

National Rural Education Association

**Critical Issues in Rural Education  
Position Paper I**

*“No Child Left Behind”*

2004

## Sounding the Alarm: Critical Issues in Rural Education

In service to fellow citizens, Paul Revere rode from one small town to another to proclaim, “The British are coming, the British are coming.” His alarm served to warn the local residents that it was time to prepare to defend their communities. In service to its state-affiliates, the National Rural Education Association (NREA) believes current times call for sounding the alarm for local communities and their educators, as well as state policymakers, to become better informed and take action on behalf of rural children to ensure quality educational opportunities in rural America. Voices of those who care about the future of rural America must enter the fray over how federal education policies and regulations play out in rural schools and their communities.

Idealistic federal legislation that invokes excellence and fairness, such as the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act of 2001, may actually leave many rural communities behind as rural schools seeking to meet the federal mandates collide with state budget deficits of historical proportion. Closing or consolidating the small rural school in favor of economies of scale is an unacceptable, forced option, particularly in rural areas with declining populations.<sup>1</sup> Funding inequities are becoming pronounced, as rural schools that customarily rely heavily on state funds are subject to legislative cost-savings measures. School districts are marching to the courthouse door to seek relief from funding formulas that fail to provide adequate funds to address the regulatory school improvement agendas imposed on them by federal, and consequently, state policies and regulations.<sup>2</sup>

But successful challenges of state funding formulas for public education may be like winning the battle and loosing the war, as legislatures act to remedy court decisions

in ways that force school closures or consolidations.<sup>3</sup> Schools in communities with 2,500 citizens or less enroll at least 20% of the K-12 students in the country. If rural schools are calculated as those based in communities of 25,000 or less, then rural communities enroll one-third of the students in the country.<sup>4</sup> Wholesale tax reform may be necessary if, in fact, all students are to be provided adequate educational opportunities for an education as mandated by regulation that address specific areas of study in NCLB.

Meeting the 100% proficiency level mandate of NCLB appears far beyond the 2014 deadline. In his presidential address at the annual meeting of the American Educational Research Association, R. L. Linn points out the stark realities. If improvement in mathematics continues at the same pace as the last decade, we can expect to attain 100% proficiency in the fourth grade by 2056, in the eighth grade by 2060, and in the 12<sup>th</sup> grade by 2166. Linn notes that just getting 100% of the students to the basic level would be an enormous challenge.<sup>5</sup>

Some educators will argue 100% proficiency is an impossible challenge under NCLB. NCLB places an inordinate emphasis upon high stakes testing in core subject areas. One hundred percent proficiency, defined by test results that are translated into adequate yearly progress (AYP), assumes all children can and will learn at the same rate. This raises the bar to an extreme. Can all children learn to high jump six feet? No! Can all children learn to jump three feet? No! Can all children jump? No! Do all children have different skills and abilities? Yes!

Many executive directors of NREA state-affiliate organizations are finding themselves in the position of Paul Revere. Sounding the alarm about NCLB is striking a cord with local citizens who previously thought their local and state elected leaders

governed public education decision making. NCLB changes that focus to the federal level because US Department of Education regulations controlling NCLB tend to exceed the statutory provisions and legislative intent in NCLB. For example, some keen observers of the issues believe NCLB represents, “Accountability on the backs of rural children.”<sup>6</sup>

Other astute observers<sup>7</sup> proclaim NCLB has many “pitfalls” for rural schools and ultimately will leave rural children behind. On the other hand, in a national broadcast on National Public Radio, a high-level official in the U.S. Department of Education proclaimed the NCLB law provides flexibility in implementation for rural and remote schools that have unique circumstances.<sup>8</sup>

What appears clear is few citizens know the real issues and consequences of implementing NCLB. After reviewing results of the 35<sup>th</sup> PDK/Gallup Poll on public education, Lowell Rose, executive director emeritus of Phi Delta Kappa International, concludes the public is so uninformed about NCLB that they were unwilling to say whether they viewed it favorably or unfavorably. And responses to questions they were willing to answer indicate that as public familiarity with NCLB grows, the likely result will be disapproval.<sup>9</sup>

Rose maintains the problem is not the well intended goals of NCLB. Instead, it is the regulatory implementation strategies that are certain to work against the goals. Goals to improve student achievement and close the achievement gap are top priorities of NCLB. But results of the Gallup Poll have consistently indicated that reform should come through the existing public schools and that decisions affecting schools in the community should be made locally. NCLB does not meet either of these criteria. Rose

notes that specific NCLB regulatory implementation strategies rejected by respondents to this year's PDK/Gallup Poll include:

- using a fixed standard, instead of improvement, to judge a school;
- basing the judgment of a school on a single test administered annually; (high stakes testing)
- measuring a school's performance and student proficiency in English and math alone;
- emphasizing English and math to the possible detriment of other subjects;
- focusing on sanctions rather than on helping schools that need to improve;
- judging special needs students by the same standard used for all other students; and
- relying so heavily on standardized testing that it may produce unwise teaching to the test.

More acceptable strategies would be:

- utilize a comprehensive and objective accountability system to improve a school;
- de-emphasize high stakes testing, give state and local school districts flexibility in student testing to reflect the needs, attitudes, and values of each community;
- provide flexibility to meet proficiency strategies, otherwise, the strategies are regulations;
- focus on helping, not personalizing schools;
- accept the fact that special education students are in fact special; and
- avoid regulations that force teachers to teach to the test.

Rose notes that the gulf between the public's preferences and NCLB is so great that as the controversy grows, support to sustain it will be missing. Further, NCLB is widely regarded in the education community as a scheme to replace the public schools

with a regulatory system fueled by penalties, vouchers, and focusing on private entrepreneurs. A failed NCLB will be no cause for celebration, according to Rose, but it will mean that a golden opportunity to address stark inequities, such as achievements gaps, has been lost.

Is NCLB questionable? Yes! It is questionable because implementation of NCLB has become too regulatory as opposed to an initiative oriented implementation strategy.

### **NREA Leadership and State-Affiliate Action**

Bob Mooneyham, executive director of the National Rural Education Association believes NCLB may be the best thing that has happened in recent years to rally a voice for rural schools and their communities. Like most of the directors of state NREA affiliate organizations, Mooneyham believes unless policymakers and technical assistance providers become more knowledgeable about the context of educating students in rural communities, much of NCLB will force rural schools to once again fit into urban models of schooling—including forced consolidation of small rural schools.

