

# Raise the Bar: Supporting Rural Communities



*Achieving Academic Excellence*  
*Accelerating Learning for Every Student*

**Goal: Attain student achievement levels that exceed pre-pandemic performance and close underlying achievement and opportunity gaps.**

*This document is part of the “Raise the Bar: Supporting Rural Communities” series, which is intended to highlight areas of strength and opportunities for growth in rural schools as it relates to Raise the Bar focus areas. To learn more about Raise the Bar, visit [www.ed.gov/raisethebar](http://www.ed.gov/raisethebar).*

## Introduction

“Raise the Bar: Lead the World” is the U.S. Department of Education’s (Department’s) call to transform public education and ensure all students have the resources needed to reach their full potential. **Achieving Academic Excellence** is a key focus area of Raise the Bar, which calls on the nation to ensure that students receive an education that prepares them to reach new heights of academic achievement by **accelerating learning**.

Rural communities face unique challenges in the pursuit of academic excellence, but also possess unique qualities that can set them up for success. This brief focuses on three relevant issue areas for rural communities in their work to accelerate learning: **(1) partnering for high-quality tutoring, afterschool, and summer learning; (2) blending and braiding funding; and (3) increasing everyday attendance.**

## High-Quality Tutoring, Afterschool, and Summer Learning

Increasing access to high-quality tutoring, afterschool, and summer learning has been shown to have a [positive impact on student learning](#). However, [School Pulse Panel](#) data shows that rural districts [may face certain hurdles](#) as they work to offer these programs, including staffing shortages, limited opportunities for local partnerships, and logistical challenges such as geographic distance between sites and transportation shortages.

In collaboration with researchers, experts, technical assistance providers, and other federal agencies, the Department has introduced cross-sector resources and partnerships to enhance student academic performance. [The National Partnership for Student Success](#) promotes high-quality, evidence-based student supports such as tutoring, and provides technical assistance to State Educational Agencies (SEAs) and Local Educational Agencies (LEAs) looking for [technical assistance](#), including help identifying partners that can provide more of these people-powered supports. [The Engage Every Student Initiative](#) supports student access to out-of-school learning programs. Additionally, in September 2024, the Department announced \$149 million in new [Comprehensive Literacy State Development Grant awards](#), allowing states and districts to continue to develop and implement evidence-based literacy interventions.



A champion of the Department's 2024 Engage Every Student Recognition Program, [Black Hills Special Services Cooperative](#), in western **South Dakota**, partnered with Rapid City Area School District and Rapid City to leverage nearly \$300,000 in Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief (ESSER) funding to double the capacity of their afterschool and summer learning program for K-12 students. The Cooperative engaged nearly 1,000 students in [Discovery Programs](#) designed to meet the diverse needs of students by providing academic support, fostering positive behavioral support and social skills, and offering engaging activities for both students and families. In addition to afterschool and summer learning, the Cooperative also supported a pilot of high impact tutoring during the school day in several Title I schools in Rapid City. The Cooperative used an evidence-based web program to support tutoring, increasing access for students from isolated areas. Additionally, they recruited a significant number of retirees to act as tutors, both utilizing a whole community approach and tapping into innovative resources, considering many rural geographies tend to have a [slightly older population in general](#). Tutoring sites saw an [average increase](#) in attendance of 27.6 percent from October 2023 to March 2024.

## Creatively Utilizing Resources | Blending and Braiding Funds

Many rural districts [face funding and resource challenges](#), including: higher costs to deliver services, challenges creating economies of scale, and absence of the local tax base to fund schools at the level of peer schools in more densely populated areas.

Federal funding sources such as the Department's [Rural Education Achievement Program](#) and the U.S. Forest Service's [Secure Rural Schools](#) program are designed to account for these disparities. Additionally, as of 2021, [34 states provide additional funding adjustments](#) for small and isolated schools via varying mechanisms. States and districts have had some success addressing budget constraints by working intentionally and creatively to blend and braid federal, state, and local funds to maximize services. Rural schools, while often the community hub, cannot address all student, family, and community needs alone, and often find they are better able to meet these needs working in close collaboration with community-based organizations, county governments, and the private sector. Additionally, states, districts, and schools work in partnership to blend and braid federal, state, local, and private dollars to fully meet the needs of rural students.

The Department has [provided information about activities to improve academic achievement](#). Federal funds can be braided or blended with state and local funds to support activities like high dosage tutoring or afterschool and summer school programs. For example, districts and schools can use \$18 billion in annual Title I funding alongside other funding streams to improve academic achievement.



[Morgan County Schools](#) in rural **West Virginia** utilized ARP funding, [21st Century Learning Center grants](#), and other resources to expand their summer and after-school programs that meet the needs of students. In addition to providing academic supports such as STEM activities and college and career support, ARP [funds also provided](#) food, transportation, wellness activities, and social-emotional resources.

