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Rural Research Brief

Special Challenges of the "No Child Left Behind" Act for Rural Schools and Districts

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Across the country, states are concentrating efforts to meet the requirements and the spirit of No Child Left Behind (NCLB). The implementation provisions and timelines are demanding and challenging for all districts. NCLB is particularly daunting, however, for rural and small districts. This paper outlines the characteristics of rural schools and districts that create special problems in implementing the legislation and summarizes the major challenges of the NCLB for these districts.

Characteristics of Rural Schools and Districts

The following characteristics of rural and small schools make implementing NCLB particularly problematic.

1. **Rural schools and districts tend to be small**. Thus the number of students who take any particular test is small. Low numbers of "test-takers" create special statistical challenges in using state assessment plans to make reliable and valid judgments about academic performance.
2. **Rural schools in many locations are poor and often have large concentrations of minority children**. Traditionally, students from poor families and communities do not perform as well academically as those from advantaged backgrounds. Poor minority students are especially vulnerable to this "achievement gap." Helping these students achieve "adequate yearly progress" (AYP) targets and reaching 100% proficiency within 12 years will be difficult.
3. **Many rural districts are in financial distress**. Since complying with NCLB will require additional financial investment, poor rural districts are at a disadvantage. Most states are struggling with decreased revenues and financially troubled education budgets. Rural schools, however, have other financial woes in addition. In many states, the funding formulas are inadequate and/or inequitable and small rural districts often suffer. Rural districts, in general, offer lower salaries than suburban and urban districts. Competing for the most qualified teachers, therefore, becomes difficult. Also rural facilities are in poor condition, which puts another level of financial strain on rural school budgets. In addition, in some rural places, decreasing enrollment has siphoned off per-pupil state aid, placing more burden on local communities.
4. **Rural schools in many states are situated in remote areas**. This physical distance creates problems in attracting new educators, in retaining educators, in meeting the NCLB requirements for providing school choice and supplemental services, and in offering high quality professional development for faculty. Accessibility is a big problem.
5. **There is a strong tradition of local control in many rural areas**. Though local control depends on each state's unique governance system, for many rural communities, local schools are community-centering institutions and local governance is an ingrained part of the culture. These are places where rural communities have strong connections with local schools and local decision-making is highly valued. NCLB's prescriptive nature, however, makes local control illusive.
6. **Many rural areas are experiencing depopulation and declining enrollment**. Rural areas losing population to out-migration are losing the younger, better-educated, and more upwardly mobile people. Those left behind are often a challenging population of older, poorer people with less education.
7. **Other rural areas are experiencing rapid population increases and rapid ethnic diversification**. Many rural communities are witnessing large numbers of new residents, often with very diverse ethnic and racial backgrounds. This has put new stresses on rural schools as they must accommodate both the challenges of rapid population growth and educating students with limited English proficiency for the first time.

Some of these characteristics are shared with many urban and some suburban districts. The significant challenges of poverty, of course, are not confined to rural areas. However, the convergence of these problems with the more unique rural characteristics causes additional burdens for rural districts. For example, remoteness, financial distress due to declining enrollments, and the unreliability of the statistics for small numbers of students add another dimension to implementation problems in many rural places.

Special Challenges of NCLB for Rural Schools and Districts

NCLB is designed to be challenging. However, because of the unique characteristics of rural schools and districts, NCLB's goals may prove to be unattainable, hence demoralizing and harmful. Some components of NCLB tend to ignore the characteristics and advantages of small schools and the uniqueness of rural contexts.

Some states have recognized these problems and have proposed strategies to reduce negative impact from the legislation. Below is an outline of the six major challenges that NCLB poses for rural schools. A list of state-specific examples and strategies is included when available. Though many of these challenges are shared with urban schools, the convergence of these difficulties makes NCLB especially precarious for rural schools.

1. Preventing small schools and districts from being misidentified as failing or "in need of improvement".

Issue: This is, by far, the major problem for rural small schools and districts. Small schools mean that few students take the assessment tests in each grade each year. Therefore, judgments about whether a school meets AYP are based on very few individual "pieces" of data. Statistically, the formulas used to determine AYP become unreliable with small sets of data. In addition, small numbers make comparing progress form one year to the next very unstable.[1] [1]

To deal with this problem, the U.S. Department of Education requires that all states designate a "minimum *n*" or "cell size" that will be used for AYP determination. State plans reveal a range from 5 to 200 (with other statistical requirements).

