

SUSAN M. COLLINS  
MAINE

413 DIRKSEN SENATE OFFICE BUILDING  
WASHINGTON, DC 20510-1904  
(202) 224-2523  
(202) 224-2693 (FAX)

## United States Senate

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COMMITTEES:  
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The Honorable Betsy DeVos  
Secretary  
United States Department of Education  
400 Maryland Avenue, SW  
Washington, DC 20202-8510

Dear Secretary DeVos:

I am writing to express my opposition to the notification by the Department of Education that it plans to cut \$1.2 million from Maine's rural, low-income schools made available through the Rural Education Achievement Program (REAP) I coauthored in 2002 and reauthorized in the 2015 Every Student Succeeds Act. The law creates two programs – the Small Rural Schools Program and the Rural Low-Income Schools Program (RLIS) – that are critical to ensuring rural districts are able to overcome the unique challenges associated with geographic isolation and poverty.

For 16 years, the Department of Education has permitted Maine to qualify for the RLIS program by measuring school district poverty levels by the percentage of students receiving free lunch. Last year, 149 Maine schools were eligible for the RLIS program. The Department's abrupt decision to eliminate this eligibility flexibility and distribute funding based solely on the Census Bureau's Small Area Income and Poverty Estimates (SAIPE) will result in eliminating funding to more than 100 of those schools in Maine. Such a severe funding cut makes clear that there are serious deficiencies in relying on the SAIPE data alone to implement the RLIS program. Free lunch data is an important measure of poverty for rural districts. The Department should immediately reverse this misguided change and restore the use of alternative poverty data as an acceptable measurement, so that rural, low-income students, their teachers, and their school communities are spared from drastic cuts that will affect the quality of public education in rural America.

REAP is the only dedicated federal funding stream to aid rural school districts. Unfortunately, federal education formula programs typically do not allocate enough dollars to rural districts to carry out those programs' purposes. Also, small and rural school districts often forgo competitive grants because they lack the resources to compete for grants. REAP helps rural schools overcome these challenges by providing them with additional funding and flexibility. Decisions that curtail this flexibility run counter to the purpose of the law and undermine the effectiveness of these programs.

I urge you to use any and all possible interim measures and authorities to prevent such severe cuts for rural, low-income students and the RLIS program this year. If this decision is not reversed, the Department risks denying thousands of students living in rural Maine the chance to reach their full potentials. I look forward to working with you on this vital issue and request an immediate response.

Sincerely,



Susan M. Collins  
United States Senator