



Helping Rural Schools Make the Grade

During discussions on education reform, big cities typically dominate the agenda, leaving rural school districts to fend for themselves. There seems to be an assumption, at least at the national level, that the issues plaguing rural high schools are almost secondary to those of urban districts. With one out of four students from rural high schools failing to graduate, this assumption is utterly untrue.

A high school diploma was once sufficient for success in this country. But with two-thirds of the jobs in our fastest growing economic sector requiring some form of higher education, a college degree has never been more important. This is especially true if our students are to stay competitive in the globalized economy of the 21st Century. Unfortunately, only 17 percent of rural adults have completed a college education — half the percentage of urban adults. This disparity must be fixed.

Iowans can take pride in the support that our rural communities give to their local schools. The state has long been at the forefront of efforts that put an emphasis on quality instruction. We have tremendous potential to prepare our students with the education they need to succeed. Nevertheless, rural schools lack funds and face challenges often over-looked by our nation's policymakers.

To help address this issue I created the Harkin School Construction grants, because children cannot be expected to reach their full potential if the school they attend is crumbling around them. Since 1998 these grants have provided \$128 million in federal dollars to the Iowa Department of Education to make competitive grants for school repair and construction. Because the grants required a local match, over \$600 million has been leveraged for construction and repairs in over 300 Iowa school districts. I hope this method of using a small infusion of federal dollars to leverage construction and repair funding becomes a national model to provide all children with safe, modern school facilities conducive to world-class learning.

Another important way in which the federal government supports our rural schools is through the Rural Education Achievement Program. I am pleased that we were able to offer almost \$175 million to rural schools through this program this year, funds which can be used to meet needs ranging from school materials to teacher training.

This year the Senate will be reauthorizing 2001's Elementary and Secondary Education Act (also known as No Child Left Behind). As Chairman of the Senate Education Committee, as well as the Appropriations Subcommittee that funds education initiatives, I will be very active in shaping this legislation. During this process, I will work to ensure that policies are designed to meet the unique needs of rural schools to ensure rural students are given the tools and incentives to meet their full potential. Through these sorts of efforts, we can help our rural schools truly make the grade.

I'm very pleased to see Secretary of Education Arne Duncan making an effort to reach out and address the challenges that face rural school districts. During a recent meeting with superintendents from rural districts around the country, Duncan said, "Nearly every state has rural schools, which frequently lack resources, have trouble attracting teachers, and serve students living in areas with high concentrations of poverty. At the same time, we know that all children can learn with the appropriate support. We must learn from and replicate the many examples of success in small rural schools." Such strong support from the Obama Administration will be the wind at our backs as we make progress together in strengthening our rural schools.