

Taking Advantage

The Rural Competitive Preference in the Investing in Innovation Program

Executive Summary



The Investing in Innovation (i3) program is a U.S. Department of Education competitive grant program supporting innovation in public schools. To encourage projects focusing on rural education in its first round of grants in 2010 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 schools within a rural [school district] and address the particular challenges faced by students in these schools.”

This report analyzes the impact of this “competitive rural preference” by examining the applications and the reader-scorers’ reviews of the 19 applicants who claimed the rural preference points, and were ultimately successful in securing an i3 grant. This report does not address the question of whether the applicants should have been awarded a grant, but only considers whether the rural claim was well-made by the applicants and well-evaluated by the readers.

Of 1,698 applications received by the Education Department, 652 (38%) made the rural competitive preference claim (“the claim”). Among the 49 grant recipients, 19 (39%) made the claim.

Most applicants making the claim propose using innovations that did not originate in rural schools and have had little or no prior use in rural schools. Although some proposals pledge to adapt the innovation to rural contexts, most are vague about this process. Some explicitly insist that the innovation not be adapted in any way, for the sake of fidelity to research design.

Only two proposals are designed to operate entirely in rural schools. For most, the proportion of the total project effort that is rural-focused is small relative to the scale of the project, or too indeterminate to be estimated. In one instance there was actually no intent to engage in any rural school district.

Two-thirds of the potential rural points were awarded by the readers who scored these 19 proposals. In many cases, readers made little or no effort to explain the basis for their scoring decisions and in most cases there was little evidence that readers gave attention to the requirement that innovations be designed to address “unique challenges” of rural students or schools.

In 15 of the 19 proposals, nothing in the readers’ comments indicates that the readers verified or even made note of the i3 requirement that at least one school district served by an applicant claiming the rural preference points be eligible for the Rural Education Achievement Program.

Our search for i3 proposals that were authentically rural -- that is, were based on innovations that are expressly applicable in rural settings, were clearly focused on rural schools, and would serve the kinds of high-needs rural schools specified in the final Education Department rule governing the i3 competition --was disappointing. In our judgment, only three proposals reach that level of rural centeredness. What we found much more of were proposals of urban origin and design, centered in urban institutions or organizations, serving primarily urban schools, reflecting little thought about rural context, and involving little more than enough rural participation to justify making the rural claim.

The high expectations established by the requirement that proposals making the rural claim be designed

to address unique challenges of high-needs rural schools and students were essentially undermined by four factors.

1. The low threshold of effort required to qualify as serving a rural constituency was an inducement to token rural inclusion in otherwise substantially urban proposals.
2. The fact that the rural claim was worth twice as much as any other competitive preference made it even more attractive to chase these points.
3. The failure to establish a scoring rubric by which readers should assess whether the proposal met the rural claim made it pliable to nearly any purpose. Unguided by such a rubric, many readers were too willing to award rural points on the flimsiest of evidence.
4. Most readers probably lacked rural experience, let alone expertise. This may be attributable in part to the paucity of rural education research in the United States. Coupled with a widely held point of view that challenges in rural education are not materially different from those in urban education, this lack of rural familiarity meant that for many readers, the bare minimum requirement that at least one rural school district be served was enough to earn the rural points.

Many of these applicants were simply taking advantage of the rules of the game. And the referees were ill-prepared to call fouls.

A better approach to the challenge of high-needs rural schools and their students might be setting aside a pool of funds for competition among similarly situated high-needs rural districts, giving priority to proposals in which the lead applicant is a rural district or a collaboration of rural districts rather than a non-profit or an institution of higher education. A program of “prior support” could be offered to help these districts before and during the application stage, including assistance in drafting and revising proposals and especially providing a research support capacity to help applicants design good research and find researchers who can do the supporting research. We need to invent a better national rural education research capacity, and i3 could play an important role in helping to do so.

Rural schools exist in a context that is fundamentally different from the urban context that draws most of the attention of education policy makers and scholars. Certainly, rural students and educators share many challenges common to the education process everywhere. But they also face unique challenges. Those are the challenges that proposals claiming the rural competitive preference in i3 were supposed to address. With only a few exceptions, they did not. Open competition is not the best way to encourage educational innovation in a rural context. “Making rural matter” in the quest for innovation will require greater attention to the distinct character of rural communities in our society, as well as greater reliance on rural people for their own ideas and for the ways by which ideas from elsewhere might be best adapted to their needs.