NREA has promoted a list of organizational positions on NCLB and other issues important to rural education.<sup>10</sup> Unlike past major reform efforts in public education, rural schools and their communities find themselves in the limelight of the controversy over implementing NCLB and other federal-supported programs (e.g., IDEA, Carl Perkins Career and Technical Education Act) which NCLB is likely to impact in the spirit and intent of upcoming reauthorizations. In April, 2003, a meeting of executive directors of NREA state-affiliate organizations and NREA leadership resulted in a call for better informing rural educators and citizens about the critical issues surrounding

implementation of NCLB and the pending reauthorization of select federal programs.

One outcome of the meeting was the request for a paper on issues related to implementing NCLB, IDEA, education funding, and school consolidation.

NREA leadership commissioned Dr. Hobart Harmon; an independent consultant and frequent writer on issues in rural education, to assist the NREA in drafting the paper. Dr. Harmon, with support of a panel of NREA state-affiliate executive directors, conducted a survey of all 24 state-affiliate organizations (see Appendix A). The executive director of each organization was asked to complete a survey comprised of 54 issues found to be related particularly to implementing NCLB.<sup>11</sup>

### **Critical Issues Perceived by Executive Directors**

Twenty-three of the 24 executive directors completed the survey (95.8% response rate). Table 1 shows the 23 states represented by the NREA state-affiliate organizations.

Table 1. States Represented by Executive Directors' Response to Survey

State	State	State
Arizona	Minnesota	Oklahoma
Arkansas	Missouri	Oregon
Idaho	Montana	Pennsylvania
Illinois	Nebraska	Texas
Indiana	Nevada	Utah
Kansas	New Mexico	Virginia
Louisiana	New York	Washington
Michigan	North Dakota	

## Concern Ratings of Executive Directors

Executive directors rated their perceived degree of concern for the issue regarding implementation in their state. For each rating of 5 or higher, the executive director also was asked to indicate reasons for the concern. The rating scale for degree of concern was as follows:

0 = no concern, perceived not an implementation issue in my state

1-2 = not too much of an issue, easily addressed by 75% or more of rural schools in state

3-4 = a fair amount of concern, with more than half of schools able to address concern

5-6 = quite a bit of concern, with 50% or less of schools able to address concern

7-8 = much concern with less than 25% of schools able to address the concern

9-10 = exceptional concern, with 10% or fewer of schools able to address the concern

Of the 54 issues, 47 or 87% received a mean score concern rating of 5.0 or higher. Table 2 reveals the top ten issues of concern based on a mean (average) rating of all executive directors responding to the issue.

The executive directors rated all issues on the survey pertaining to state versus federal decision making among the top ten issues of greatest concern. The issue, “State, not federal government, should decide school choice,” was tied for the number one ranking with the issue concerning, “40% funding of IDEA inadequate.” “State, not federal government,” was a concern for issues related to making decisions about setting standards, determining the curriculum, and defining a highly qualified teacher.

Other top ten concern ratings related to issues of time expected for a school to meet mandated performance levels, the hiring of highly qualified teachers, requirements for paraprofessionals, and the potential devastating effects that a negative adequate yearly

progress (AYP) announcement could have on rural schools and districts. Based on the rating scale, it is noteworthy that a mean concern rating of between 7 and 8 for each of the top ten issues reveals the executive directors perceived less than 25% of schools in their state would be able to address the concern.

Table 2. Top Ten Issues with Highest Rated Concern by Executive Directors

Rank	Issue	No.	Mean Rating	S.D.
1	State, not federal government, should decide school choice	23	7.96	2.64
1	40% funding of IDEA inadequate	23	7.96	2.51
3	Time period expected for school to meet expected performance level	23	7.87	1.94
4	Must have “highly qualified” teachers in all classrooms	23	7.74	2.47
5	State, not federal government, should set standards of educational achievement	22	7.64	2.70
6	State, not federal government, should determine curriculum emphasis	23	7.57	2.83
7	Pool of highly-qualified teachers almost nonexistent in isolated schools	23	7.52	2.33
8	Potential devastating effects of AYP announcements to school/district	23	7.48	3.03
9	State, not federal government, should define highly qualified teacher	22	7.45	2.67
10	Paraprofessional requirements make hiring new personnel difficult	22	7.23	2.22

The ranking of the ten issues reflects NCLB’s “cookie cutter” approach to public education is not acceptable to many educators. NCLB expects all children to learn at the same rate and level, adequate yearly progress (AYP). Likewise, it assumes all teachers and all paraprofessionals in rural areas have the same, convenient access to educational opportunities and training resources as do their urban and suburban cousins.

What is the penalty for teachers and paraprofessionals if the school district does not meet NCLB regulatory standard? Termination, if a school district does not meet NCLB regulations in five years! Should the federal government be involved at the local level in the termination of school employees? If so, due process laws for teachers and paraprofessionals will have to be re-written in every state.

Table 3 in Appendix B shows the number of executive directors rating the issue, along with the mean (average) concern rating and standard deviation for all 54 issues on the survey. Only seven issues received a mean concern rating of less than 5.0 (see Table 4).

Table 4. Issues with Average Executive Directors Concern Rating of Below 5.0

Survey Item No. and Issue Statement	Rank	No.	Mean	SD
36. Numerous changes in local school board policy necessary	48	23	4.74	2.80
42. Small rural schools have limited access to distance learning technology	49	23	4.74	2.63
49. Use IDEA funds for early intervention	50	23	4.61	2.73
14. Protection of student identity in reporting annual yearly progress	51	23	4.09	3.07
25. Hiring “highly-qualified” teachers affects collective bargaining contract	52	23	3.78	2.97
47. Inclusion of the student in IEP meetings	53	23	3.65	2.23
28. State budget cuts forcing district to go to 4-day week schedule	54	23	3.30	2.80

## Reasons for Concern

Each state executive director providing a rating of 5.0 or higher also was asked to indicate the reason(s) for the concern from a list including parent/community support, funds, time, staff expertise, practical, and other. Definitions for the reasons were as follows:

P/C Support = inadequate parent and community support in favor of issue

Funds = inadequate funds currently available to address issue

Time = more time needed to adequately address issue

Staff = no staff person with expertise to address issue

Practical = issue or recommendation simply not practical in rural area

Other = any other reason for having a concern rating of 5 or above

Table 5 reveals the major reason or reasons indicated by the executive directors for the top ten issues with average concern ratings of 5.0 or higher.

