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# Recent History of Federal Support For Rural Education

E. Robert Stephens

## Introduction

Rural interests have long argued that the federal government is insensitive to the needs of rural schools, or worse, that a widespread anti-rural, pro-urban bias permeates all levels of the federal policy communities. Assertions of this type gained momentum in the late 1970s and early 1980s and have continued unabated, and largely unchallenged, to the present time.

The work of a small handful of policy analysts and rural education advocates is largely responsible for challenging the equity and fairness of federal efforts in rural education. Perhaps the most critical judgments were those offered by Sher,<sup>1</sup> Irwin,<sup>2</sup> Bass and Berman,<sup>3</sup> Gjelten,<sup>4</sup> and Hern.<sup>5</sup> Though the purpose and the rigor of the investigations and advocacy pieces undertaken by these authors differed, a number of common themes were stressed by most. The claims that seem to be most damaging for rural interests include: federal formula grants targeting special populations of students that use the total number of students as an eligibility criterion, as opposed to a minimum number, will automatically bias against rural systems having small enrollments, as most do; similarly, formula grants having as a condition of eligibility a local district matching requirement will also bias against poor wealth rural systems, as many are; the major discretionary programs usually contain a density bias that will handicap rural, low density, districts; rural districts also tend to be further handicapped in pursuing discretionary funds because of their inability to mount successful "grantsmanship" efforts; closely related, the paperwork ordinarily associated with the application for and monitoring of federal assistance programs is especially burdensome for rural systems who generally lack the administrative support systems found in larger districts; and, federal reporting systems and analytical reports on the condition of public education are ineffective in providing a consistent, comprehensive profile of rural systems.

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Over a decade has now passed since the relative flurry of highly critical evaluations of the federal role in rural education were first issued. Not a great deal of attention in the ensuing years has been given to testing the theses advanced by these earlier critics. The few efforts in the late 1980s and early 1990s that were undertaken also provide some insight on the merits of the claims and are outlined below.

It is important that continuous attention be given the issue of the equity, fairness, and responsiveness of federal assistance to rural systems for several reasons. On the one hand, rural districts, despite huge reductions in their number over much of this century, correctly called "one of the most awesome and least publicized governmental changes in the nation in the twentieth century,"<sup>6</sup> continue to: represent approximately one-half of the over fifteen thousand operating public school districts in the nation; enroll approximately one of eight public elementary-secondary students; and, employ approximately one of twelve public school professional personnel.<sup>7</sup> These estimates represent a huge enterprise. How well this enterprise is reflected in federal policy debates, and whether or not rural systems receive their fair share of federal efforts to improve access to equal educational opportunities, certainly one of the continuing principal reasons d'être of federal involvement in education, is therefore of vital interest. Moreover, the most recent federal emphasis on the promotion of systemic reform, and the pursuit of other policy objectives, clearly cannot be indifferent to how these initiatives are likely to impact nearly one-half of the public school universe in this nation.

Furthermore, it is important that both existing efforts as well as those currently under consideration by a new administration and Congress be examined so that the debate concerning what should be the preferred federal role be based on timely information, not old stereotypes, no matter how reasonable these may have been when first asserted. It could be, for example, that some of the building blocks of a needed comprehensive and cohesive federal policy for rural education may have already recently been put in place and ought to be preserved and strengthened in the future.

## Objectives Pursued Here

The objectives of this piece are three in number. First, an overview will be provided of what are regarded to be major efforts aiding rural systems launched during the past approximately fifteen-year period. Examining new Congressional and executive branch initiatives undertaken from approximately 1980 through most of 1993 is meaningful for several reasons, in addition to the fact that this time span is attractive as a relatively reasonable period for establishing any discernable trends that might be observable. For example, cabinet-level status for the Department of Education was authorized in 1979 and took effect in 1980. Ostensibly, one of the hopes of the proponents of this elevated status for education on the national scene was that the needs of all of education urban, suburban, and rural were to enjoy greater visibility in national domestic policy debates. Furthermore, the period 1980 through 1993 covers the terms of two Republican presidents as well as the early months of a Democratic presidency. With one exception, that in the early 1980s, both Houses of Congress were controlled by the Democratic Party. The significance of what is commonly called an era of divided government for most of the time period focused on here is of course potentially huge and must be acknowledged in any attempt to profile recent federal efforts in education.

The second objective is to offer a number of observations concerning what did not happen during the period focused on here. Finally, the major education proposals under consideration by Congress in the fall of 1993 will be reviewed to determine to what extent, if any, these are likely to be supportive, are neutral, or represent a set-back from any gains that rural interests may have realized in recent years. Three major

proposals that are to be considered by Congress in the winter and spring of 1994 will be emphasized: Improving America's Schools Act of 1993, the reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act; Goals 2000: Educate America Act; and, the Rural Schools of America Act of 1993.

