

MEETING THE CHALLENGE OF RURAL PRE-K

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Overview

Due to the ever increasing evidence of the advantage of prekindergarten more and more states have begun investing money into quality pre-K programs. However, providing the same early education opportunities to rural children is a challenge for policymakers. State and federal support for education is critical in rural communities where school districts often lack a sufficient tax base to adequately support pre-K-12 education. This paper summarizes the challenges in providing pre-k in rural areas and proposes a new federal investment to improve the availability of high-quality, voluntary pre-k for children living in rural America.

Rural Pre-K as a Federal Responsibility

The federal government has assumed a share of the responsibility for providing public education to specific, enumerated groups of children, including the poorest children assisted by Head Start and Title I. The lack of resources and funds at the state justifies a new federal investment to expand the availability of high-quality pre-k for children in rural areas. Effective legislation to support rural pre-k would incorporate the following principals:

- *Formula grants* – This method of distributing grant funds preserves the benefits of competition among states and supports rural schools and providers.
- *Economic incentives* – As an important part of a high-quality school system, pre-k can help to sustain rural communities by giving families a strong incentive to move into or continue to live in a rural community.
- *Funding formula* – providing pre-k funding through state school funding formulas helps pre-k providers plan for subsequent fiscal years.
- *Expanded school day* – In rural areas, extended school days are essential to facilitating participation for families that face long commutes to and from the school or pre-k center.
- *Building on Head Start* – To reach more children in rural areas, rural pre-k providers can build on the foundation that Head Start has put in place.
- *Transportation* – Federal funding for pre-k in rural communities can include allotments for safe and efficient means of transportation.
- *Facilities* – Congress can help rural communities provide pre-k settings that are both accessible and developmentally appropriate by enacting legislation similar to the facilities provisions in the Head Start statute.
- *English language learners* – Federal funding should allow providers to use funds to implement programs that benefit students of limited English proficiency.
- *Teacher workforce* – Well-educated pre-k teachers are a crucial part of a high-quality classroom. In an increasingly competitive market, rural schools are at a disadvantage in recruiting highly qualified teachers.

Conclusion

Children in rural America typically attend school in communities with limited resources to support education. These factors contribute to the marked shortage of high-quality pre-k programs in rural areas. Many states and school districts are working to overcome the challenges to providing rural pre-k, but the federal government has yet to offer support. As states across the country boost funding for pre-k and enrollment levels continue to climb, federal lawmakers should seize the opportunity to ensure that children in rural areas will not be overlooked.