Table 5. Major Reason(s) for Top Ten Rated Issues

Rank	Issue	Major Reason(s)
1	State, not federal government, should decide school choice	Twelve (52%) of 22 ex. directors indicated the issue or recommendation simply not practical in rural area.
1	40% funding of IDEA inadequate	Sixteen (70%) of 23 ex. dirs. indicated inadequate funds currently available to address issue.
3	Time period expected for school to meet expected performance level	Thirteen (57%) of the 23 ex. dirs. indicated issue or recommendation simply not practical in rural area. Almost half also indicated more time needed to adequately address issue (48%) and no staff person with expertise to address issue (48%).
4	Must have "highly qualified" teachers in all classrooms	Thirteen (57%) of the 23 ex. dirs. indicated inadequate funds currently available to address issue. Eleven (48%) also indicated no staff person with expertise to address issue and eleven (48%) indicated the issue

		or recommendation simply not practical in rural area (48%).
5	State, not federal government, should set standards of educational achievement	Nine (41%) of the 22 ex. dirs. responding indicated issue or recommendation simply not practical in rural area.
6	State, not federal government, should determine curriculum emphasis	Twelve (52%) of the 23 ex. dirs. indicated issue or recommendation simply not practical in rural area.
7	Pool of highly-qualified teachers almost nonexistent in isolated schools	Twelve (52%) of the 23 ex. dirs. indicated no staff person with expertise to address issue. Ten (44%) ex. dirs. also indicated issue or recommendation simply not practical in rural area.
8	Potential devastating effects to school/district of AYP announcements	Twelve (52%) of the 23 ex. dirs. indicated issue or recommendation simply not practical in rural area. Nine (39%) also indicated inadequate parent and community support in favor of issue.
9	State, not federal government, should define highly qualified teacher	Ten (44%) of the 22 ex. dirs. responding indicated issue or recommendation simply not practical in rural area.
10	Paraprofessional requirements make hiring new personnel difficult	Fourteen (64%) of the 22 ex. dirs. responding indicated inadequate funds currently available to address issue. Nine (41%) also indicated issue or recommendation simply not practical in rural area.

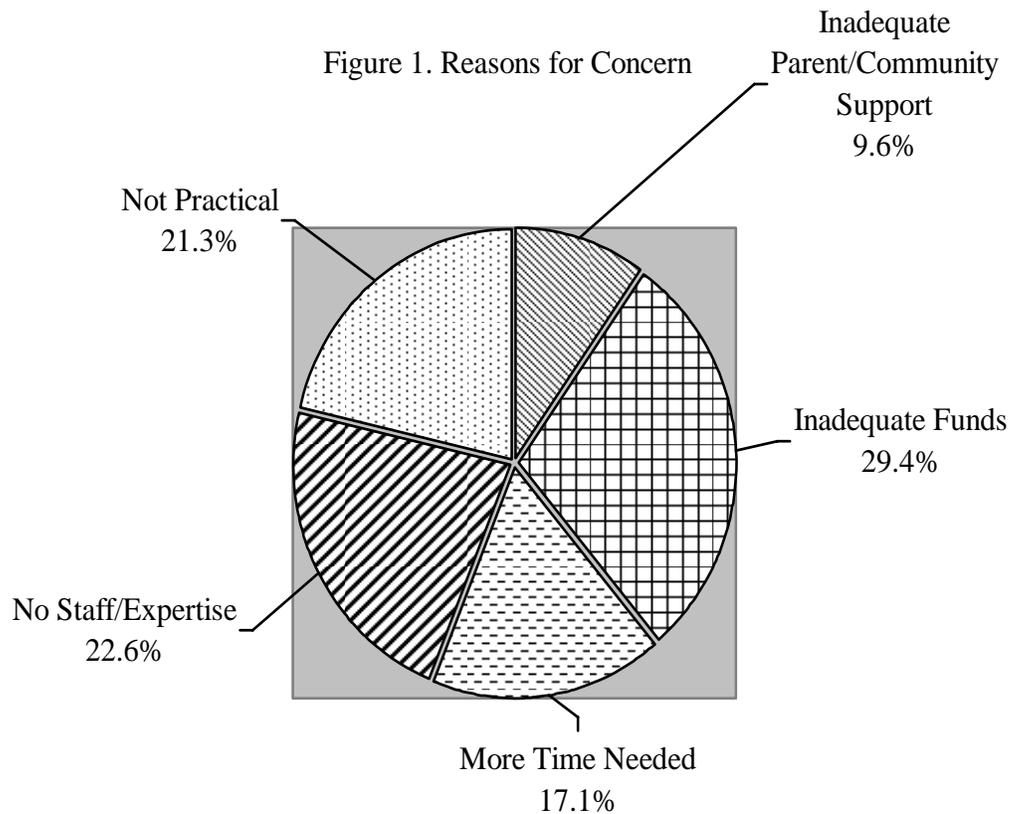
Inadequate funds, inadequate staff to address the issue, and the issue not being practical for schools in a rural area were indicated most often as the reasons for concern regarding implementation in their respective states.

Five major reasons were indicated 1,381 times by the executive directors in indicating why they were concerned about implementation of the 47 issues receiving an average rating of 5.0 or higher. Figure 1 and Table 6 show the number or percentage of times each of the five reasons was selected by the executive directors. (Note: More than one reason could be indicated for each issue on the survey.) Inadequate funds was indicated most often (407 times or 29.4%), followed by inadequate staff/expertise,

impracticality of the issue in a rural area, more time needed for implementation, and inadequate parent and community support for the issue.