Before discussing the promising practices as well as the disappointments of recent years, however, it is important that the context in which old concerns were or were not addressed be at least sketched.

### The Changing Context of Federal Efforts

There is little question that the federal role in elementary-secondary education has changed dramatically over the past three decades. The 1960s were of course characterized by the beginnings of numerous initiatives to achieve equity. While this same goal held through much of the 1970s, federal oversight also became prominent. Still other dominant features characterize the 1980s, mainly a retrenchment of the federal presence in education.

That there was a major reduction in the federal role in elementary-secondary education during the twelve years of the Reagan and Bush administrations seems irrefutable. In an especially useful analysis of the first five years of the Reagan administration, these changes were characterized as a "deemphasizing, diminishing, and decentralizing the federal role in education."<sup>8</sup>

To support their basic thesis that a major reduction occurred, Clark and Astuto suggest that it is instructive to compare the language that dominated the pre- and post-Reagan federal role in education: from equity to excellence; from needs and access to ability, selectivity; from social and welfare concerns to economic and productivity concerns; from common school to parental choice, competition; from regulation, enforcement to deregulation; from federal intervention to state and local initiatives; and, from diffusion of innovations to exhortation, information sharing.<sup>9</sup>

They also offer the conjecture that the basic changes in federal policy witnessed in the early 1980s will be both institutionalized and then broadened over the ensuing five to fifteen years.<sup>10</sup>

In a later, equally insightful analysis, Verstegen<sup>11</sup> supported the prediction of Clark and Astuto that the changes brought about in President Reagan's first term were likely to be institutionalized with her conclusions that: though federal aid to elementary-secondary education administered by the Department of Education increased 35 percent from 1981 to 1988, in real terms revenue actually decreased twelve percent; moreover, funds for several individual programs including research and statistics, the Elementary and Secondary Education Block Grant (the centerpiece of President Reagan's "new federalism"), bilingual education, and vocational and adult education decreased even more in real terms; and, importantly, elementary and secondary education assistance programs would be funded at a lower rate if Congress had not ignored the administration's proposals and in several cases appropriated more monies than requested by the administration.<sup>12</sup>

A recent report of the National Center for Education Statistics<sup>13</sup> includes federal expenditures for elementary-secondary education for all federal departments and independent agencies, not just the Department of Education. Hoffman argues that there was an increase of three percent between 1980 and 1992, with most of the gain, however, occurring during the just-concluded four-year term of President Bush.

Even though the late increases in the overall, government-wide, support for elementary-secondary education may have reversed the earlier declines in the funding of Department of Education programs, other evidence to support the general pattern of a diminished role is available. There is general agreement, for example, with the estimate of the National Education Association that in 1992, federal aid represented ap-

proximately 6.4 percent of all revenues for elementary-secondary education, a decrease of one percent from 1982.<sup>14</sup> Even more telling, perhaps, is a 1990 estimate by the National Education Association that asserts that:

If education spending had remained constant at 2.5 percent of the federal budget its share in FY 1980 America's education institutions would have some \$6.7 billion more to spend for essential education programs in FY91.<sup>15</sup>

Despite the ideological shifts attempted by the Reagan and Bush administrations that no doubt were in part greatly facilitated by a number of major economic issues that surfaced in the late 1980s, some benefits to rural education did in fact occur in recent years. These are briefly discussed below.

### Promising Recent Initiatives

A number of promising initiatives were launched by the federal government since the early 1980s. Ten of these judged to be of particular significance are cited in Table 1. The ten are highlighted because they satisfy one or more of the following selection criteria used in this portion of the exercise. To be included, an initiative must: address a critical need facing many of the nation's rural systems, establish an important precedent, or hold promise of laying the foundation for sustained, long-term benefits.

It can of course be argued that the use of the second and third selection criteria contributes to an inflated profile of promising developments, or one that is unnecessarily speculative. While conceding some merit to these lines of argument, the weight given to the importance of the establishment of a precedent is based on the belief that being able to do so continues to be highly valued in public policy debates. The use of the third criterion, though somewhat speculative, is warranted because it is one way to accommodate the inclusion of promising developments just beginning that may take years to materialize.

A number of the ten initiatives cited are viewed to be of such extraordinary importance that they are briefly elaborated on below. The first, the adoption of the "Rural Education and Rural Family Education Policy for the 1980s" by Secretary of Education Bell in 1983 is believed to be without precedent in recent history wherein an agency head singled out one sector of the public school universe for special attention. True, the language of the bill authorizing the establishment of the Department of Education (ED) directed that a new organizational commitment was to be given the nation's rural schools (Public Law 96-88, Section 206, 1979). Secretary Bell, however, chose to be very emphatic in responding to the statutory directive by prefacing the policy statement with an equally clear statement of intent:

Rural education shall receive an equitable share of the information, services, assistance, and funds available from and through the Department of Education and its programs.<sup>16</sup>

Unfortunately, there is little evidence that the comprehensive, sweeping declaration of an agency head resulted in major substantive changes in the behavior of ED, in part, perhaps, because Secretary Bell departed ED soon after the adoption of the policy.<sup>17</sup> Nonetheless, the Secretary's action demonstrated what is possible working within statutory language authorizing the Department of Education, language that, it is important to note, is still in force.

