

Results in Brief:

Study of Experiences and Needs of Rural Education Achievement Program Grantees

December 2016

Rural schools often face a variety of unique challenges, such as geographic isolation, shortages of qualified educators, limited access to rigorous classes and enrichment activities to prepare students for college, and underdeveloped infrastructure. To help rural school districts address these challenges, in 2001 Congress established the Rural Education Achievement Program (REAP) which includes two programs: the Small, Rural School Achievement (SRSA) program and the Rural and Low-Income School (RLIS) program. Of the two programs, SRSA is designed for smaller and more isolated districts, and it provides funding and a flexibility authority known as REAP-Flex. REAP-Flex allows SRSA-eligible districts to use specific *Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA)* formula funds to support local activities for which they are allowed to spend their REAP funding to assist them in addressing local needs more effectively. RLIS serves rural districts that are generally slightly larger but have substantial concentrations of poverty, and it provides funding only. The U.S. Department of Education (the Department) awards SRSA grants directly to eligible districts based on a statutory formula, while it provides RLIS formula allocations to state education agencies, which in turn make subgrants to eligible districts by formula or by competition. This study examined state and district practices and perspectives regarding the REAP program based on data collected in 2015.

STUDY QUESTIONS

1. What role do states play in supporting the Department's SRSA and RLIS eligibility and award determination process?
2. How do districts use their SRSA or RLIS funds?
3. To what extent do SRSA-eligible districts use REAP-Flex and for what purposes?
4. What recommendations do states and districts have for improving the operation of the SRSA and RLIS programs?

STUDY DESIGN

The study included state telephone interviews, a survey of a nationally representative sample of districts, and follow-up telephone interviews with a subsample of the districts that completed their surveys. Interviews were conducted with state REAP coordinators in all 47 states that reported districts using REAP funds. The district sample included 669 SRSA grantees and 336 RLIS subgrantees; the combined response rate for the district surveys was 95 percent (634 SRSA and 316 RLIS district coordinators). District follow-up phone interviews were completed with 24 district coordinators (18 SRSA and six RLIS). Data collection took place between March and June 2015.

This study was conducted prior to the passage of the *Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA)* of 2015. Therefore, the findings reflect REAP as authorized under the *ESEA*, as amended by the *No Child Left Behind Act* of 2001. They do not represent implementation under the *ESEA* as amended by the *ESSA*.

Highlights

- States supported the Department in determining REAP eligibility by providing district-level data and reviewing the accuracy of Department-provided data.
- All 43 states with RLIS-eligible districts chose to make subgrants to districts on the basis of a funding formula rather than on a competitive basis, and 28 of these states based the subgrant amount entirely on average daily attendance (ADA).
- Districts most frequently used SRSA and RLIS funds to improve or expand access to technology (71 percent of SRSA districts and 71 percent of RLIS districts) and to provide educator professional development (45 percent of SRSA districts and 58 percent of RLIS districts).
- Forty-six percent of SRSA district coordinators reported exercising REAP-Flex authority; of these, 82 percent used it to maintain a stable level of funding for ongoing activities in 2014-15.
- The majority of both district and state REAP coordinators were highly satisfied with REAP as a whole. However, they provided recommendations for improvement to REAP in three categories: (1) improved timelines for eligibility and award determination, (2) more information on allowable uses of funds and REAP-Flex, and (3) revised eligibility criteria. We note that some districts and states made recommendations to requirements that are set by statute and therefore are beyond the authority of the Department to alter.

STATE ROLE IN THE REAP ELIGIBILITY AND AWARD PROCESS

Nearly all states with REAP districts in the 2014–15 school year reported that they reviewed the Department-provided eligibility data for accuracy and/or provided additional data.

Forty-three of 47 states reported reviewing the Department-provided data for accuracy. All 47 states reported providing additional data: 37 states reported using only state databases to provide ADA data to the Department, five states obtained this information from districts, and two from a combination of district and state sources. Three coordinators reported that they had submitted the data, but were not directly responsible for obtaining them and did not know the source.

All 43 states with RLIS-eligible districts chose to make subgrants to districts on the basis of a funding formula rather than on a competitive basis, and most of these states based the subgrant formula entirely on ADA.

Of the states with funded RLIS districts, four had only one eligible district and awarded all of their funds to that district. Twenty-eight states based their formula entirely on ADA, three states used both ADA and poverty data, and two states used only poverty data. Six state REAP coordinators were not directly responsible for administering the formula, and did not know which data were used to determine RLIS subgrants.

Although the majority of district and state REAP coordinators did not experience any challenges in the eligibility or award process, some expressed concerns about criteria used for determining eligibility, the timing of notification, and states' ability to provide technical assistance to their districts.

The majority of SRSA (59 percent) and RLIS (54 percent) district coordinators reported that they experienced no challenges in finding out whether their districts were eligible for REAP awards. However, two-fifths of REAP district coordinators reported they had finished their budget planning before they knew the amount of their award (44 percent for SRSA and 35 percent for RLIS). Six state coordinators noted challenges answering SRSA districts' questions about the federal eligibility determination process.

DISTRICT USE OF REAP FUNDS

REAP districts most frequently used their funds to improve or expand access to technology and to provide educator professional development.

The most frequently reported uses of REAP funds were to improve or expand access to technology (71 percent of SRSA and 71 percent of RLIS coordinators) and to provide educator professional development (45 percent of SRSA coordinators and 58 percent of RLIS coordinators).

In keeping with REAP's purpose as a supplemental funding stream, half of SRSA districts (51 percent) reported using the funds in combination with other funds from the Department, and 33 percent in combination with E-rate. Similarly, 58 percent of RLIS district coordinators reported using REAP

funds in combination with other funds from the Department, and 23 percent in combination with E-rate.

More than half of REAP district coordinators reported targeting the use of REAP funds to improve the educational outcomes of particular subgroups of students.

Fifty-four percent of SRSA and 66 percent of RLIS district coordinators reported that they targeted funds to support specific student subgroups, most commonly low-performing students, low-income students, students with disabilities, and English learners.

Percentages of SRSA and RLIS districts targeting REAP funds to various student groups

	SRSA	RLIS
Low-performing students	87%	86%
Students from low-income families	70%	78%
Students with disabilities	40%	28%
English learners	29%	33%

REAP FLEXIBILITY

SRSA districts most commonly exercised their REAP-Flex authority to maintain a stable level of funding for ongoing activities.

Forty-six percent of SRSA district coordinators reported exercising their REAP-Flex authority in the 2014–15 school year; of these districts, 82 percent used it to maintain a stable level of funding for ongoing activities. Sixty-seven percent of SRSA district coordinators whose districts exercised their REAP-Flex authority reported using Title II, Part A funds to support activities under Title I, Part A.

SRSA districts that did not exercise their REAP-Flex authority reported lack of awareness and information about the provision as reasons for not using the option.

In districts that did not exercise their REAP-Flex authority, 32 percent of coordinators reported they were not aware of the option, and 33 percent said they did not have enough information to make an informed decision about whether or not to use it.

GRANTEE RECOMMENDATIONS

Districts and states had recommendations for improvement to the REAP program in three categories.

- Grantees recommended that the Department accelerate the eligibility and award timeline so that it aligns more closely with other *ESEA* funding and their own budget cycles.
- Both state and district REAP coordinators wanted more information about the program, particularly the REAP-Flex provision and allowable uses for REAP funds.
- State coordinators suggested changes to certain eligibility criteria, such as revising the rural locale codes used in eligibility determination and flexibility in the measures used to determine poverty rates. Such statutory provisions are beyond the authority of the Department to address.