Table 6. Number of Times Reason Indicated by Executive Directors

Reason Issue is Concern of 5.0 or Higher	No. CEOs	No. Times Selected
<b>P/C Support</b> = inadequate parent and community support in favor of issue	20	132
<b>Funds</b> = inadequate funds currently available to address issue	23	407
<b>Time</b> = more time needed to adequately address issue	21	236
<b>Staff</b> = no staff person with expertise to address issue	22	312
<b>Practical</b> = issue or recommendation simply not practical in rural area	18	294



### Anecdotal Responses

Each state affiliate executive director was asked to offer specific input to the paper that would reflect the impact of NCLB and the other issues in their respective states. The following are samples of these responses.

## **Michigan**

In small school districts, it is not feasible to employ staff who meet the NCLB requirements, particularly at the middle school level, and to a lesser extent at the high school level. For example, in a middle school of 100 students, to hire a science teacher for each of the content areas (biology, earth science, physical science) is unreasonable.

School districts with 1,200 or fewer students should be exempt from meeting the highly qualified teacher component of NCLB at the middle school or high school level if the district can document that the requirement would create unreasonable employment requirements.

For many school districts, changes in annual testing can be significantly impacted by minimal changes in the student population. Thus, the statistical accuracy of annual testing does not adequately address the educational progress of the school.

A modified model needs to be developed for the small school district that will provide statistically relevant information to determine adequate yearly progress.

## **Missouri**

One of the most critical issues we face in this state is the potential devastating effects of AYP announcements to school/district. The real issue that our districts face is the fact that the Missouri State Board of Education has kept the “proficiency” level the same as was approved several years ago when testing was put into place. The issue is that “proficiency” in this state is actually higher than the “proficiency” level in NCLB. The concerns for many of our school districts in that as our resources stretch to address state and federal mandates, achieving the current level of “proficiency” will depend on

many variables, some of which are beyond our control. It will be difficult to succeed in future years.

Many of the state's districts have received "Accreditation for Distinction for Performance" (state accreditation standard) while at the same time a subgroup may not achieve the level of "proficiency" as identified in NCLB with the end result of a "not met" on the 2003 AYP report.

### **Oklahoma**

Inclusion of all special education students as a subgroup having to meet standards that are age appropriate, not ability appropriate. By definition special education students are identified because they do not perform well and have special needs.

Provide ability appropriate assessment for "all" special education students with established base lines and targeted improvement goals. In Oklahoma, if you have 34% (that % will decline as the bar is raised) of your students identified as special education students, chances are you will not make AYP. In small rural schools with 9 students in a class and 3 of them special education students, the school will most likely fail to make AYP.

Including ELL as a subgroup for AYP is equally troublesome for districts with large ELL populations. By definition, once ELL students become proficient they are removed from the subgroup which automatically causes this subgroup to fail.

### **Pennsylvania**

Certainly, our school is a case in point. We are actually on the list in three areas: attendance – we are at 93%; graduation rate – they have us at 88%; and participation by special needs on PSSA. Our attendance is not an issue and has more to do with internal

recording systems. Our graduation rate is actually closer to 97%, we graduate kids in August, January, and June (we have three full semesters one in the summer offered at no expense to the child and gets no credit for their attendance.) We also carried alternative ed kids as seniors until they completed, needless to say we changed that system. PSSA special needs participation at 77%, I think amounted to 3 kids.

Our school was recognized as one of the outstanding high schools in the state as part of the federal Blue Ribbon process; we have been recognized by High Schools That Work as one of the top 80 high schools nationally in their project; we have SAT scores at the national average, while testing over ½ our seniors; over 70% of our kids go on to college or advanced education; only 3% graduated last year without a job or specific plans as to their next step in life; and we exceeded the NCLB standard in proficiency. I think NCLB will catch us in 2008 or 09 if we do not improve. I could go on but that would be senseless.

If we can put a man on the moon and send a bomb down a smoke stack from 10,000 feet, you would think a multi-variant system of looking at a school system could be developed. The reliance on absolute measures is a product of small minds.

Also, the Reading School District has filed a law suit contending the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania has unfairly judged its efforts under NCLB to educate thousands of immigrant students and required the impoverished city to offer tutoring and other services for which there is no money.

## Utah

Meeting the staffing requirements will be difficult for rural schools. Rural districts need reasonable latitude for the “highly qualified teacher” mandate. Paraprofessional certification is also a great concern.

Compliance with other NCLB mandates will be difficult for small districts. Issues include online testing, data management, data analysis, and supplemental services. Meeting adequate yearly progress expectations is an interesting challenge. Professional development plans for teachers and administrators needs to be a collaborative effort.

The Utah Rural Schools Association is looking for new revenue sources such as state income tax reform, water subsidy revenues, redevelopment agency exemptions, and federal impaction funding revisions. Rural districts are adversely affected by recent changes in state financial formulas, declining enrollment, and the economy of scale related to capital outlay funding.

Consolidation of school districts in Utah is an ongoing issue.

### **Discussion**

Clearly, the executive directors of NREA state-affiliate organizations have reasons to “sound the alarm” regarding the enormous challenges facing rural schools and communities who must implement federal mandates for school improvement. U.S. Secretary of Education Rod Paige states, “Children in rural schools deserve a great education just like all other children in America.”<sup>12</sup> NREA agrees! Will NCLB help or hinder this effort?

It remains unclear, however, how NCLB regulations can best serve the unique circumstances of providing a high quality education for the 31% of the children that

attend rural schools. These children are enrolled in more than 43% of the nation's public schools located in rural communities and small towns of less than 25,000 people. And, approximately 17% of these children attend a public school in the smallest communities with a population of less than 2,500.<sup>13</sup>

Alarming realities of rural education must be addressed for any national reform to do good rather than harm to rural communities and their children. After traveling two days in rural Alaska, Education Secretary Rod Paige clearly recognized what it means to be rural, stating: "When you said 'rural' to me several days ago, it meant one thing, when you say it to me now, it means a different thing." He acknowledged that he had been to rural districts in Nebraska and the Dakotas, but was absolutely surprised at what he saw in western Alaska.