The second of the ten initiatives, the Congressional directive to ED in 1987 that it launch a "Rural Initiative" and place this responsibility in the Regional Educational Laboratories<sup>18</sup> is also of extraordinary importance. Alone among the ten, the "Rural Initiative" is judged to have contributed to all three criteria used in this exercise, and, moreover, spawned one additional development cited, the designation of a "rural coordinator" in ED.

**Table 1. Major Federal Initiatives Benefitting Rural Education Launched Since 1980**

Year	Initiative <sup>a</sup>	Major Significance
1. 1983	Adoption of "Rural Education and Rural Family Education Policy for the 1980s"	B
2. 1985	Development of new typology of nonmetro counties based on primary economic activity	C
3. 1987	Enactment of Regional Educational Laboratories "Rural Initiative"	A, B, C
4. 1988	Enactment of Rural Technical Assistance Centers, Chapter I	A
5. 1988	Designation of "rural coordinator" to monitor regional lab rural initiative	B, C
6. 1989	Enactment of "Star Schools Program"	A
7. 1989	Development of "Johnson Code" for classifying schools by type of locale	B, C
8. 1990	Development of new typology of nonmetro counties based on size of population and proximity to metro counties	B, C
9. 1990	Establishment of Rural Development Administration	C
10. 1993	Development of "School District Data Book"	B, C

<sup>a</sup> Program responsibility rests with the Department of Education for all but #s 2, 8, and 10, where the administrative unit is the Department of Agriculture.

<sup>b</sup>A = address critical current needs

B = establish important precedent

C = lay foundation for potential sustained, long-term benefits

Though the appropriations to the original nine, now ten, regional laboratories to implement the "Rural Initiative" have never been large (ranging from approximately \$25 to \$30 million annually), the regional laboratories have nonetheless begun to demonstrate, at least collectively, that they can: provide technical assistance to state education agencies and local districts on a wide range of contemporary instructional, organizational, and planning issues facing rural districts in their service regions; serve as a national network for the collection and analysis of timely information on the status of rural schools; and, serve as a national network for the examination of the implications for rural systems of the national education goals and other federal priorities.

Moreover, the "Rural Initiative" is contributing to the creation of a critical mass of staff in many of the regional laboratories having expertise in rural education matters. Some of the very best work in rural education is now being produced in a number of the regional laboratories, and, most recently, through the beginnings of meaningful collaboration among them. The concentration of staff expertise in the laboratories having a charter to devote their total energies in the furtherance of rural education interests might well be one of the most enduring, long-term benefit accruing to rural schools of any of the ten recent developments highlighted here.

Still another benefit of the 1987 "Rural Initiative" was the need for the Office of Educational Research and Improvement, the administrative unit in ED having responsibility for the program, to designate one of its staff to monitor and coordinate the work of the laboratories. The current coordinator is widely credited with accomplishing a number of major efforts benefi-

cial to rural education, most notably: the publication and widespread dissemination in 1991 of a first of its kind ED report that identifies research and development priorities that is intended to focus the work of the research and school improvement communities<sup>19</sup>; the publication by ED of a relatively comprehensive report on the status of rural education<sup>20</sup>; helping to create communication networks of rural education advocates across federal departments and independent agencies, and between federal units and professional associations; and, serving as an advocate for rural education within ED.

The long-term benefits of four of the remaining developments are related and also warrant mention as being of potentially extraordinary significance for rural education interests. Clearly one of the most troubling issues confronting the federal policy, research, and school improvement communities over time is the absence of a consensus on how one should define a rural school system. This handicap, that has been commented on by many, has resulted in the use of widely diverse definitions among federal departments and independent agencies and has virtually precluded the meaningful resolution of the claims and counterclaims surrounding the issue of whether or not rural schools receive their fair share of federal assistance programs.

