive Parenting (Oklahoma); Family Network (North Carolina); Educating Parents of Indian Children with Special Needs (New Mexico); LINKS Mat-Su (Alaska); Children's Disability Information (Texas); Family Resource Center for Disabilities (South Carolina); Association for Special Children & Families (New Jersey); and Parent CAN (California).
- **State Personnel Development Grants (SPDGs).** SPDGs assist SEAs in reforming and improving their systems for personnel preparation and professional development in early intervention, educational and transitional services in order to improve results for children with disabilities. To achieve this purpose, the SPDGs must be used to improve systems of professional development, including training and technical assistance and/or dissemination of knowledge about best practices to improve results for infants and toddlers and children with disabilities.
- **Promoting Readiness of Minors in Supplemental Security Income (PROMISE).** PROMISE is a joint initiative of the Department, the U.S. Social Security Administration, the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, and the U.S. Department of Labor, to fund States to develop and implement model demonstration projects (MDPs) to promote positive outcomes for children who receive Supplemental Security Income (SSI) and their families. The purpose of this program is to improve the provision and coordination of services and supports for child SSI recipients and their families to enable

⁴ A child's entitlement to FAPE begins at a child's third birthday and could last to the child's 22nd birthday, depending on State law or practice.

⁵ At the State's discretion, EIS programs may make available early intervention services to infants and toddlers with disabilities from birth through age five and their families.

them to achieve improved outcomes, such as completing postsecondary education and job training to obtain competitive employment in an integrated setting that may result in long-term reductions in the child recipient's reliance on SSI. PROMISE grants were awarded through OSEP in FY 2013 to six MDPs, which included grants to five individual State projects (Arkansas, California, Maryland, New York, and Wisconsin) and one six-State consortium called ASPIRE (consisting of Utah, South Dakota, North Dakota, Montana, Colorado, and Arizona). Arkansas, Maryland, Wisconsin, and ASPIRE are serving eligible youth and families across all areas of their States, resulting in specific efforts to support rural families. ASPIRE reached out to American Indian tribal communities in their States, resulting in ASPIRE services being offered in 11 tribal communities.

Rehabilitation Services Administration (RSA)

RSA provides leadership and resources to assist State agencies in providing vocational rehabilitation (VR) and other services to individuals with disabilities to maximize opportunities for employment, independence, and integration into the community and the competitive labor market. RSA awards formula grants to States to serve eligible individuals with disabilities in their States, including in rural communities.

The Rehabilitation Act of 1973 also authorizes competitive grants to States, Indian tribes, institutions of higher education, and non-profit organizations to build and support the capacity of States, Indian tribes, and other service providers to provide VR services. Many of these grant-supported activities generate knowledge and provide services of interest and utility to professionals, families, and individuals with disabilities in rural communities. Among the authorized discretionary grant programs, two provide significant support to rural communities.

- **American Indian Vocational Rehabilitation Services (AIVRS).** The AIVRS program provides financial assistance to the governing bodies of Indian tribes located on Federal and State reservations (or consortia of such governing bodies) to provide a program of VR services, in a culturally relevant manner, to American Indians with disabilities residing on or near Federal or State reservations. All currently funded AIVRS projects are located in rural communities.
- **Vocational Rehabilitation Training Institute for the Preparation of Personnel in American Indian Vocational Rehabilitation Services Projects.** The Vocational Rehabilitation Training Institute for the Preparation of Personnel in American Indian Vocational Rehabilitation Services Projects (Institute) is funded through the Capacity Building Program for Traditionally Underserved Populations. The grantee is a tribal college – the Northwest Indian College – that has partnered with a four year institution of higher education – Western Washington University to form the Institute. The Institute provides a structured program of training in VR services to current personnel of the AIVRS projects to improve the delivery of VR services to American Indians with disabilities.

Office of Educational Technology (OET)

OET develops national educational technology policy and establishes the vision for how technology can be used to transform teaching and learning to make everywhere, all-the-time learning possible for early learners through K-12, higher education, and adult education.

OET resides in the Office of the Secretary of Education and works with other offices at the Department, the White House, and other Federal agencies on issues related to the effective use of technology to support teaching and learning. OET represents the Department on the Broadband Interagency Working Group, co-chairs the Broadband Research and Development Task Force, and collaborated with the Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) to develop a ConnectHome playbook.