Twenty percent of Alaska's schools have three or fewer teachers. NCLB requires that only "highly qualified" teachers with a college degree or major teach eight core subjects. Rural Alaska has trouble holding on to teachers and administrators, where turnover averages 25% to 30% annually in some districts.<sup>14</sup>

Alaska is not the only state that "lags behind" in agreeing with the federal government on a plan for implementing NCLB. Approval of state accountability plans to comply with NCLB continues to be a moving target. At one time, only five of the 52 accountability plans had been "fully approved," just as only 11 plans for academic standards and test had been fully approved under the old law. The "basic elements" of plans have been approved in 47 states, according to a report in *The Atlantic Journal-Constitution*.<sup>15</sup> The U.S. Department of Education has created the Secretary's Rural

Education Task Force to hear from rural educators, parents and citizens about the challenges rural schools and their communities face.<sup>16</sup>

New federal regulations in NCLB present a host of challenges, starting with finding talented teachers, according to an article in *The American School Board Journal*.<sup>17</sup> Rural areas are particularly concerned that they lack the money and staff to meet the new federal requirements. Rural schools are under funded compared to other schools. According to the U.S. Department of Education, rural district have about \$400 less annually per student to spend than the average district.

Many small rural school districts simply can't compete with larger districts with the dollars to "buy" new teachers. Small districts located close to larger districts with money can also expect to serve as the training ground for many excellent teachers that ultimately are attracted away by the dollars and fringe benefits of the larger school systems. NCLB could inadvertently undermine one of the biggest advantages of rural schools: strong parental support. Many rural schools rely on parents to serve as teacher assistants, or in paraprofessional roles. These parents, without an appropriate college education or training, can no longer provide these critical services for rural schools and their communities as noted in NCLB. Why would Congress pass a law that could restrict parental involvement in schools?

Choice provisions of NCLB enable students—and the dollars that support them—who are attending failing schools to transfer to another successful school in the district. In many small rural schools districts this is not practical, as no other school may exist in the school district. One study shows approximately 1,000 such K-12 unit schools may exist in America.<sup>18</sup> Making matters worse, few supplemental service providers are

available in rural areas to offer private tutoring or other services to students that might attend “low-performing” schools not meeting adequate yearly progress requirements of NCLB.

Moreover, after finally being convinced that small rural schools seldom receive adequate funds for implementing federal initiatives, Congress passed the Rural Education Achievement Program (REAP) to provide grant funds to school districts with 600 or less students. A subpart of REAP also provides funds for rural and low-income schools regardless of size that have a Census poverty level of 20% or higher. Since taking office, however, the Bush administration’s proposed budgets submitted to Congress have proposed to eliminate funding for REAP, with the exception of the 2005 budget in which the Bush administration has proposed funding for REAP. Fortunately, Congress has included funds for REAP in final appropriation bills for the past three years.

Schools in rural America need the capacity to recruit and retain teachers that meet their needs for educating students in the rural context. Consequently, “highly qualified” would mean persons with characteristics of the ideal teacher. The “ideal” rural teacher would have the following characteristics:

1. Be certified and able to teach in more than one subject area or grade level;
2. Be prepared to supervise several extracurricular activities;
3. Be able to teach a wide range of abilities in a single classroom;
4. Be able to overcome the students’ cultural differences and add to their understanding of the larger society; and
5. Be able to adjust to the uniqueness of the community in terms of social opportunities, life styles, shopping areas, and tolerate continuous scrutiny.<sup>19</sup>

Unfortunately, the ideal characteristics for a rural teacher do not satisfy the highly qualified teacher requirements in NCLB. The Department of Education recently attempted to afford rural schools flexibility to meet the highly qualified teacher requirements in NCLB. The flexibility only applied to approximately 5,000 school districts with an average daily attendance of fewer than 600 students. Thus, about one half of the rural school districts were provided flexibility to meet the highly qualified teacher requirements, and one half of the rural school districts were left behind.

Successful teachers in rural areas understand the essential symbiotic relationship between a school and its community. Requiring a teacher to have a certification in specialized areas may seem appropriate for large urban schools. Small rural schools need teachers who are generalists, with access to educational opportunities that enable them to become endorsed in multiple subjects. Student success on more than a test score makes the effective teacher highly qualified and highly valued by the school, parents, and community members in rural America. Moreover, studies confirm:

Students learn more from teachers with certain characteristics. ...In the case of degrees, coursework, and certification, findings have been inconclusive except in mathematics, where high school students clearly learn more from teachers with certification in mathematics, degrees related to mathematics, and coursework related to mathematics.<sup>20</sup>

Numerous authors acknowledge the vital role of public schools as partners in helping communities transition and sustain their local economy.<sup>21</sup> If unreasonable, forced school consolidation or closure is a consequence of mandated federal requirements on states—even though federal funds comprise only about 8% of the total budget—the

community will have lost one of its greatest benefits. Schools are critical to the well-being of small communities.<sup>22</sup> Without schools, rural communities will lose much of their economic base, civic support, and churches.

Unfortunately, closing or consolidating schools can mean long bus rides for students, time students need to be in the classrooms, with teachers, working toward achievement of core content materials. Significant social and intellectual implications of long bus rides exist for students and their families.

A recent major study<sup>23</sup> found rural elementary schools were more likely than suburban elementary schools to have longest rides of 30 minutes or more, to have attendance areas greater than 10 square miles, to have bus routes with rougher rides, to be located in a district without a full-time bus supervisor, and to include middle-school or high school students on the same bus runs as elementary students. In three of the five states investigated, rural principals were more likely than suburban principals to associate length of ride with reduced parental involvement, and in all states, principals in schools with longest rides of 60 minutes or more thought that long rides negatively influenced parental involvement.

The budget squeeze is on as legislators in the majority of states looks for ways to address deficits of historical proportion.<sup>24</sup> As a result, state school aid court cases are on the horizon in many states (e.g., KS, KY, MO, TX). Challenging funding inequities in the courts has long been one of the most critical issues in rural education.<sup>25</sup>

NCLB may serve as a catalyst for court challenges. The National Conference of State Legislatures (NCSL) issued a memorandum to state legislators regarding the possibility of challenging the No Child Left Behind Act in federal court over the law's

ban on imposing unfunded mandates on states. NCSL warned that the law might instigate a flood of new lawsuits against states challenging the level and equality of school funding. If that happens, NCSL predicts that states may, in turn, file lawsuits against the federal government.<sup>26</sup>

Tight budgets and declining student enrollments could spell disaster for some rural communities in states that conclude that no other choice remains but to close a school, consolidate or merge a district, or some other reorganization plan. The Rural School and Community Trust offers a set of 10 standards for states to consider.<sup>27</sup> The Trust maintains reorganizing rural schools or school districts should result in an organizational structure that is accountable to the following standards:

1. Maintains and improves small schools, making them more cost-effective.
2. Provides funding for each school sufficient to meet program and outcome standards as defined by the state and to provide each child with an equal opportunity to achieve.
3. Retains or places schools within communities and avoids placing them in isolated open country.
4. Provides maximum participation in school governance by communities served by the school and the school district and requires community approval of school closings.
5. Honors and reinforces a policy of racial desegregation.

