



Federal Priorities Impacting K-12 Education in South Dakota

INTRODUCTION

Associated School Boards of South Dakota is a private, non-profit organization representing more than 850 school board members, the 152 South Dakota school districts they govern and the students they serve. As a federation member of the National School Boards Association, we support many of the recommendations NSBA has set forth to impact federal education policy.

This document outlines ASBSD's support for federal policy initiatives that would improve public education in South Dakota.

REAUTHORIZATION OF ESEA

ASBSD supports the key goals of ESEA, and particularly the need to set high expectations for our students and our school districts. However, South Dakota school board members believe the law can be improved while keeping the core beliefs intact.

ASBSD supports many of NSBA's recommendations for improving ESEA and looks forward to continued dialogue. Please refer to the NSBA Document "Recommendations for the Reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Act" for further perspective on the changes school board members believe should be made to ESEA. We urge Congress to act with urgency to renew the law this year. If Congress fails to work together to strengthen our nation's signature education policy, ASBSD strongly recommends giving local schools relief from the counter-productive sanctions written into current law.

Specifically, ASBSD supports improvements to ESEA in the following ways:

FLEXIBILITY: State and local schools have greater flexibility to make decisions at the local level. Local school districts should have freedom from federal mandates that often become burdensome or counterproductive.

ACCOUNTABILITY: Assessment and accountability systems should use multiple measures of academic achievement that reflect the skills and knowledge necessary to succeed in a 21st Century economy. Using growth models and other measures of student achievement will more accurately reflect student and school performance, allowing schools to focus on improving achievement instead of having to implement costly sanctions that can impede progress.

TITLE FORMULA FAIRNESS: Currently, Title I funding is not fair to small schools or rural states. The formula's reliance on state per-pupil spending as a determinant of federal funding rewards high-spending states with more Title I resources. In addition, weighting mechanisms in the federal formula seem to ignore high-poverty rural areas in favor of more densely populated urban areas.

A COMMITMENT TO FORMULA FUNDING: South Dakota, along with a coalition of rural states, is concerned about the Obama Administration's use of competitive grants, rather than formula funding, to spur innovation in America's public schools. Massive federal grant programs place rural states at a competitive disadvantage because rural states lack the resources – both financial and otherwise – to develop lengthy grant applications. Rather than base new investments in K-12 education in unproven grants, ASBSD encourages the administration to fund existing title programs, thereby freeing up local resources that local schools can use to initiate innovative programs based on the needs of the local student population.

LOW-INTEREST BONDING PROGRAMS

South Dakota is one of just a dozen states that does not have a state program to assist school districts with capital construction projects. Because facility construction is based on local taxable valuation, it is often difficult for South Dakota's schools – and particularly the state's most rural districts – to build safe learning environments for students. Low-interest loan programs, such as the Build America Bonds and Qualified Zone Academy Bonds, have helped school districts across South Dakota secure the financing necessary to upgrade and replace aging facilities. ASBSD strongly encourages the continuation of low-interest loan programs that will help revitalize South Dakota's school infrastructure.

RESPONDING TO THE NEEDS OF RURAL STATES

ASBSD shares the concerns of several rural state education officials and education advocates that President Obama's federal education policy is overly focused on reform for American's struggling urban schools. A host of federal priorities – from teacher quality to school accountability – look different when examined from a rural perspective. For example, the designation of highly qualified teachers may be more difficult in a rural setting, where schools may need to require multiple-subject teaching assignments to meet curricular demands. Accountability provisions, including school choice and supplemental services requirements, are also challenging for rural states.

As Congress examines federal education policy, we encourage the South Dakota Congressional delegation to collaborate with rural state lawmakers, rural state education officials and local school board members to ensure that rural states are provided with the flexibility to operate under the law and compete for competitive grants with rural-state solutions. We also encourage the U.S. Department of Education to continue to assess and provide for the needs of rural states.

E-RATE EXPANSION

The Schools and Libraries Program of the Universal Services fund, commonly known as "E-Rate," provides discounts to assist most schools and libraries obtain affordable telecommunications and Internet access. Because of E-Rate, the percent of instructional classrooms with internet access has jumped from 51 percent to 94 percent. The program has been particularly successful in South Dakota, where we consistently rank towards the top in access to technology. However, South Dakota's K-12 technology infrastructure is starting to show its age. The availability of adequate network bandwidth is limiting how schools integrate technology in our state's classrooms. As Congress debates both the National Broadband Plan and the future of the E-Rate program, ASBSD strongly encourages Congress to maintain its commitment to rural technology infrastructure.

ASBSD RESOLUTIONS

Built in to ASBSD's representative process is a mechanism to give local board members input on the direction ASBSD should take in seeking education policy change. In November of 2010, school board members passed resolutions relating to federal education policy.

- ASBSD supports full funding for all federal mandates, including the Individuals with Disability Education Improvement Act (IDEA) and the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA).
- ASBSD supports the reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, provided the federal policy is fully funded, provides for public school accountability and gives local school boards flexibility to develop education programs reflective of the diverse needs of the local student population and community.
- ASBSD supports the continuation of federal Medicaid Service provided to K-12 for providing health services to Medicaid-eligible students.
- ASBSD supports legislation to develop guidelines for disbursements of PILT (payment in lieu of taxes) fund from the county level to the school districts within the counties.
- ASBSD supports the reauthorization of the Child Nutrition Act, provided Congress appropriates adequate resources to improve school nutrition, fully funds any expansion of school lunch and breakfast programs, and does not impose burdensome regulation or mandates on schools outside of the federally subsidized meal programs.
- ASBSD supports action by Congress and the Federal Communications Commission to strengthen the E-Rate program and improve the quality and speed of Internet connectivity in our nation's K-12 schools; however, ASBSD opposes efforts to expand the E-Rate program to other entities until the needs of K-12 schools have been met.