



## Rural Education Achievement Program (REAP)

The Rural Education Achievement Program was conceived by AASA in 1998. It was included in the 2001 reauthorization of ESEA and has grown every year in strength among members of Congress and numbers of rural schools involved.

The Rural Education Achievement Program Reauthorization Act was introduced as HR 2446/S 1052. These stand-alone bills would make the necessary changes to improve REAP and ensure that school districts are accurately identified to participate in the program. The first change proposed in the reauthorization bills is the transition to new locale codes. Currently, eligibility for the Small and Rural Schools Achievement Program is restricted to school districts located within locale codes 7 and 8, the rural designations. These codes will transition to 41, 42, and 43 (rural fringe, rural distant, and rural remote) under the new system. District eligibility under the new codes should be similar to current law, although there is no way to ensure an absolute match between the old and new locale codes.

Eligibility for the Rural and Low-Income Schools Program was previously based on locale codes 6, 7, and 8 (rural and small town designations). Under the reauthorization, eligibility will also be based on 41, 42, and 43 but will also include 32, 33 (remote town and distant town). Because 32 and 33 are not a direct link to the previous code of 6, there will be some minor adjustments in eligibility.

Under the current law, if you are eligible for both programs, you are automatically enrolled under the Small and Rural Schools Achievement Program. This was done to prevent double dipping. Unfortunately, some schools eligible for the Small and Rural Schools Achievement Program do not receive a financial award due to their current levels of federal funding. The Rural Education Achievement Program Reauthorization Act will allow districts that are eligible for both programs but not receiving additional funding under the Small and Rural Schools Achievement Program to apply under the Rural and Low-Income Schools Program. This will affect approximately 200 school districts across the country.

Another proposed change switches the eligibility poverty measure from 20 percent Census poverty to 40 percent free and reduced-price lunch for those districts under the Rural and Low-Income Schools Program. Census poverty is an inaccurate measure of poverty for school districts, especially in areas where school district borders are not contiguous with county borders. In addition, the Census Bureau questions the accuracy of its poverty measure for any populations below 20,000 people, the size of the communities REAP seeks to target.

The last change the Rural Education Achievement Program Reauthorization Act proposes a shift in the sliding formula from the current \$20,000 to \$60,000 to a new scale of \$25,000 to \$80,000. This shift will help acknowledge changing costs since the program's initial introduction. In addition, it will

help school districts with populations from 450 students to 600 students take full advantage of the sliding scale. While this change will be beneficial for most school districts that receive funding under REAP, we will need to raise the overall funding level first to prevent funding shifts that cause school districts to lose funding. This change in the program will be predicated on REAP funding reaching the \$200 million mark. We are currently at \$173.5 million, so it is not an enormous leap, but we will need everyone's help.

### **Senate Threats to REAP**

The Senate Health, Education, Labor and Pensions Committee released its proposals dealing with REAP Reauthorization in the fall of 2007. AESA was disappointed to see that the changes were not inline with the REAP Reauthorization Bill. That bill will likely continue to serve as the basis for the Senate reauthorization discussion. The Senate discussion draft made no changes in the eligibility requirements for the Small and Rural Schools Achievement Program, except to update the locale code to the newer versions as expected.

The eligibility problems are more apparent in the Rural and Low-Income Schools Program. Current law eligibility requires eligible districts to be in locale codes 6, 7, or 8 (rural or small town designations). However, the Senate discussion draft proposes elimination of any locale code 6 from eligibility. When the Senate updated the locale codes for the Rural and Low-income Schools Program, it only carried over the locale codes for 41, 42, and 43, which are equivalent to codes 7 and 8. Eliminating small towns from eligibility would knock out 662 districts from the Rural and Low-income Schools Program. The Senate's argument is that these districts are not rural. We believe that the districts proposed to be eliminated would argue otherwise.

In addition, the Senate failed to include the use of free-and-reduced-lunch poverty as part of the eligibility criteria. Instead they chose to rely on 20 percent census poverty, despite its inaccuracy for rural school districts. Luckily the House discussion draft includes the switch to 40 percent free-and-reduced-lunch, so there is still a chance that the Senate version will include this change.

Finally, the Senate did not increase the sliding scale for the Small and Rural Schools Achievement Program. Failure to address these funding concerns will prevent small rural schools from receiving the resources they so desperately need. Again, the House draft includes the formula change so hopefully we can prevail in the end.

We need to work hard to fight the Senate proposal and make the needed changes.

### **REAP in FY11 Budget Proposal**

President Obama's FY11 budget proposal included an alarming call to not only level fund REAP, but to allow the Secretary to set aside an undetermined portion of REAP funds "...for technical assistance, evaluation and dissemination activities, as well as make competitive grants to support innovative programs that help rural districts overcome capacity constraints." AESA strongly opposes the use of competitive funding within REAP. While Congress has demonstrated no interest in such a provision and the Administration has seemed to let up on this specific proposal, make sure to let your Senators and Representative know that one of the strengths of the REAP program is that it is free of the administrative capacity burden that comes with competitive grants.

This summer, the Department issued a program report outlining how well REAP's Rural and Low Income Schools program is working. It clearly mentions how much school administrators were able to accomplish with the flexible formula dollars. While the report does not establish a causal relationship between REAP dollars and academic gains, it does report, "...from the 2002–03 school year to the 2007–08 school year, the rate of academic improvement in mathematics and reading for districts that received RLIS funding was significantly greater than for non-RLIS rural districts."

**Talking Points:**

1. Urge your Representatives and Senators to cosponsor for HR 2446/S 1052, the Rural Education Achievement Program Reauthorization Act, that would create the necessary improvements in REAP to ensure that rural school districts receive the necessary federal assistance.
2. Urge your Senator to oppose the proposed harmful changes in the Senate committee draft of ESEA. These proposed changes will hurt rural schools and fail to recognize their unique situations. Without some direct input from around the country, it will be difficult to protect the program from these proposed changes.
3. Let your Senators and Representative know how important the continued flexible formula funding of REAP is to the program's continued success. Let them know about the Department's report and point out the disconnect between supporting a formula program that is proven to work and calling for competitive grants.