Examples:
North Dakota: About half of all school districts have fewer than 200 students;
Wyoming: 25% of all 4th grade classes have fewer than 10 students;
Alaska: 27% of all schools have fewer than 50 students.
Strategies:

a. *Use a higher "minimum n" or cell size*. Schools or subgroups in schools with very small numbers of "test-takers", below the minimum *n*, are then excluded from AYP calculations. (e.g., West Virginia, North Carolina, and Mississippi have "large" cell sizes of 40 or more).
b. *Use a Confidence Interval*. This statistical technique designates a "range" of scores that represent how well a school (or a subgroup) is doing, rather than portray results as a single number[2]. The purpose of this approach is to make judgments that are statistically reliable. This is similar to the "margin of error" that pollsters commonly use then reporting survey results. Confidence intervals produce wider "ranges" when there are fewer numbers of data points. This is a statistically sound method to ensure higher reliability for very small numbers (Coladarci, 2003). (e.g., Vermont, Montana, Wyoming, and Mississippi).
c. *Average assessment data across years*. States are permitted to average test data over the last three current years. This eliminates some of the random fluctuations from year to year (e.g., Montana, Arkansas, and North Dakota use three-year "rolling" averages).

2. Preventing schools that need help from being under-identified as "in need of improvement".

Issue: Large Minimum *n* or "cell size" may means that many small schools are not included in state assessment systems. Here, the solution to the main problem (over-identification) may have the byproduct of allowing some very small schools to "slip through cracks". That is, some schools that *need* technical assistance and state help may be "under-identified".

Strategies:

a. *Devise alternative ways to determine school progress*. (For example, Vermont, Nebraska, and Wyoming use a special "small school review" and assess every school, though outside of the AYP calculations).
b. *Use a confidence interval and NO minimum n*. All schools are included in AYP, but smaller numbers

[1] An example. Suppose in Rural Elementary there are 10 students in one particular subgroup, say Hispanic. Four of these students meet "proficiency" or 40%. If the annual target is 40% proficiency, then all is well. However, consider what happens if one student who meets proficiency standards moves. Then 3 students of the remaining 9 meet proficiency. The percent meeting proficiency for this subgroup now drops to 33.3%. The school would therefore be judged as not meeting AYP targets because of this random event. Small numbers make small schools very vulnerable to being misidentified as "failing" AYP

[2] Example: Suppose 50% of students in a very small subgroup meet or exceed the standards. Is this a true picture of their performance or a chance event? Using statistical formulas, a confidence internal may establish a range of plus or minus 10%, in order to be 95% certain that the results are reliable. Therefore, the subgroup results would be 40-60% proficiency. A very large number of students, however, may produce a range of only +/- 3%, or 47-53% proficiency.

result in a larger "range" representing each school's results. (Examples are Montana and North Dakota).

3. Maintaining confidentiality

Issue: All schools are required to publicly release assessment results, for the entire school and by subgroup. In small rural communities, the release of scores, especially by subgroups, may identify individual students.

Strategies:

a. *Increase minimum number for reporting purposes* (Range: 5-30).
b. *Report scores in more general terms for smaller populations*, such as "less than 5% of LEP students met the standards" (Maine is an example of this approach).

4. Staffing all rural schools with "highly qualified" teachers

Issue: States have until 2005 to ensure that all teachers are "highly qualified" according to NCLB definitions. States were to submit their plans by this May and outline their plans on how to guarantee that this occurs. Many states are still formulating their plans and this is still an emerging issue.

However, even prior to NCLB, many rural districts have had difficulty recruiting and retaining highly qualified teachers. Low salaries, remote locations, challenging students and school conditions make some rural locations less attractive to new teachers.

In addition, many rural teachers need to teach more than one subject. This is especially true in very small rural high schools. For example, it is common for one high school science teacher to cover all the sciences. Requiring content-specific college majors for each teaching assignment will present enormous (and expensive) challenges for rural districts, especially in hard-to-staff schools and in certain subject areas such as math and science.

Example:
Alaska: 20% of all schools have fewer than three teachers

Strategies:

a. *Create flexible certification categories*
b. *Give credit for prior experience and training* (Idaho is considering this)
c. *Offer scholarships and incentives to new teachers to work in "hard-to-staff" areas* (Mississippi)
d. *Ask for waivers from the "highly qualified" requirements and/or timeline* (Alaska)
e. *Utilize technology to offer a wider range of advanced subjects*, to a wider audience. Especially advantageous for advanced, specialized and AP courses

5. Limiting financial strains due to NCLB implementation

Issue: Implementing NCLB will be expensive. Many of the costs will be incurred at the state level. Others will filter down to the districts.