Work on the four initiatives, however, has the potential of resolving the definitional issue in that they together have overcome a number of technical (but not policy) issues that have in the past impeded reaching a consensus on an acceptable, uniform definition. For example, the "Johnson Code", developed by ED's National Center for Education Statistics in 1989, classifies all of the nation's schools (not school districts) into one of seven locale categories based on ZIP Code designation. Two of the categories used allow the identification of the community types that most would likely agree are the sites of the vast majority of rural districts (rural locale, a place of less than 2,500 people or a place having a ZIP Code designated rural by Census; and, small town, a town within an SMSA and with a population less than 25,000 and greater than or equal to 2,500 people).<sup>21</sup> The new School District Data Book (SDDB), also developed by ED's National Center for Education Statistics, in cooperation with the U.S. Census Bureau, provides a selected socioeconomic and demographic profile of every public school district in the nation. Moreover, the SDDB can be merged with school district financial, enrollment, and staffing data collected by NCES at periodic intervals.<sup>22</sup> The SDDB promises to be a powerful analytical tool available to the research and school improvement communities.<sup>23</sup>

These two efforts have solved many of the technical issues present in the rural school definitional issue. They make possible the testing of the costs and benefits of the use of alternative sparsity, enrollment, or the other viable criteria that should be included in any definition of a rural district.

The two recently developed typologies by the Department of Agriculture's Economic Research Service (ERS) also have great potential significance for rural education. The first of these classifies all nonmetropolitan counties according to their primary economic activity (e.g., agricultural-related, mining-related, persistent poverty).<sup>24</sup> The second classifies all nonmetropolitan counties according to their size of population and proximity to a metropolitan county.<sup>25</sup>

The availability of both of these classification systems makes it possible to address the legitimate concerns of those who argue that the use of a common rural district definition will obscure the demonstrable diversity present among these types of systems across this nation. A reasonable solution to the diversity issue would seem attainable.

Both the two NCES efforts and the two ERS efforts were worked on independently. Thus, the benefits for rural interests at this point remains only a potential. The technical difficulties of effecting a merger of these efforts would appear to be

solvable.<sup>25</sup> The policy debates that would need to be held in order to do so, however, are likely to be heated, but have yet to occur.

The potential benefits of the final of the ten developments, the establishment of the Rural Development Administration (RDA) within the Department of Agriculture in 1990, is probably even more problematic, given the short history of similar predecessor efforts to develop a cohesive national policy for rural development. Nonetheless, the goals of the President's Council on Rural America, on whose advocacy the RDA was created, are the closest existing example at the federal level of the recognition that comprehensive and cohesive federal policies are, on the one hand, an absolute necessity for the revitalization of rural America, and, on the other, that a strong, healthy education infrastructure is a prerequisite for sustained rural economic and community development.<sup>27</sup> There does seem to be a renewed commitment in both the legislative and executive branches that the traditional piece-meal, fragmented approaches to the multi-faceted issues present in rural economic and community development have been less than effective, as well as too costly. It is for these reasons that guarded optimism is held that the RDA just might succeed. Should this be the case, rural education should reap renewed attention and a vastly increased commitment.

### What Did Not Happen?

The preceding overview of what are regarded to be major steps undertaken at the federal level in recent years might leave the impression that the period 1980–1993 was marked by an unbroken series of successes, or potential future good fortunes, for rural education interests. Clear progress has been made on a number of important fronts. The recent track record, however, is hardly one of unbroken accomplishments. Indeed, little in the way of a meaningful federal response is evident on a number of the most damaging charges regarding federal practices. In addition, several windows of opportunity failed to be seized that could not only have facilitated the resolution of a number of substantive concerns, but also would have had symbolic value as well.

Following is another overview of what are judged to be major non-events of the past recent history. The themes introduced are organized into two categories:

- those addressing long-standing needs facing many of the nation's rural districts where action should have been taken, consistent with the prevailing norms concerning the role and function of this level of government in education matters
- those representing missed windows of opportunity, defined narrowly here to be situations where ED moved to better serve the nation's urban school systems and private education, yet failed to implement parallel action for rural systems.

No attempt is made to offer possible explanations of the set of complex issues that no doubt were at play that caused the perceived failures to occur. Clearly differing world views of the nature of the rural education "problem", competing ideological and political perspectives on the larger issue of the role of the federal government in education, as well as other factors, including perhaps even the possibility of oversight, would all have to be taken into account. But consideration of these complex matters is beyond the scope of this article. Rather, the list of missed opportunities represents one person's view of important steps not taken that would have benefited rural education.

#### *Continued Neglect of Long-Standing Concerns*

One of the most serious inducements against the federal government raised by rural interests over time is that rural schools do not receive an equitable share of federal assistance

programs. This claim has been levelled not only with regard to the big-ticket formula programs, but the large number of discretionary programs as well. Unfortunately, no progress has been made during the past fifteen years to shed light on this issue. While a number of efforts were initiated that attempted to do so, largely on the insistence of Congressional interests, there is still no definitive, conclusive answer to the question.

The primary reason for the continued absence of a response to the charge is of course in large part related to a lack of a common definition of what is to constitute a rural school district, a point alluded to previously. As a result, attempts to establish the rural share of the big-ticket formula grants undertaken in the 1980s are limited in their conclusions.

