

Senator Susan M. Collins
Introduction of the Success for Rural Students and Communities Act
January 8, 2020

I rise to introduce the *Success for Rural Students and Communities Act*, a bill that would help rural students achieve their higher education goals and connect their successes with economic opportunities in their own communities. I want to thank Senator Hassan for introducing this bill with me.

The *Success for Rural Students and Communities Act* aims to improve the outcomes for rural students who are pursuing higher education and skills-based credentials that will prepare them to meet the workforce needs of their home communities.

According to the 2010 Census, Maine is the most rural state in the country. Two out of three Maine schools are in rural communities, and more than half of Maine students attend those schools. While nearly 90 percent of the students in my state graduate from high school, only 62 percent enroll in higher education right away. According to a recent report by the Maine Department of Economic and Community Development, only 30 percent of Maine students go on to earn a two-year or four-year degree. So we have a huge disparity between the number of Maine students who graduate from high school and the number who are successful in graduating from some sort of higher education.

Maine's experience reflects the trends observed nationwide. Rural students tend to graduate from high school at higher rates than their peers in urban districts, and at about the same rate as their peers in suburban schools. But, only 59 percent of rural graduates enroll in college upon graduation, which is a lower percentage than their counterparts in urban and suburban areas.

The *Success for Rural Students and Communities Act* would help spur innovation and investment in strategies that would improve college access and success for rural students. It would create a demonstration program to encourage rural community stakeholders to partner together to help their students go to college or other post-secondary education, complete this education, and go into the workforce. These partnerships would draw on the talents of local school districts, institutions of higher education, regional economic development entities, rural community organizations, and the private sector. The bill encourages these partnerships to develop and implement strategies to help students and their families navigate higher education opportunities and addresses the barriers that stand in the way of their achievement.

For example, the bill calls for partnerships to coalesce around approaches that boost higher education enrollment rates for rural students by exposing students and their families to college campuses, courses, internships, and to the career pathways to jobs at home. These partnerships could also focus on the enrollment and completion rates of rural nontraditional students who may need additional credentials or who once began, but did not finish, higher education credentials. Successful partnerships would be required to disseminate best practices.

To meet the demands of today's workforce, many employees will need a credential beyond a high school diploma – perhaps a college degree, a skilled trade credential, or a professional certificate. The *Success for Rural Students and Communities Act* encourages schools and employers to forge partnerships that will put students on pathways into the high-demand jobs available where they live. So that helps a rural community. It helps them keep their young people. It helps them keep people who have the education and the skills that those communities need to be vibrant and successful, to have strong economies. The bill highlights a number of strategies that could be developed and tested, including work-based learning opportunities such as apprenticeships, internships, and stackable credentials that make up a sequence of courses on the path to a certain skill or job. I have toured apprenticeship programs in Maine, including one that helps to train people for jobs in forestry. I've seen first-hand how successful those apprenticeship programs are.

When rural students enroll in college, they often face barriers that prevent them from graduating, and that's why I have been a big promoter of student success programs. I've seen a very effective one at the Eastern Maine Community College in Bangor where students are helped with whatever the barrier is that is preventing them from completing community college. In some cases it's the need for some mentoring, in others, tutoring in some areas. In other cases it's simply a short-term loan in order for them to fix their automobile so they can get to class. In another case, it's child care needs. But whatever the barrier is, if we can help these students they will be able to complete this education. Many are the first in their families to attend college, which means they may have a more difficult time finding information about financial aid or selecting an educational program that meets their needs. With the right supports in place, more and more rural students can complete their post-secondary education.

Let me give you a great example of the type of program that I am talking about that would fulfill the goals of this legislation. In Maine's Aroostook County, where I was born and raised and where much of my family still lives, the Aroostook Aspirations Initiative is using this kind of model to help put students on pathways to academic and career success. Launched with a generous donation from local philanthropic partners, Aroostook Aspirations provides scholarships to high school students in Aroostook County who are seeking post-secondary education. The Initiative collaborates with local colleges and universities, including the University of Maine at Presque Isle and at Fort Kent, Northern Maine Community College, and Husson University. It works with area businesses and entrepreneurs to offer seminars that guide students throughout their college educations—the kind of mentoring that I was referring to. Students can team up with Aroostook County employers through internships that give them experience in jobs that they wish to pursue or simply try out to see if it fits them. They create relationships with professional mentors, who help put them on the right path to entering the workforce. The *Success for Rural Students and Communities Act* would support dynamic programs such as the Aroostook Aspirations Initiative and encourage other communities to innovate in similar ways.

The *Success for Rural Students and Communities Act* would make a meaningful investment in the educational aspirations of rural students and their families and would strengthen the economy in rural America. By helping students succeed in reaching their

education and career goals, we can also enhance the skills of our workforce in rural America. I urge my colleagues to support our bill.

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