6. Makes best use of appropriate distance learning technologies to share students and faculty enriching curriculum and instruction without enlarging schools or transporting students.
7. Reduces disparity between districts in local tax capacity and effort.
8. Protects children from bus rides exceeding 30 minutes each way for elementary students and one hour each way for high school students.
9. Maximizes regional cooperation between districts, such as regional education service centers, to provide high-cost, low-demand services efficiently to schools and/or students who require them.
10. Strengthens local economic and community development and supports and is supported by community patterns of work and commerce.

The Rural School and Community Trust recommends that where circumstances produce a conflict between the standards, state policy should seek to resolve the conflict to achieve optimum compliance with all conflicting standards.

Increasingly, school finance issues are aligning with the movement of standards-based education reform. The principal issue today is “adequacy” of funding for public education. Can the amount of funding provided produce the desired level of student performance? Consequently, advocates of rural schools and communities may be concerned with the credibility of studies that are conducted toward closing a rural school. The Rural School and Community Trust has prepared a set of standards for adequacy studies.<sup>28</sup> Highlights from the standards include:

1. Adequacy study consultants should conduct their work free of any conflict of interest and political pressure.
2. Adequacy studies should provide maximum feasible involvement by all major education stakeholders including educators, parents, policymakers, and the general public.
3. While the focus of adequacy studies is, by definition, to determine the amount of funding needed to meet state educational goals, such studies should also ensure that remedies promote greater equity and do not lead to further inequities in a state's school finance system.
4. Adequacy studies should recognize the value of students being educated close to home and apply proposed adequacy remedies to the existing structure of schools and school districts.
5. Adequacy studies should not predetermine a minimum size for a district or school.
6. Adequacy studies should recognize that rural schools in a state are often highly variable with respect to cost structure, and that many rural schools experience cost factors that are not typical of other schools in the same state, including other rural schools. Such costs include those associated with population sparseness, small scale of schools, migrant and seasonal farm workers, minority students, remoteness and isolation affecting recruitment, and retention of teachers.

Unlike the past, states can no longer allow districts to select their own spending levels. Under the adequacy framework, all districts and schools must spend at least at an adequate level. Using the adequacy argument, usually linked to an education clause in the state constitution, "...the legal test is whether a state's school finance system provides adequate revenues for the average school to teach state-determined performance standards and whether adequate additional revenues are provided for extra help that students with special needs require at those same performance levels."<sup>29</sup>

The legal issue is not so much whether one district has more or less than another, but whether all districts in the state have revenues that are adequate for the programs they must implement and for teachers that they must employ in order to educate students to high levels of achievement.

Unequal funding between and among school districts remains a critical issue in the U.S.<sup>30</sup> Despite the evolving shift to adequacy, policymakers must continue to be concerned about the fiscal disparities caused by the unequal distribution of the local property tax base. The tax base supporting education for students who live in school districts with the lowest property wealth may yield a small portion of the dollars available to public schools in a wealthier district, even though the poorer district has instituted a higher tax rate. Fewer total dollars are generated in the less wealthy district<sup>31</sup>—dollars that now are needed to address unfunded mandates of NCLB and IDEA. This problem will be exacerbated at the local and state levels by the lack of federal funding for key services to 2,259,000 Title I eligible students as a result of the under funding of NCLB in FY-2005. The Bush administration promised \$19.4 billion, yet recommended only \$12.6

billion to fund Title I in FY-2005. A loss of \$6.7 billion that must be recovered at the local and state levels to fund federally mandated NCLB regulations.

### **Recommendations for Action**

Because this paper is intended to provide a vehicle for NREA members, NREA state-affiliate organizations, and others to create a greater voice for quality education in rural America, a special session on the paper was held at the 2003 NREA Convention in Kearney, Nebraska. All members at the convention were provided a draft copy of the paper as preparation for participation in the session. A distinguished panel comprised of a rural school district superintendent and two university researchers commented on contents of the paper. Panel members and session participants presented ideas on “call for action” statements that might further raise the voice of those who experience the critical issues reported in the survey of NREA state-affiliate leaders.

The discussion revealed the need to select vital actions that NREA can pursue and successfully achieve in a reasonably short time. Six actions were highlighted at the 2003 NREA Convention:

1. Demonstrate the NREA and state-affiliate organizations advocate a high quality, standards-based education for all students in rural schools with adequate funding provided equitably and used effectively to support such an education;
2. Identify and promote the qualities of a rural education that help students excel and build strong rural communities;

3. Support a research agenda that reveals how and why rural schools are being successful in the current climate of high stakes accountability;
4. Identify the constraints to the academic and social success of rural students, develop an agenda to overcome them, and move aggressively to accomplish implementation of the agenda at the national policy level, in both the political and educational environments;
5. Establish supportive partnerships with community organizations and groups through signed memorandums of understanding; and
6. Build public awareness of these actions and work to develop a membership base that is active and supportive of their attainment.

## **Summary**

No Child Left Behind is idealistic federal legislation, and the NREA supports its goal to leave no child behind. NCLB is based on the premise that all children can learn, and the NREA supports this concept. However, it is a fallacy to assume all children can learn the same information at the same rate. No Child Left Behind regulations make this assumption when 100% core subject proficiency is mandated for every child by 2014. No two children are the same. Each child is unique, with unique cognitive skills. Thus, educational progress should be measured individually for each individual child. To achieve this ultimate goal would cause school districts to voluntarily develop an individual education plan (IEP) for each child, not an IEP as defined by IDEA, but an individualized plan to draw teachers' attention to the needs of each child, a concept that would result in real education reform and improved academic results. Then, the school,

the teacher, the child, and the parents would share in the responsibility for accountability measures. This reform would not require state or federal legislation. It would require educators to take the initiative to implement an individualized education plan for each child.