A General Accounting Office (GAO) study issued in 1989, for example, reported that in 1985 the rural percent of the large Educationally Deprived Children-Local Education Agency Grants was nineteen percent, and twelve percent of the Bilingual Education Grants. The GAO could not establish the rural percent of the relatively massive Vocational Education-Basic Grants to the states.<sup>28</sup> The definition of rural districts used by the GAO were those located in "counties with urban populations of less than 20,000."<sup>29</sup> A major, mid-1980, ED-sponsored study of Chapter 1<sup>30</sup> used eight different enrollment size categories for establishing the recipients of these formula grant monies. Rural districts were defined in this instance as those enrolling less than one thousand students. Dubin's<sup>31</sup> comprehensive study of the distribution of all major federal programs, that included elementary-secondary assistance programs, is also of limited value because the analysis is based on funds going to different types of metropolitan or nonmetropolitan counties, not school districts, many of which have geographic boundaries that are not coterminous with county boundaries.

The Stephens<sup>32</sup> report identified which of the 140 elementary-secondary formula and discretionary programs administered by ED in FY 1990 contained, either by statute or ED regulations, a rural set-aside. His probe established that twelve of the 140 programs did (including the previously cited *Rural Technical Assistance Centers, Chapter I*, and the "Rural Initiative" of the regional educational laboratories). However, no uniform definition of a rural system was used in the twelve programs, the majority of which were targeted on special populations of rural students and were begun in the mid to late 1980s. With regard to the equity of the formula programs for special populations of students, it was observed that:

The fact is, this exploratory effort cannot address this question and it is likely that even more appropriate inquiries would be handicapped in doing so. This is so for several major reasons, . . . : most of the big-ticket items administered by ED are grants to the states which make use of their own largely self-determined distributive formulas; and, there is no standard definition of rural presently used by either the federal government or by the states. What can be said is that any formula grant program that uses a population factor in its mathematical formula (many do) or any grant program that uses a cost per pupil factor in its mathematical formula (as several do) potentially can discriminate against a rural small school district's efforts to address the needs of its special populations.<sup>33</sup>

A second major long-standing concern of rural interests is that the federal government has no cohesive policy to assist rural education. One certainly would have expected a comprehensive federal strategy to be forthcoming, at least from the Department of Education, given the clear Congressional directive in the authorization act establishing the department that it was to make extraordinary efforts to pay attention to rural schools. As commented on earlier, then Secretary of Education Bell in 1983 did adopt a wide-ranging policy statement that, if

implemented, would have resulted in substantial benefits as well as had important symbolic values to rural schools. But the great potential of 1983 policy was never realized.<sup>34</sup> If anything, the poor performance of ED in implementing the 1983 policy statement had the added negative effect of reinforcing the existing widespread cynicism in the rural education community.

#### *Missed Windows of Opportunity*

Other evidence of failures during the past approximately fifteen-year period is also available. Three missed opportunities in particular stand out as being especially difficult to comprehend. All three involved inaction by the Department of Education to address rural education when it chose to do so for either urban education or private education. In 1990, ED identified an urban focus for one of its new Research and Development Centers; none of the remaining twenty-three centers was earmarked for an emphasis on rural education. This was done despite the fact that ED had been working for several years prior to 1990 on the previously cited "An Agenda for Research and Development on Rural Education." Secondly, in 1991, ED completed work on a new classification system for describing the diversity among the nation's private schools<sup>35</sup>; no comparable organizational resources and energies have been devoted to establishing a meaningful topology of rural systems. Finally, for most of the fifteen-year period, ED has sponsored an "Urban Superintendent's Network" that entails periodic meetings of representatives of the nation's large urban systems with senior-level staff of the department; no comparable rural superintendents' network has ever been initiated.

#### **New Legislative Proposals**

As established earlier, the profile of new legislative proposals and their likely benefits for rural education will concentrate on three education initiatives currently under consideration in this session of Congress: Improving America's School Act of 1993, Goals 2000: Educate America Act, and the Rural Schools of America Act of 1993. Though other education bills have either already been passed or introduced, the three singled out for emphasis are regarded to be of most significance. Together, certain features of the three, if enacted, will both address long-standing issues as well as aid rural systems in meeting the new demands being made of rural school districts.

#### *Improving America's Schools Act of 1993*

The proposed amendments to the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (H.R. 3130 and S. 1131), that promise to be the most far-ranging changes in the act since its adoption in 1965, is shaping up as perhaps the most volatile of the three legislative proposals highlighted here. Rural education is likely to be both winner and loser in the reauthorization debate that is predicted to accelerate in the late winter and spring months of 1994.

