

DeVos Backs Away From Rural Schools Cuts After Senate Pressure

- Accounting change would affect money for hundreds of schools
- Bipartisan group of lawmakers warned of funding cliff

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The Education Department said it will back off plans to change eligibility for a rural education program after pressure from senators, including Majority Leader [Mitch McConnell](#).

The lawmakers, in a letter to Education Secretary Betsy DeVos, said the changes would sever federal funds to more than 800 low-income rural schools and urged her to drop the eligibility changes. More than 20 senators including McConnell (R-Ky.) signed [the letter](#) Wednesday.

McConnell and one of letter's principal authors, Sen. [Susan Collins](#) (R-Maine), both face tough re-election challenges this fall in their states, both of which have areas of rural poverty.

The Education Department recently began notifying state education leaders of changes to the way school districts report the number of students living in poverty. The department said that districts had improperly received funding through the Rural Low-Income Schools Program for years because they hadn't used the correct measure to report poverty levels.



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Education Secretary Betsy DeVos

Angela Morabito, a spokeswoman for the department, said the changes were designed to reflect the law as written by Congress and that administration officials have provided language to lawmakers to make a permanent fix.

“However, due to the States’ reliance on the Department’s calculations for the past seventeen years, the secretary has concluded the Department can use its authority to allow alternative poverty data to be used for an additional year,” she said via email. “We have heard from States the adjustment time is simply too short, and the Secretary has always sought to provide needed flexibility to States’ during transitions. This protects States and their students from financial harm for which they had not planned.”

Funds Support Technology, Supplies

School districts rely on the Rural Low-Income Schools Program to pay for supplies, technology upgrades, transportation, or classes like music and art.

The law authorizing the program directs districts to report poverty data from the U.S. Census Bureau. But the department has in the past accepted alternative measures of school poverty, such as the number of students receiving Free and Reduced Lunch, because Census data is often unavailable or understates poverty levels.

Recently federal officials began notifying states that the alternative poverty data would no longer be acceptable, impacting the eligibility of numerous campuses.

“The Department’s decision has created a funding cliff for hundreds of rural, low-income schools that are already balancing tight budgets,” the lawmakers wrote to DeVos.