No Child Left Behind assumes that all students are equally motivated and interested in taking and scoring well on standardized tests. Nothing could be further from the truth. There is no scientifically based research to support this assumption. A more valid assumption would address high school students and adults as test takers. Students who are most motivated to take and to do well on high stakes tests are college bound, high school students who take college entrance examinations and high school age students or adults who take the GED Exam.

No Child Left Behind assumes all children arrive at the school house door equally prepared, motivated, and supported to learn. The tragedy in No Child Left Behind lies in the fact that if this assumption is not true, then No Child Left Behind punishes and discriminates against targeted schools, teachers, students, parents, and communities. Ultimately, society in general is weakened by this assumption because these schools, teachers, students, parents, and communities will be left behind.

It is correct to assume students enrolled in schools with selective enrollment policies may well meet No Child Left Behind regulations because they do not generally reflect a normal, diverse student population.

A recently released study by Policy Analysis for California Education, a University of California, Berkeley Research Center, reported schools with diverse student bodies face higher hurdles in clearing Bush administration rules on education standards

than schools with homogeneous populations. The study found schools with many subgroups of students were at a disadvantage under No Child Left Behind because a school would be declared “failing” if only one subgroup did not meet federal standards. For instance, one school with eight subgroups was declared “failing” because one subgroup did not test 95% of the students in the subgroups while the other seven subgroups met their AYP growth target.<sup>32</sup>

Similar examples to the one above can be found in every state, city, town, and community in the nation. Leaders of other successful schools have studied No Child Left Behind enough to realize the Department of Education regulations will ultimately result in their school being declared “failing”. A Pennsylvania school superintendent recently reported his high school was recognized as one of the outstanding high schools in Pennsylvania as part of the federal Blue Ribbon Schools Program and recognized as one of the top 80 high schools in the nation by High Schools That Work. His school maintains high average SAT scores with over 70% of the high school graduates advancing to college or post high school education, and currently exceeds No Child Left Behind regulations. However, the superintendent thinks his school will not be able to meet No Child Left Behind regulations after 2009.

Can Congress and federal policymakers who emphasize the needs of an urban-oriented society that has over one half of its population living in a place of at least one million residents effectively plan national educational reforms that are fair, equitable, and adequate for rural schools and the children they serve? Should rural residents be satisfied with well-intended federal legislation that fails to reflect the realities of educating students in the countryside? NREA and its state-affiliate organizations should unite with

other organizations that value rural America and its children. Sounding the alarm in ways that give a greater voice to rural schools and communities is needed now more than ever.

Concerns documented by the state affiliate CEOs that reflected states' rights and adequate funding issues must be shared with local, state, and federal policymakers.

Those who value the past, present, and future contributions of rural America should join the effort to ensure educational improvement regulations are not a disservice to rural children and families, their schools, and their communities. That is why the NREA, executive directors of NREA state-affiliates, and rural educators across the United States must follow Paul Revere's example and "sound the alarm" for a noble and just cause: Fair, appropriate, adequate, and equitable educational opportunities for rural children.

Will the alarm be heard? A recent survey by the Public Education Network and Education Week indicates NCLB needs to be fixed and funded. Reg Weaver, President of the National Education Association, summarized the survey results.

"The number of voters who oppose the law has more than tripled in one year. Three-fifths of voters say the level of funding from the federal government for public schools is not adequate to ensure quality. And, they believe resources must go to methods that really work to improve student achievement, such as smaller class sizes, early childhood education, and incentives to attract and retain teachers.

As the findings of this poll and others suggest, the more the public learns about how No Child Left Behind affects them on the local level, the less they believe it can work as currently crafted. This should come as no surprise to the growing chorus of teachers, parents, principals, and state and local policy makers who have been raising

serious, legitimate concerns about the law's one-size-fits-all approach to educating children and its lack of adequate resources.

The Department of Education has responded to this pressure by tweaking No Child Left Behind, but it has left many of its fundamental problems unresolved. The law still forces schools to spend more money on paperwork and bureaucracy at a time when they are having to cut funding for practices that improve student achievement. It relies on just two tests to judge students and schools, and it makes judgments by comparing the students in a classroom one year with a different set of students in the classroom the previous year.

Moreover, thousands of schools have already been unfairly labeled, 'low performing,' and teachers are under pressure to devote an increasing amount of valuable classroom time solely to preparing students for standardized tests."<sup>33</sup>

## Endnotes

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<sup>1</sup> See "Declining Enrollment: Widespread, But Especially in the West," *Rural Policy Matters Newsletter*, Vol. 4, No. 11, (Washington, DC: The Rural School and Community Trust, September 2003): 3.

<sup>2</sup>For example, school districts in KY and MO have recently sued the state over inadequate funding. See funding issues in H. L. Harmon, Rural Education, in *Encyclopedia of Education Vol 4*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., ed. J. W. Guthrie (New York: MacMillan, 2003):283-290.

<sup>3</sup> A. C. Lewis, "Accountability on the backs of rural children." *Phi Delta Kappan*, 84 (2003): 643-644.

<sup>4</sup> See "Why Rural Matters Again!" *Rural Policy Matters Newsletter*, Vol. 5, No.2, (Washington, DC: The Rural School and Community Trust, February 2003): 1.

<sup>5</sup> R. L. Linn, "Accountability, Responsibility and Reasonable Expectations." Presidential Address to the Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association, Chicago, April 23 (2003).

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<sup>6</sup> A. C. Lewis, "Accountability on the Backs of Rural Children. *Phi Delta Kappan*, 84 (2003): 643-644.

<sup>7</sup> R. B. Tompkins, R. "Leaving Rural Children Behind. *Education Week*, 22 (March 26, 2003): 30, 31, 44.

<sup>8</sup> See "Education Department Official Pledges Flexibility for Rural Schools," *Rural Policy Matters Newsletter*, Vol. 5, No.4, (Washington, DC: The Rural School and Community Trust, April 2003): 1.

<sup>9</sup> See L. C. Rose, "Public Education's Trojan Horse? *Phi Delta Kappan*, 85 (2003): 2.