The most fundamental proposed change, and the one that represents a loss for many rural systems, would change the funding formula for Chapter 1 of the ESEA. There appears to be widespread support for the targeting of Chapter 1 monies (that will likely be in the range of \$7 billion annually) to schools with high concentrations of poor students. The administration's proposal would set aside fifty percent for concentration grants to the poorest areas (compared to ten percent at present). It would also increase the threshold for eligibility to receive a concentration grant from the present requirement that a county have ten poor children, or a fifteen percent poverty rate among school-age children and youth, to a minimum of 100 poor children or an eighteen percent poverty rate. This proposed change in the formula has generated counter-proposals from rural interests, who are predicted to be losers if the formula stands as proposed. The Department of Education estimates

that fifteen states will lose monies in FY 1995, led by several states with large numbers of rural systems (e.g., Iowa, a loss of 29.4 percent; Maine, a loss of 28.2 percent).<sup>36</sup>

Other features of the proposed legislation that, if retained, will clearly assist rural systems in addressing both traditional difficulties as well as aid in meeting the rising expectations of public education include: the strong emphasis given to staff development that is to be aligned with the voluntary content standards, that in turn are to be aligned with the national education goals; the strong emphasis given to technology, including: the creation of an Office of Educational Technology in the Department of Education, that among other functions, is responsible for developing a national long-range plan for the educational use of technology; and, a continuation of the Star Schools Program that has in the past been so beneficial to many rural districts; the use of grants and contracts to establish a technical assistance capacity that will aid state and local agencies in achieving greater equity in state funding formulas; the provision of incentives to post-secondary institutions that should encourage their more meaningful engagement in elementary-secondary reform efforts; and, the emphasis given to the promotion of collaboration among schools and other agencies.

#### *Goals 2000: Educate America Act*

This proposed bill is the major legislative proposal advanced by the Clinton Administration. There are at present substantial differences in the House version (H.R. 1804) and Senate version (S. 1150), and how these differences will be reconciled is of course not known at this time. There is general agreement, however, on a number of key provisions that are of significance to rural education.

The bill, authorized for \$393 million in FY 1995, and such sums as necessary for FY 1995 through 1998, is a grant program to the states to develop and implement state plans for the systemic reform of education. The chief provisions of the proposal include: the establishment of the six national education goals as federal policy and, if the House version is enacted, that civics and government be added to the competencies students must demonstrate, and that teachers must have access to professional development; the establishment of national and state voluntary education standards, or content standards; the development of national and state voluntary student performance standards that are aligned with the content standards; and, the development of national and state voluntary opportunity-to-learn standards for assessing whether or not the resources, programs, and practices are available at each level of the educational system necessary for students to acquire the competencies and skills called for in the national or state content standards.

The proposed development of the opportunity-to-learn standards potentially has far-reaching implications for rural education. Which ever version is enacted, the more prescriptive House proposal that would require greater accountability of the states than would the Senate proposal, a focus on whether or not rural schools have the institutional capacity to meet the content standards most assuredly represents a major breakthrough for rural interests. It would seem that the inclusion of opportunity-to-learn standards in the proposed bill institutionalizes in federal policy what a number of state courts in recent year have already done by their insistence that an adequacy criterion be used as a test of whether or not a state funding formula is constitutional.

#### *Rural Schools of America Act of 1993*

The third major legislative proposal, the "Rural Schools of America Act of 1993" (H.R. 1687 and S. 1472), is certainly one of the most ambitious Congressional initiatives intended to assist rural education. The potential benefits of the bill as

proposed (or, even if the bill is folded into the proposal amendments to the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, as some observers predict might happen) are significant. Chief among these are the following: the authorization for the appropriation of \$1.5 billion in the first year, and as needed annually through FY 2000, to support rural schools most in need of assistance in meeting the national education goals; the strong emphasis given to supporting applications that give prominence to widely acknowledged problems facing rural schools, including the recruitment and retention of staff, staff development, and access to educational technology; an equally strong emphasis given to supporting applications that give prominence to assisting rural schools in new initiatives that are also widely acknowledged as having potential for strengthening rural education, including the development of consortia to strengthen curriculum offerings, coordination and collaboration with other youth-serving agencies, efforts to encourage making the rural school the community learning and service center, and the development of broad-based rural community advisory groups; the authorization for an appropriation of an additional \$1.5 billion in the first year, and as needed annually through FY 2000, to rural districts for the construction, repair, or renovation of instructional space including facilities for the use of telecommunications technologies; an amendment to the Department of Education Act of 1979 that would establish an Assistant Secretary for Rural Education; the requirement that the Secretary of the Department of Education report to the Congress no later than January 1, 1995 the impact on rural schools of federal regulations, guidelines, and policies; the establishment of rural school research and evaluation centers to be operated by the ten regional educational laboratories; the establishment of a new Interagency Council on Rural Schools composed of the secretaries of Education, Labor, Health and Human Services, Agriculture, Energy, and Commerce, as well as the directors of several independent agencies; and, the sponsorship of a White House Conference on Rural Education no later than the end of October, 1996.

