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Cover Page Footnote

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The Essential Role of Federal Government in Education: Protecting Rural Schools and Communities

Steven L. Johnson

The debate over the federal government's role in education has taken center stage in recent months, with many arguing that it is time to "hand education back to the states." While state control may sound appealing to some, this perspective overlooks the crucial role the federal government has played in establishing and protecting a public education system that benefits all students, especially those in rural communities. While I agree that bureaucracy in education can be an issue, many criticisms of that bureaucracy miss a key point: Much of the bureaucracy that is often condemned has been created by mandates from policymakers without the proper funding or support to make them effective. Federal involvement in education has not only provided the foundation for a fair and equitable system but has also ensured that civil rights are protected, national security is maintained, and a strong workforce is developed to sustain our economy.

As a fourth-generation North Dakotan, I have witnessed firsthand the shifting of populations, changes in local economies, and the unique needs of our communities. I continue to live and work in rural North Dakota, raising livestock with my family and staying closely connected to the everyday realities that shape our rural communities. I have worked directly with the local Farm Service Agency, reporting my acreage each year, and I have spoken with the local Social Security office to sign up for benefits. Over the course of nearly 50 years in education, working with both state and federal education agencies, I have always found these agencies to be very helpful and efficient. Internet access has significantly changed the way in which we complete reports, and finding more efficient ways to do our work should always be part of the process.

This policy brief focuses on why the federal government's involvement is particularly important for rural areas like North Dakota. Rural communities are often most vulnerable when federal policies are disregarded or rolled back, particularly when it comes to school choice and funding mechanisms that directly support rural schools. Living and working in North Dakota provides me with a unique perspective

on the challenges that our rural communities face. Over the years, I've seen how changes in our state's population and economy have hit rural areas hardest, with many communities losing their schools, businesses, and basic services.

Early Federal Involvement in Public Education

The foundation for public education in the US was established early, beginning with the Northwest Ordinance of 1787, which required new territories to create public schools and set aside land for that purpose. In North Dakota, this ordinance meant that Sections 16 and 36 of every township were reserved for public education. North Dakota's Common Schools Trust Fund appropriates millions of dollars each year to North Dakota's schools. Trust fund lands are federal lands given to the state to manage with the provision that the lands must benefit the public good, primarily by generating funding for public schools (Usher, 2011). In 2023–2025, the Trust Fund provided \$499.9 million to public schools in North Dakota. When North Dakota became a state in 1889, Article VIII of our state Constitution reinforced this commitment, stating that the state "shall make provision for the establishment and maintenance of a system of public schools which shall be open to all children of the state of North Dakota and free from sectarian control." Without the federal government's involvement through the Northwest Ordinance, the Common School Trust Fund, which is critical for the operation of public schools in rural communities, would never have been established. The Trust Fund serves as a legacy of the federal government's investment in the education system of North Dakota, supporting public schools and providing critical resources for students in rural areas.

The Morrill Act of 1862 strengthened this commitment by establishing land-grant colleges that focused on agriculture and mechanical education. North Dakota State University (NDSU), founded under the Morrill Act, continues to serve as the state's land-grant university, playing a vital role in both higher education and supporting the state's agricultural and technological sectors. From

agriculture to youth development, NDSU Extension Services bring research-backed programs to every county, helping rural North Dakotans build stronger communities and more resilient local economies.

The Federal Role in Protecting Civil Rights

The 14th Amendment to the U.S. Constitution, ratified in 1868, was designed to protect civil rights and ensure equity, stating that “no state shall deprive any person of life, liberty, or property, without due process of law” and guaranteeing “equal protection of the laws.” This amendment was a response to the states’ failure to protect civil rights, particularly in the wake of the Civil War and its aftermath. The federal government’s role has been to correct such state failures, ensuring that all students have equal access to a quality education.

While federal involvement in education helped to expand access, it was also essential to protect students’ civil rights. Throughout the history of public education, states have at times failed to protect the fundamental rights of students. Landmark court cases, such as *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka* (1954), declared that segregated schools were unconstitutional, showing that without federal intervention, many students—especially in Southern states—would have continued to face discrimination in education. In *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954), the U.S. Supreme Court ruled that “separate but equal” facilities were inherently unequal, mandating the desegregation of public schools across the nation.

Similarly, the courts have upheld the importance of freedom of speech in schools, as demonstrated in *Tinker v. Des Moines Independent Community School District* (1969), which established that students’ rights do not end at the schoolhouse door. In *Tinker v. Des Moines* (1969), the U.S. Supreme Court ruled that students have the right to express themselves in school if their actions do not disrupt the educational environment. This ruling reinforced the idea that public schools must uphold students’ civil liberties, and the federal government has been instrumental in ensuring that states comply with these protections.

Moreover, the federal government’s role in ensuring services for students with disabilities, through laws like the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA, 1990), has been vital in ensuring that students who might otherwise be excluded from public education receive the support they need to succeed. Federal protections against discrimination on the basis of race, sex, and disability

have ensured that public schools offer an inclusive, fair, and equitable education for all students.

The Need for an Educated Population

The importance of education to national defense and economic competitiveness has long been acknowledged by the federal government. In 1958, the National Defense Education Act (NDEA) was passed in response to the Soviet Union’s successful launch of Sputnik, marking a significant investment in improving education in science, mathematics, and foreign languages. This act recognized the importance of public education to maintaining global competitiveness and ensuring national security.