Additionally, in September 2024, the Department announced the new Center on Fiscal Equity which will support states and districts in strengthening equitable resource allocation strategies, improving the quality and transparency of school fiscal data, and using formula funds to blend and braid federal, state, and local funds to sustain high-impact interventions started or expanded by [American Rescue Plan](#) (ARP) Funds.

## Increasing Everyday Attendance

Regular school attendance is critical to academic success, but rates of chronic absenteeism increased sharply during and after COVID-19. Additionally, chronic absenteeism nearly doubled in rural communities post-pandemic. Multiple factors may contribute to increased rates of absenteeism in rural communities: transportation barriers, student, and family health (physical and mental), and housing instability. Research shows that a sense of belonging and strong family engagement is central to addressing chronic absenteeism, which is an area where rural schools have an advantage. Due to the tight-knit interpersonal relationships that often exist in rural schools, a strong sense of community and meaningful one-on-one relationships can be an asset to rural schools working to encourage everyday attendance. Though chronic absenteeism has risen sharply in rural communities since the pandemic, [data suggest](#) that rural schools still struggle less with chronic absenteeism than their urban and suburban peers.

Program models such as [Full-Service Community Schools](#) and [Promise Neighborhoods](#) work to provide comprehensive, cradle-to-career, family and whole community supports, and can be used to address chronic absenteeism and support student engagement. At least 15 percent of awards for both programs must, consistent with the number and quality of applications received, serve rural areas. Similarly, the [Education Innovation and Research grant](#) provides funding to promote innovative programs that increase student achievement. This can include programs that aim to increase attendance, and at least 25 percent of funds must, consistent with the number and quality of applications received, be awarded to projects that serve rural areas. Formula funds [can also be used](#) to address chronic absenteeism, and the Department funds [the Student Engagement and Attendance Center](#), which provides technical assistance to state and local education agencies in their efforts to reduce chronic absenteeism and increase student engagement.



One Promise Neighborhoods grantee, the [Deer Creek Promise Community](#) in the **Mississippi** Delta, is working to increase attendance rates and student engagement. The Delta Health Alliance serves as the grantee and lead organization, working with two school districts, Leland and Hollandale, which each have an elementary school, middle school, and high school. Deer Creek promotes kindergarten development prior to kindergarten entry through maternal home visiting and connecting students to Head Start and other early learning transition programs. They also promote academic supports, including after-school tutoring and credit recovery programs. Through these interventions and individualized attendance plans for students who are chronically absent, Deer Creek had [boosted its graduation rate](#) from an average of 79 percent for years 2013-2017, which was prior to receiving the [Promise Neighborhoods](#) award, to an average of 90 percent for 2018-2023. Further, as chronic absenteeism increased substantially across the Delta post-pandemic, Deer Creek's chronic absenteeism rate (20 percent) remained well below average across the Delta (30 percent) and below average statewide (24 percent) in 2023-24.

## Questions for State and Local Policymakers

State and local policymakers working to remove barriers and increase support for rural communities to accelerate learning can consider the following questions as they develop strategies to advance this work:

### High-Quality Tutoring, Afterschool, and Summer Learning

- How is your state identifying barriers rural communities face when providing these kinds of programs? What supports and assistance does the state provide to help rural communities identify how federal funds (i.e., Title I, Part A, Title II, Part A, Title IV, Parts A and B, Rural Education Achievement Program, the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, Stronger Connections) and state and local funds can be used to address these barriers?
- Where do high-quality summer and after-school tutoring programs exist in your state, and are they distributed equitably among rural areas?
- How is your state/district recruiting highly qualified tutors to support student needs, particularly in rural and more sparsely populated areas?

### Creatively Utilizing Resources | Blending and Braiding Funds

- What technical assistance does your state provide to help rural districts strategically blend and braid federal, state, and local funds to meet whole-child needs?
- What is your state's and/or district's plan for sustaining high impact interventions started or expanded via American Rescue Plan funds?
- What successes have your rural districts and communities already had in creatively accessing resources, and how can you support their efforts to build upon these successes?
- What tools are you using to understand how districts and schools have used their federal funds over time?
  - For example, [the Department's School Spending and Outcomes Snapshot tool](#) allows the user to compare school spending and outcome data to evaluate their funding choices.

### Increasing Everyday Attendance

- How does your state and/or district consider accountability for addressing chronic absenteeism? Does it adequately consider the needs of rural, small, and geographically isolated schools?
- How are rural districts building upon preexisting community resources and supports to strengthen family engagement and empowerment?
- How are you using your data to identify rural schools and communities who are successfully promoting everyday attendance to identify promising practices to share with other communities?
- What touch points are available for connecting with families regarding student engagement and attendance, and how can they best be utilized?



*Disclaimer: The resources and examples listed here include links to information created by other public and private organizations. These links are provided for the user's convenience. The Department does not control or guarantee the accuracy, relevance, timeliness, or completeness of this non-Department information. The inclusion of these links is not intended to reflect their importance, nor is it intended to endorse views expressed, or products or services offered, on these non-Department sites.*