

Little Help for Rural School Innovation in Federal Grant Program

Only three applicants claiming rural bonus points made "authentically rural" proposals

["Taking Advantage: The Rural Competitive Preference in the Investing in Innovation Program"](#) report published by the Rural School and Community Trust

ARLINGTON, Va., Jan. 26, 2011 /PRNewswire-USNewswire/ -- The U.S. Department of Education's Investing in Innovation (i3) grant program did little to fund education innovations unique to high-needs rural schools, despite regulation requirements encouraging rural proposals.

Instead, projects that are largely urban in origin and design, managed by urban-centered institutions, and operating primarily in urban schools, were able to win bonus points in the competition by adding a small, sometimes token effort in a handful of rural schools.

These are the key findings of "[Taking Advantage: The Rural Competitive Preference in the Investing in Innovation Program](#)," a report published by the national non-profit Rural School and Community Trust, which analyzed all the proposals and Education Department review sheets for the 19 applicants that claimed the rural bonus points and were ultimately among the 49 applicants awarded i3 grants.

Only three of the applicants claiming the rural bonus points made "authentically rural" proposals, which, according to the Rural Trust, involved innovations that are expressly applicable in rural schools, are clearly focused on serving rural schools, and will serve high-needs students in rural schools.

According to Marty Strange, Policy Director, Rural School and Community Trust, and principal author, "It seems absurd on its face that a project, originating in and operating entirely within the city of New York and has no plan to offer anything to rural schools, can claim and receive a rural bonus point merely by arguing that the innovation might work later in some rural place." Strange added, "The idea that if something can make it in New York it can make it anywhere makes great music but bad public policy. We are not saying that proposal is not a good proposal and should not have been funded. We are saying it should not have claimed rural points and should not have been awarded rural points."

The preference for rural proposals was undermined by the fact that only token effort was required in rural areas to claim the bonus points, while the two-point bonus for doing so was more than that allowed other preferred areas, and because readers who scored the proposals were provided no rubric to guide them in assessing proposal's rural effort, according to the report.

Many of the readers were undoubtedly unfamiliar with rural schools and some gave points without much due diligence to the extent of rural effort or the appropriateness of the proposed innovation to a rural setting. This problem is aggravated by the paucity of rural education research to support proposal writers or readers who review their proposals.

"It is evident that many of the applicants were simply taking advantage of the rules of the game and the referees who scored the proposals were ill-prepared to call fouls," said Strange. He added, "Most awardees are serving urban and suburban schools and reflect little real engagement or effort connected with rural school districts."

The report offered the following key recommendations:

- To make competitive grants effective in rural settings, *Taking Advantage* suggests setting aside funds for rural schools or collaborations of rural schools;
- A requirement that the innovation be expressly designed to meet challenges that are unique to those schools; and
- Implement a system of "prior supports" to provide technical assistance to those applicants in the development of solid rural proposals.

Investing in Innovation (i3) Grant Program

The Investing in Innovation (i3) competitive grant program is the U.S. Department of Education's effort to support innovation in public schools and was funded through the American Reinvestment and Recovery Act.

To encourage projects focusing on rural education the Department offered two bonus points in the scoring system for projects that would implement innovative practices, strategies, or programs that are designed to focus on the unique challenges of high-need students in school within a rural school district and address the particular challenges faced by students in these schools.

Rural School and Community Trust

The Rural School and Community Trust is a national nonprofit organization addressing the crucial relationship between good schools and thriving communities. Our mission is to help rural schools and communities get better together. Working in some of the poorest, most challenging places, the Rural Trust involves young people in learning linked to their communities, improves the quality of teaching and school leadership, and advocates in a variety of ways for appropriate state educational policies, including the key issue of equitable and adequate funding for rural schools.

www.ruraledu.org

CONTACT: Robert Mahaffey

703-243-1487 x114 robert.mahaffey@ruraledu.org

CONTACT: Robert Mahaffey of Rural School and Community Trust, +1-703-243-1487 x114
robert.mahaffey@ruraledu.org