[National Educational Technology Plan \(NETP\)](#). The NETP is the flagship educational technology policy document for the United States. The NETP is often used as a template for LEA and State educational technology plans. The NETP sets a national vision of equity, active use, and collaborative leadership to make ubiquitous learning possible. The plan consists of five separate sections—learning, teaching, leadership, assessment, and infrastructure—and the principles and examples in the document align with Title IV-A of the ESEA, as amended by ESSA. During the development of the NETP, over twenty focus groups with key stakeholders, including representatives from rural populations, were held to identify examples and get input and feedback on the recommendations included in the NETP.

Connecting 99% of American students to broadband by 2018. Providing high-speed Internet connectivity to schools is an essential element to creating 21st century learning opportunities. OET has been working toward the goal of connecting 99% of American students to next-generation broadband in their schools by 2018. Since 2013, an additional 20 million students have been connected to high-speed broadband in their classrooms and we are on track to connect 99 percent of students by 2018. Approximately 81% of schools now have access. This expansion of broadband access is transforming educational opportunities in rural America, underscoring the importance of ensuring high-speed access throughout our rural schools.

[Building Technology Infrastructure for Learning Guide](#). This K-12 school infrastructure guide provides practical, actionable information to help school and district leaders navigate the many decisions required to build a technology infrastructure that supports digital learning. The guide includes examples and information specifically targeted to rural stakeholders.

Office of Communications and Outreach (OCO)

Office of Rural and Community Engagement (ORCE)

ORCE is focused on outreach and communication with rural and tribal education stakeholders. ORCE acts as a two-way information conduit between the Department and these stakeholders. ORCE disseminates information about the Department, its initiatives, policies and programs with these stakeholders and also collects information from these stakeholders to notify the Department

about rural education issues. In addition, ORCE coordinates interactions between rural stakeholders and offices within the Department who can address issues and concerns involving rural education.

State and Local Engagement

The State and Local Engagement unit is responsible for targeted communication to key stakeholders, communities, and citizens at the State and local levels, many of which are in rural communities and/or involved with rural schools. Outreach services include a bi-weekly newsletter summarizing news and activities at the Department, regular conference calls with stakeholders, detailed briefing materials for the Secretary and other senior officials on the latest developments in education, and a speakers' bureau of surrogates for the Secretary who can meet with State and local groups and schools. The unit also administers the Department's four recognition programs: National Blue Ribbon Schools, U.S. Department of Education Green Ribbon Schools, U.S. Presidential Scholars, and the President's Education Awards Program.

Intergovernmental Affairs

Intergovernmental Affairs is responsible for outreach to State and local elected officials, including governors, Chief State School Officers, State Board of Education leaders, State legislators, county executives, mayors, city councilmembers, and local superintendents and school board members, as well as the organizations that represent them. While the primary focus of this office is not exclusively rural, each of the 50 States contains rural areas, so all State elected officials and many local elected officials are responsible for rural schools. The office's core function is to communicate information about the Department's policies, programs, and initiatives and build partnerships to improve education for all children by supporting educational excellence and equity.

Recognition Programs

The Recognition Programs unit plans and coordinates the Department's initiatives that recognize outstanding schools and students nationwide. The programs honor achievement as they facilitate communication and sharing of best practices within and among schools and the public. The programs include Blue Ribbon Schools, the Department's Green Ribbon Schools, Presidential Scholars, and the President's Education Awards Program. In managing these programs, team members coordinate with outside organizations such as the National Association of Elementary School Principals, the National Association of Secondary School Principals, and Middle School Principals Association, Chief State School Officers, as well as with other Federal agencies. Each year, a number of rural schools, teachers, and students are recognized for their exemplary achievements, outstanding student scholarship and innovative school leadership.

School Ambassador Fellows (SAF) Program

SAF supports the Department's mission by employing a cadre of outstanding teachers, counselors, and principals to contribute their education expertise and experience to the national education dialogue and, in turn, facilitate discussions with educators across the country. Fellows have the opportunity to gain greater knowledge of educational policy and leadership and contribute to solutions. Throughout the history of this program, rural teachers have been part of the final selection cadre and in almost every year one or more of the final SAF cohort have been from rural schools.