The provisions of the proposed bill address a large number of the concerns raised here regarding the past performance of the federal government. The relatively huge \$3 billion annual authorization, along with a companion \$3 billion proposed for urban education introduced under separate legislation, is of course likely to be a major handicap to final passage in its present form. It is important to note, however, that several of the provisions highlighted here are relatively low-cost, yet would represent real gains for rural education interests. The probability certainly exists that these low-cost features will be recognized as such and retained, either as a separate bill or folded into other legislative proposals.

### Concluding Comments

The profile of recent federal efforts to address rural education issues provided here should be both comforting and distressful to the rural education community. The inability to address the basic question of whether or not rural schools receive their equitable share of federal assistance, even by the use of a narrow standard of this criterion, must be viewed as a major disappointment. Further, some might argue that what is identified as representing progress is reaching. It is conceded that the time period used here is a relatively long period and the list of benefits cited, that concentrated on activities of the Department of Education, is admittedly not too long, and nearly offset in number by perceived missed opportunities as well.

Nonetheless, one should be encouraged by the beginnings of a number of initiatives that have great potential for benefitting the nation's rural school systems. Especially note-

worthy is the progress being made to resolve the technical issues surrounding the establishment of an acceptable definition of a rural district, a necessary prerequisite for addressing equity questions, and adequacy and responsiveness concerns as well. Moreover, the new legislative proposals under consideration are equally encouraging. The prominence given in the proposals to staff development, technology, and opportunity-to-learn standards is especially gratifying. It does not seem likely that all of these proposals will be entirely abandoned. So there should be hope that further steps will soon be forthcoming that not only will address long-standing needs of rural systems, but enhance their institutional capacity to continue to be an asset to the nation as it moves more rapidly into the information age.

### Endnotes

1. J. P. Sher, "A Proposal to End Federal Neglect of Rural Schools," *Phi Delta Kappan* 59, 4 (1978): 280-282.
2. P. M. Irwin, *Report on Rural America: Educational Problems and Federal Alternatives* (Washington, D.C.: The Library of Congress, Congressional Research Service, Education and Public Welfare Division, 1978).
3. G. Bass and P. Berman, *Federal Aid to Rural Schools: Current Patterns and Unmet Needs*. (Santa Monica, CA: The Rand Corporation, 1979).
4. T. Gjelten, *The Rural Experience With Federal Education Aid*. (Washington, D.C.: National Rural Center, 1980).
5. N. A. Hern, *Treatment of Rural Areas*. (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Education, Office of Elementary and Secondary Education (unpublished memorandum submitted to Assistant Secretary for Elementary and Secondary Education, 6 July 1981).
6. J. R. Guthrie, "Organization Scale and School Issues." In C. S. Benson et al., (eds.), *Education Finance and Organization Research Perspectives for the Future*. (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Health, Education, and Welfare, National Institute of Education, 1980), p. 120.
7. These estimates are based on the breakthrough work by W. K. Elder, *A Descriptive Analysis of Rural Schools and Rural School Districts*. (Columbia, MO: University of Missouri, Office of Social and Economic Data Analysis, 1991). Elder arrived at his estimates by establishing the standard that if 75 percent or more of the total enrollment of a district were in schools located in a place with fewer than 2,500 people or a place having a ZIP Code designated as rural by the U.S. Census Bureau, then the district was designated a "rural district." This procedure is viewed to be by far the most defensible of the many attempts undertaken in recent years. It does produce a relatively conservative estimate.
8. D. L. Clark and T. A. Astuto, "The Significance and Permanence of Changes in Federal Education Policy," *Education Researcher*, 15, 8 (1986): 6.
9. D. L. Clark and T. A. Astuto, "The Significance and Permanence of Changes," p. 6.
10. D. L. Clark and T. A. Astuto, "The Significance and Permanence of Changes," p. 4.
11. D. A. Verstegen, *Fiscal Policy for Education in the Reagan Administration*. (Charlottesville, VA: University of Virginia Policy Studies Center of the University Council for Educational Administration, 1988), pp. 78-80. See also, D. A. Verstegen, *Educational Fiscal Policy in the Reagan Administration. Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis*, 12(4), 355-374, 1990.
12. Verstegen, *Fiscal Policy for Education*, pp. 78-80.

