

Congress of the United States

Washington, DC 20510

February 21, 2020

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

Dear Secretary DeVos:

We are writing to express our strong opposition to the decision by the Department of Education to alter the eligibility determination of the Rural Low-Income Schools Program (RLIS) this year. This change in methodology, implemented without consultation or prior notice, will reduce significantly the number of Maine school districts eligible to receive funding under the RLIS program and result in a \$1.2 million reduction in funding. We are deeply concerned about the significant and sudden financial strain that this change will impose on Maine's rural schools and students and urge the Department to prevent these cuts from taking effect.

The Rural Education Achievement Program (REAP), authored by Senator Susan Collins and former Senator Kent Conrad, is designed to help level the playing field for rural school systems. Its two grant programs – the Small Rural Schools Achievement Program and the RLIS – provide additional funding and flexibility to help rural schools overcome the unique challenges posed by geographic isolation. For 16 years, the Department of Education has measured Maine's school district poverty levels by the percentage of students receiving free lunch. Last year, Maine received approximately \$1.6 million in RLIS funding to serve students in those high poverty schools. This year, however, the Department has decided it will no longer accept this measurement and will rely solely on the Census Bureau's Small Area Income and Poverty Estimates (SAIPE) data. This abrupt change undermines the flexible purpose of the law. It will eliminate more than 100 Maine schools from RLIS eligibility and result in a staggering \$1.2 million funding reduction. That difference in school eligibility alone makes clear that the SAIPE data is inadequate. Such a sudden and unexpected change will greatly hinder the ability of Maine's rural schools to educate students and improve their academic achievement in this next school year.

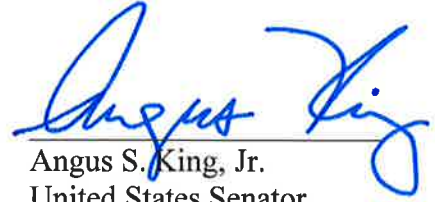
We particularly object to the Department's decision to implement this change in methodology with respect to this current year's appropriated funding without prior notice or any option for adjustment. Those schools that have rightly relied on RLIS support in the past will face drastic cuts to curricula and resources.

We urge you to use all possible interim measures and authorities to prevent cuts to the RLIS program in Maine, and to continue to provide the eligibility flexibility on which the state has relied for years. We look forward to working with you on this important issue and request an immediate response.

Sincerely,



Susan M. Collins
United States Senator



Angus S. King, Jr.
United States Senator



Chellie Pingree
Member of Congress



Jared F. Golden
Member of Congress