<sup>10</sup> See web site of the National Rural Education Association at : [www.nrea.net](http://www.nrea.net)

<sup>11</sup> Issues in the survey were based on a review of the literature, particularly two recent reports (1) G.D. Lanning, "Oregon Small Schools Association's Report: The Challenges and Best Practices of Small, Rural Schools in Implementing the No Child Left Behind Act. Portland, OR: Report submitted to Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory (March 31, 2003); and (2) National Association of State Board of Education and American Association of School Administrators, "No Child Left Behind: A Guide for Small and Rural Districts". (Author: Arlington, VA, 2003). Available at [www.aasa.org/resources](http://www.aasa.org/resources). Issues in the survey also include suggestions of the NREA CEO Panel members.

<sup>12</sup> See comments by Education Secretary Rod Paige, April 2, 2003 at U.S Department of Education website <http://www.ed.gov/inits/ruraled/index.html>

<sup>13</sup> See "Why Rural Matters, Again!" *Rural Policy Matters*, Vol. 5, No. 2, (Washington, DC: The Rural School and Community Trust, February 2003): 1.

<sup>14</sup> See "Rural Schools in Alaska Lag Behind Federal Plan," *The Seattle Times*, Wednesday, May 14 (2003).

<sup>15</sup> See "Most states not Fully Compliant: Optimism Premature on Bush's Program," *The Atlantic Journal-Constitution*, Friday, August 8 (2003). Available at [http://www.ajc.com/Friday/content/epaper/editions/Friday/news\\_f333b430b44e90eb007d.html](http://www.ajc.com/Friday/content/epaper/editions/Friday/news_f333b430b44e90eb007d.html)

<sup>16</sup> See U.S Department of Education website <http://www.ed.gov/inits/ruraled/index.html>

<sup>17</sup> B. Buchanan, "Rural Blues," *The American School Board Journal*, (2002): 28-31.

<sup>18</sup> C. B. Howley and H. L. Harmon, "K-12 Unit Schooling in Rural America: A First Description," *Rural Educator*, 22 (2000): 10-18

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<sup>19</sup> H. L. Harmon, "Teacher Recruitment and Retention in Rural Schools," *The State Education Standard*, 4(2003): 13-17.

<sup>20</sup> A. J. Wayne and Peter Youngs, "Teacher Characteristics and Student Achievement Gains: A Review," *Review of Educational Research* 73 (2003): 89-122.

<sup>21</sup> See H. L. Harmon, *Public schools as partners in rural development: Considerations for policymakers*. Paper prepared for the AEL Regional Educational Laboratory Policy Program, Charleston, West Virginia, December 4 (2000).; L. Beaulieu and D. Mulkey eds.), *Investing in People: The Human Capital Needs of Rural America* (Boulder, CO: Westview, 1995); H. L. Harmon, "Creating Work-based Learning Opportunities for Students in Rural Schools," *The High School Magazine*, 6(6): 22-27, (1999); D. Hobbs, *Exemplary Rural School Programs in Support of Rural Development*, Symposium conducted at the National Conference on Rural Adult Education Initiatives (Kansas City, MO, 1991); B. Miller, *Rural Distress and Survival: The School and the Importance of a Community* (Portland, OR: Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory, 1991); B. Miller, "The Role of Rural Schools in Community Development: Policy Issues and Implications," *Journal of Research in Rural Education*, 11(3): 163-172 (1995); G. Sharratt, C. McClain, and S. Zehm, "Vocational Education in Rural America: An Agenda for the 1990s," *The Rural Educator*, 14(1): 21-26 (1993); J. D. Spears, L. R. Combs, and G. Bailey, *Accommodating Change and Diversity: Linking Rural Schools to Community*, A Report of the Ford Western Taskforce (Manhattan, KS: Rural Clearinghouse for Lifelong Education and Development, 1990); D. Versteeg, "The Rural High School as Community Resource," *Educational Leadership*, 50(7): 54-55 (1993)

<sup>22</sup> Thomas A Lyson. "What Does a School Mean to a Community? Assessing the Social and Economic Benefits of Schools to Rural Villages in New York." *Journal of Research in Rural Education*, 17 (2002): 131-37.

<sup>23</sup> C. B. Howley, Amiee A. Howley, and Steve Shamblen. *The Experience of Rural School Bus Rides*, Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association (Seattle, WA, April 10-14, 2001). ERIC Document Reproduction Service No. ED 451 017.

<sup>24</sup> See "Budget Squeeze: State Legislatures Face Tough Decisions in 2003 Sessions," National Conference of State Legislatures, News Release, (December 30, 2003): 1. Available at <http://www.ncsl.org/programs/press/2003/pr021230.htm>

<sup>25</sup> H. L. Harmon, Rural Education, in *Encyclopedia of Education Vol 4*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., ed. J. W. Guthrie (New York: MacMillan, 2003):283-290.

<sup>26</sup> See "Notes on No Child Left Behind: NCSL Warning," *Rural Policy Matters Newsletter*, Vol. 5, No. 9, (September 2003): 3.

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<sup>27</sup> See “State School Reorganization Standards,” *Rural Policy Matters Newsletter*, Vol. 5, No. 8, (August 2003): 3. Available at <http://www.ruraledu.org/rpm/rpm508a.htm>

<sup>28</sup> See “Rural School Trust Develops Standards for “Adequacy” Studies,” *Rural Policy Matters Newsletter*, Vol. 5, No. 8, (August 2003): 3. Available at <http://www.ruraledu.org/rpm/rpm508f.htm>

<sup>29</sup> A. Odden, “Equity and Adequacy in School Finance Today,” *Phi Delta Kappan*, (2003): 120-125.

<sup>30</sup> B. J. Biddle and D.C. Berliner, “Unequal School Funding in the United States,” *Educational Leadership*, (May 2002): 48-59.

<sup>31</sup> A. Odden, “Equity and Adequacy in School Finance Today,” *Phi Delta Kappan*, 85, (2003): 120-125.

<sup>32</sup> John R. Novak and Bruce Fuller, “Penalizing Diverse Schools?” Policy brief 03-4, PACE, December, 2003.

<sup>33</sup> See “FED-Weaver Responds to Poll Showing Voter Concern About Education Law,” *Oklahoma Education Today Flashback Report*, (April 2004): 14.