Today, the role of education in national security has expanded to include cybersecurity, data management, and the ethical use of artificial intelligence (AI). With the rise of cyber threats and AI-driven industries, it is critical that we prepare our students to navigate and secure digital infrastructures. Educating students on the importance of digital security, their digital footprint, and the impact of AI on industries will ensure that the next generation is ready to lead in a technology-driven economy. AI, data skills, and digital literacy must become integral parts of school curricula to prepare students for the workforce and maintain our competitive edge.

Higher education and career and technical education (CTE) programs have played a critical role in preparing students for the workforce. For rural communities, these institutions provide access to education and training necessary for maintaining a competitive workforce. Federal funding has supported research at universities and CTE programs, making it possible for students to develop the skills necessary for careers in technology, agriculture, and healthcare. Many high school juniors and seniors in rural schools access dual enrollment opportunities through North Dakota’s dual credit program, which allows students in grades 10 through 12 to take college courses and receive college credit that may also be used to meet high school graduation requirements. This initiative helps bridge the gap between high school and higher education, offering rural students valuable opportunities to further their education without leaving their communities.

Federal Role in Ensuring Equality Across States

While states bear primary responsibility for education, federal funding is intended to ensure that all students, regardless of geography, have access to a

quality education. Programs like Title I of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1968 have been crucial for schools in rural areas, providing funding to close achievement gaps and support schools with high poverty rates. Federal funding is not merely supplementary—it is often a lifeline for rural schools.

The Rural Education Achievement Program (REAP) helps address the specific challenges of rural schools by offering financial support through two sub-programs: Small, Rural School Achievement (SRSA) and Rural and Low-Income School (RLIS) programs. These funds help rural schools navigate fiscal limitations, teacher shortages, and declining enrollments. The REAP program was designed to reduce bureaucracy by eliminating administrative fees often charged by state education departments, ensuring that more money directly reaches the classroom. This program is essential in ensuring that rural schools have the resources needed to thrive.

Impact Aid, administered through the U.S. Department of Education, and the Secure Rural Schools Program, through the U.S. Forest Service, both provide critical funding for rural schools located on or in counties with federal lands that do not contribute to local property taxes. This support is especially vital in rural schools, which often lack the resources to provide specialized services. Similarly, the U.S. Department of Agriculture's (2025) child nutrition programs ensure that all students have access to nutritious meals, regardless of their socioeconomic status.

The federal E-Rate program has been a game-changer for rural schools, providing affordable internet access and technology, bridging the digital divide. Through the Schools and Libraries Program, E-Rate helps schools and libraries obtain discounts on telecommunications and internet access. This program has been critical in rural areas where reliable internet can be scarce. E-Rate ensures that all students, no matter where they live, have access to the technology and online resources needed for modern education.

In the area of CTE, the federal government provides funding through the Carl D. Perkins Career and Technical Education Act. This funding supports the development of CTE programs that equip students with the skills and knowledge they need to succeed in the workforce. For rural schools, CTE programs are especially important, as they help prepare students for careers in industries that are crucial to the local economy, such as agriculture,

manufacturing, and technology. As technology and digital skills become increasingly vital in every field, incorporating AI, digital security, and data management into CTE programs will ensure that rural students are well-prepared for the workforce. These skills are essential for the future economic success of rural communities, helping them remain competitive in a rapidly changing world.

Rural Schools and Communities: Meeting Challenges Over Time

Rural communities like those in North Dakota face a variety of challenges that go beyond the scope of education alone. The population shift from rural to urban areas continues to accelerate, and with it, the difficulties of providing essential services in our communities. Among these are issues related to the care of the elderly, access to childcare for young working families, labor shortages, housing, infrastructure, and economic development. These interconnected problems are part of a larger challenge facing rural communities—ensuring that small towns remain vibrant, sustainable, and able to provide a quality life for all their residents.

Public education plays a pivotal role in meeting these challenges. For example, schools are not just places for academic learning; they are integral to community development. Many rural schools serve as community hubs, offering resources and support that extend far beyond the classroom. For example, if childcare options are scarce, schools might provide afterschool programs that serve as a form of childcare for working families, easing the strain on parents who are juggling jobs and family life.

Similarly, schools can play a role in addressing labor shortages by providing CTE programs that help students gain skills that are directly aligned with the needs of the local workforce. By partnering with local industries, schools can equip students with the skills necessary to fill critical labor gaps in fields like agriculture, manufacturing, and healthcare. In this way, public schools are not just preparing students for higher education—they are helping to meet the economic needs of their communities.

Public schools can also address housing and infrastructure challenges. Schools, particularly those in rural areas, are often among the largest employers in their communities. By working with local governments and businesses, schools can be part of broader economic development plans that include improvements in infrastructure, housing, and public services. This collaborative approach can help

stabilize local economies, attract new residents, and ensure that existing residents have access to affordable housing and quality services.

Conclusion

The evolution of rural schools and communities in North Dakota is a testament to the resilience and adaptability of these areas. From 4,700 school districts in 1918 to just 166 today, changes in the educational landscape mirror broader demographic shifts that will continue to present challenges for rural areas. The federal government's role in supporting these schools—through funding, civil rights protections, and the promotion of education—

has been crucial to the survival of these communities. We must ensure that help and resources go directly to our students and classroom teachers—those on the frontlines of education—rather than funding more layers of bureaucracy. As North Dakota continues to experience population shifts and the challenges associated with rural life, it is essential that we continue to prioritize the needs of rural schools and communities. The time has come to put aside political divides and work together, with bipartisan support for federal education programs, to ensure that all children, no matter where they live, have access to a high-quality, equitable education. The future of our rural communities depends on it.

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