

POLICY BRIEF

SPECIAL EDUCATION AND DISABILITY SERVICES IN RURAL AREAS

The American Council on Rural Special Education (ACRES) is the only professional organization dedicated to the provision of quality special education and disability services to children and adults in rural areas. The leadership and members of this group are concerned that 1) rural schools experience significant difficulty in complying with the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) and the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB); and 2) current federal policies and practices place rural students with disabilities and the schools that serve them at serious risk. Shortages of special education personnel are acute across the country, but have been consistently more severe in rural areas, so students with special needs in rural school are more likely to be served by untrained educators working on out of field authorizations or emergency permits. These teachers lack the skills (and rural schools often lack other resources) to enable students with disabilities to achieve adequate yearly progress in meeting state content standards (mandated by NCLB) or accomplishing individual education program (IEP) goals (required by IDEA).

Facts about Rural Special Education

Rural schools face unique challenges in meeting the needs of students with special needs:

*About 22% of all U. S. schools are considered rural and 21% are considered small schools (total 43%); 31% of all students attend rural or small schools; 64% of those students attend high-poverty schools; in 20 states (mostly in the South, Appalachia and the upper Midwest, over 30% of students are in rural schools (Rural School and Community Trust).

*Many of the most rural states (especially in the South) have the highest percentage of people with disabilities (almost 25% regionally compared with 19% nationally); minority groups represent a higher proportion of the population in many rural areas and a higher percentage of minorities have disabilities (20-24%) compared with Whites (18%) (Disability Census 2000).

*Students with disabilities represent just 10% of population in non-rural schools, but over 11% of the population in rural schools (U.S. Department of Education).

*Approximately 10-15% of special education positions in all schools, but 20-30% of positions in rural schools are staffed by individuals who are not fully qualified for that area of specialization (American Association for Employment in Education, U.S. Department of Education).

*The attrition rate is slightly more than 6% per year for general educators; over 7% per year for all special educators; nearly 10% for general educators in rural areas; and as high as 100% for rural special educators over a 3 year period (Center on Personnel Studies on Special Education).

*Only 6% of all grants awarded for research, personnel preparation, or model projects by the Office of Special Education Programs (OSEP) in the past 10 years had a distinctly rural focus.

*Doctoral programs produce only 250 graduates per year, but only 50% seek faculty positions; consequently, 30% of all special education faculty positions remain unfilled; colleges and universities in rural areas are most likely to need to re-advertise over several years and/or to lose unfilled positions (Higher Education Consortium in Special Education).

*Research designs and program models developed for and implemented in urban and suburban areas may not be applicable to rural settings and little research is available on what works in rural schools.

*Representatives from rural states in both the Senate and the House have joined forces to form a Rural Caucus to address the concerns of rural schools.

Solutions for Rural Special Education

To remedy this situation, ACRES recommends the following initiatives:

1. include rural as a priority in all federal grant initiatives under IDEA and NCLB to stimulate research, program development, and preservice/in-service training related to rural special education;
2. target a major percentage of State Incentive Grant (SIG) SIG funding to support partnerships between institutions of higher education and local education agencies in rural areas to explore how technology applications may promote access to personnel preparation and staff development for teachers and therapists, facilitate consultative services for students with disabilities, and promote collaborative efforts in research and model program development;
3. establish one or more programs to provide incentives to assist rural schools in recruiting and retaining qualified special education personnel and to help colleges and universities make preservice and in-service programs more accessible to rural areas (such provisions included in The Enhanced Teaching Effectiveness Act of 2004); and
4. allocate funding to support one or more institutes for the study of rural special education to analyze, conduct, and disseminate research related to service delivery and personnel preparation and to serve as a clearinghouse and technical assistance center for collection and dissemination of evidence-based practices to parents, professionals, and the general public.

The members of ACRES believe such initiatives are especially important NOW -- first to insure that rural schools can meet the requirements of IDEA in providing a free appropriate education for all students with disabilities; and second, to assist these schools in meeting NCLB mandates for highly qualified personnel and adequate yearly progress in achieving educational outcomes.