

# United States Senate

January 18, 2018

The Honorable Betsy DeVos  
Secretary  
Department of Education  
400 Maryland Avenue SW  
Washington, DC 20202

Dear Secretary DeVos:

I write to provide feedback on your request for information about supporting rural schools. I want to highlight three particular issues that pose significant challenges to rural schools in Montana: recruiting and retaining teachers, applying for funding under the Rural Education Achievement Program, and ensuring that school websites comply with accessibility requirements. By providing additional consideration, consultation, communication, training, and technical assistance to rural school leaders on these issues, the Department of Education will help provide students in rural communities across America with the support they need to meet their full potential.

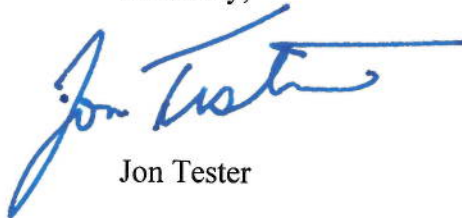
I have introduced two pieces of legislation—the NEST and REST Acts—to help rural schools, including those serving Native American students, attract and keep high-quality educators. This legislation would provide scholarships, loan forgiveness, and National Board Certification support to teachers and administrators in rural schools. I wrote this legislation based on the requests of Montana educators to address the educator shortage in rural schools. I urge you to convene rural education stakeholders to develop a proposal like this for the Department to request and advocate for in its 2019 budget proposal.

I have written to you previously about barriers that some Montana schools faced when trying to access Rural Education Achievement Program grants this year, after the Department required a new and cumbersome application process for these funds. In its preliminary Section 5005 Report on Rural Education, the Department acknowledges that rural schools often lack staff with expertise in meeting the bureaucratic requirements of grant applications. In that preliminary report, the Department proposes taking concrete steps to simplify applications and provide step-by-step training to rural school staff on filling and submitting grant applications. I enthusiastically encourage you to follow through on this proposal, and take it a step further by implementing clear procedures by which school staff can address any problems with their grant applications after the application window for those grants has closed.

I will take this opportunity to reiterate my earlier request that the Office of Civil Rights within the Department provide training and technical and financial assistance to small and rural schools to resolve complaints about the accessibility of their websites to individuals with disabilities. Montana's rural school leaders are committed to ensuring that all people have access to a high-quality education. However, they can lack the technological expertise and financial resources necessary to meet all the regulatory requirements that apply to website accessibility. I encourage you to consult with rural school stakeholders to develop ways to resolve these complaints that consider their limited resources and do not break the bank.

These requests come straight from the ground from the folks who work hard every day to provide bright futures for students in Montana's rural communities. It is crucial that the Department listen to the needs of Montanans and rural Americans about how to strengthen public education and ensure every student has a shot at success. I appreciate your attention to these requests, and I look forward to your response.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read "Jon Tester". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a long horizontal stroke extending to the right from the end of the name.

Jon Tester