

# United States Senate

February 26, 2020

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

Dear Secretary DeVos:

I write today to express my strong opposition to the Department of Education's decision to cut more than \$400,000 from Montana's most remote, low-income school districts. The Department unilaterally decided to alter state eligibility data for the Rural Low-Income Schools (RLIS) Program without warning to state education agencies and without any regard for the negative impact on rural school districts. The Department should be focusing on elevating school districts with the fewest resources instead of punishing small schools with harmful last minute policy changes. I urge you to immediately reverse course on this misguided Washington, D.C., decision to alter eligibility requirements for RLIS and refocus on helping small rural schools.

Since Congress authorized this funding in 2002, Montana education officials submitted school district poverty data to the Department of Education based on the number of students receiving free or reduced school lunch. Based on this data, in 2019, 336 schools in Montana qualified to participate in RLIS. Your Department's abrupt and inexplicable decision to throw out this data and, instead, rely on the Census Bureau's Small Area Income and Poverty Estimates (SAIPE), will mean that only 116 schools across Montana will qualify. In other words, 220 schools that rely on these programs will lose more than \$400,000 in funding, a 102 percent decrease in federal investments in this critical program. This is unacceptable.

The Rural Education Achievement Program (REAP) under Title V, Part B of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) is the only dedicated federal funding to compensate for the hurdles facing rural schools. The RLIS program, authorized under REAP, provides support to schools and school districts that do not have the resources compete for federal grants. Many educators in these districts work twice as hard for half of the funding, and that's not right. The funds from RLIS seek to close the gap for these resource-strapped school districts.

It comes as no shock to anyone who is familiar with frontier America to know that Montana's most isolated, smallest schools are those that struggle the most to recruit and retain quality educators. Geographic isolation, lack of career advancement opportunities, and low pay only exacerbate these challenges. The absolute last thing that the Department of Education should be doing is taking resources and opportunities away from these schools. I ask that you immediately rectify this situation and allow school districts to submit the data they have been submitting for nearly 20 years. Montana students and students across rural America deserve more than an arbitrary bureaucratic decision in Washington.

Sincerely,



Jon Tester