13. C. H. Hoffman, *Federal Support for Education, Fiscal Year 1980 to 1992*. (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Education, Office of Educational Research and Improvement, National Center for Educational Statistics, 1993), p. 7.
14. *National Education Association, Ranking of the States*. (Washington, D.C.: National Education Association, 1992), p. 42.
15. *National Education Association, The Cost of Excellence* (Washington, D.C.: National Education Association, 1990), p. 1.
16. U.S. Department of Education, *Rural Education and Rural Family Education Policy for the 1980s*. (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Education, 1983).
17. Surprising, to my knowledge Congress has never asked for an accounting of its 1979 directive that ED provide fair treatment to rural schools. This seems strange given what must have been a compelling concern to take the step of insisting on the inclusion of language directing that ED do so in the authorization bill creating the department.
18. *U.S. Department of Education Regional Educational Laboratory Request for Proposal* (Washington D.C.: U.S. Department of Education 1987), p. 8-9.
19. *U.S. Department of Education, An Agenda for Research and Development on Rural Education*. (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Education, 1987).
20. J. D. Stern (ed.), *The Condition of Rural Education*. (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Education, Office of Educational Research and Improvement, Programs for the Improvement of Practice, 1994).
21. F. Johnson, *Assigning Type of Locale Codes to the 1987-88 CCD Public School Universe*. (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Education, Office of Educational Research and Improvement, National Center for Education Statistics, 1989).
22. R. A. Herriot, *School District-Level Statistics From the Decennial Census*. (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, 1992).
23. Roger Herriot, the NCES project director for SDDDB, and Joyce Stern, the rural coordinator, Office of Educational Research and Improvement, worked closely with a subcommittee of the rural coordinators of the regional educational laboratories chaired by John R. Sanders, Appalachia Educational Laboratory, in modifying the original plans for the classification of school districts in the SDDDB to ensure that a more useful delineation of rural systems is reflected in this data bank that, as suggested, promises to be one of the most powerful analytical tools available.
24. L. D. Bender (ed.), B. L. Green, T. F. Hady, J. A. Kuehn, M. K. Nelson, L. B. Perkinson, and P. J. Ross, *The Diverse Social and Economic Structure of Non-metropolitan America*. (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Agriculture, Economic Research Service, Agriculture and Rural Development Division, 1985).
25. M. A. Butler, *Rural-Urban Continuum Codes for Metro and Nonmetro Counties*. (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Agriculture, Economic Research Service, Agriculture and Rural Economy Division, 1990).
26. The GAO merely followed the prevailing practice used in most federal reports that attempts to establish the geographic distribution of assistance programs. The county is the unit of analysis generally used. These are classified as metropolitan (those having a population of 50,000 or more) or nonmetropolitan, or rural (all other counties not meeting this threshold).
27. President's Council on Rural America, *Revitalizing Rural America Through Collaboration*. (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Agriculture, Rural Development Administration, 1992).
28. *Rural Development: Federal Programs that Focus on Rural America and Its Economic Development*. (Washington, D.C.: U.S. General Accounting Office, 1989), pp. 51-53.
29. The GAP merely followed the prevailing practice used in most federal reports that attempt to establish the geographic distribution of assistance programs. The county is the unit of analysis generally used. These are classified as metropolitan (those having a population of 50,000 or more) or nonmetropolitan, or rural (all other counties not meeting this threshold).
30. *U.S. Department of Education, The Current Operation of the Chapter I Program 1987*. (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Education 1987) p. 17.
31. E. J. Dubin, *Geographic Distribution of Federal Funds in 1985*. (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Agriculture, Economic Research Service, Agriculture and Rural Economy Division, 1989).
32. E. R. Stephens, *An Exploratory Profile of Federal and State Policies and Programs and Voluntary Efforts of Others Targeted on Rural, Small School Districts*. (Washington, D.C.: Council for Educational Development and Research, 1990).
33. *Stephens, An Exploratory Profile*, p. 100. The analysis of the workings of federal formula grants has been the subject of a substantial literature. for a comprehensive assessment of the major elementary-secondary formula grants to the states, see Barro (1990). For an equally useful discussion of the urban or rural bias present in most of the economic (e.b., unemployment rate, per capita income) social (e.g., poverty rate) and fiscal (e.g., population, fiscal effort, fiscal capacity) indicators used in the construction of formulae, see Reeder (1990).
34. ED did sponsor several national conferences in the mid-1980s that focused on rural education. It also created in the mid-1980s an internal working group that was intended to effect better coordination within units of the department. There is little evidence that this internal group achieved much success, an understandable outcome given the apparent lack of commitment by senior officials in the agency to carry out the ambitious goals of Secretary Bell's 1983 policy statement.
35. M. M. McMillen and P. Benson, *Diversity of Private Schools*. (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Education, Office of Educational Research and Improvement, National Center for Education Statistics, 1991).
36. "Pitched Battle Over Clinton Plan to Shift Chapter I Aid Seen." *Education Week*, 22 September 1993: 1 & 28.