At the state level, the major cost issues will be in establishing the student data systems (hardware and software), in creating new assessments, and in offering the required technical support for districts "in need of improvement". Most states are already experiencing significant budgetary shortfalls and lack of capacity is a common occurrence.

At the local level in rural areas, there will be additional costs associated with offering competitive salaries to recruit (and retain) highly qualified teachers and instructional assistance. In addition, districts will be under pressure to offer more professional development to help teachers develop instructional expertise to meet the demands of NCLB. Also, the required rewards and sanctions will demand significant financial investment (see #6 below). Though some of the expenses related to supplemental services and choice will be subsumed by up to 20% of Title I funds, there remains a question of what will be eliminated to pay for these expenses, and if additional financial investment will be required.

The federal government acknowledged the additional costs of implementing NCLB in rural places by instituting the Rural Education Achievement Program. This initiative is designed to bring additional money to rural districts to overcome the added expense of their geographic isolation. Federal funding to compensate states and school districts for the mandates imposed by NCLB has been woefully inadequate so far, however, both generally and specifically for the REAP program.

Strategies:

a. Pressure Congress to fully fund the additional money that was supposed to accompany the law (Alaska, New Hampshire, Maine, Hawaii, Montana, and Vermont have passed or considered resolutions about not complying unless NCLB is fully funded as originally promised).
b. Collaborate with other states to save money (Maine, New Hampshire, Rhode Island, and Vermont are creating a consortium to develop new state assessments together).

6. Meeting requirements for "sanctions" in rural area

Issue: NCLB mandates specific sanctions when schools or districts do not meet certain targets. After two years of failing to meet AYP, districts must offer school choice and provide supplemental services. In many rural locations, these sanctions ignore the reality of the rural context. Choice implies that there are other schools in the same area, at the appropriate grade levels. And providing supplemental services assumes that there are service providers that are willing to travel long distances, or that parents are willing to bus their children long distances after school or on weekends. In any of these cases, the transportation costs can rapidly become prohibitive.

Example:
Alaska: In many remote areas, there are no "other" schools within hundreds of miles, nor are there roads connecting schools and villages.

Strategies:

a. Use other sanctions
b. Ask for waivers (Alaska)
c. Ignore choice regulations when choice is impractical (Vermont)

7. Other areas of concern

Though the six issues above illustrate the major problems for rural schools with the specific components of NCLB, there are other areas of concern. These, however, are focused on the broader philosophy of the law and many are shared with suburban and urban districts. Here is a list of a few of these other issues:

a. Standards vary so much between states, that requiring 100% proficiency has very different meanings in different states.
b. NCLB leaves almost no room for local values, local decisions and local control. Indeed, NCLB represents a much more active role of the national government and removes significant control over education away from states.
c. NCLB elevates testing to new levels of "high stakes". Many educators are concerned that this emphasis will led to curriculum "constriction" as teachers are increasingly pressured to "teach to the test". Educators worry that many learning opportunities and subjects not included in state assessments will be eliminated or reduced. Schools might hesitate to invest in more community-oriented activities such as place-based pedagogy, service learning, field trips, drama productions, etc. since these experiences won't directly improve test results.
d. For small districts and schools, failure to meet AYP will become fodder for those policy-makers who are pushing for consolidation. Though consolidation is frequently cited as a method to reducing costs, lower academic achievement may be used to justify closing small rural schools. And indeed, governance restructuring is on the "sanction list" and can be cited as meeting NCLB regulations.

Conclusions

NCLB is basically a suburban-urban law. In general, the law is insensitive to many of the needs and problems of rural schooling. It tends to overlook the reality of rural places. It allows little room for the values of rural communities. It puts small schools in a very vulnerable place. In spite of this rural-insensitivity, some states, especially those with significant rural populations, have recognized areas of NCLB that can be especially troublesome for rural districts and found ways to reduce the potential for negative impact.

NCLB is still in its infancy. This is the first year that districts and schools could be identified as "in need of improvement" under this current law. Many components of NCLB have yet to be implemented. Some regulations have yet to be issued. Many state plans have yet to be submitted and approved. How this legislation will impact rural students, schools, districts, and states is still an unfolding drama.

References

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