

## **CAPITOL HILL BRIEFING ON RURAL EDUCATION - February 24, 2021**

Background: The preceding briefing from 12-4 pm will consist of the following 5 topical areas of interest to federal policy makers. Ours is the anchor session—designed to tie together and to incorporate the previous 4 topics.

1. Strengthening Rural Education and Communities: Opportunities for Federal Leadership
2. Preparing the Teacher Pipeline: A Rural Education Crisis
3. Rural Connectivity: Internet and Technology Access in Rural Schools and Communities
4. The Importance of a Federal Investment in Rural Education Research
5. Census and Community Matters for Rural America

Time: 4-5 pm eastern time, sign on at least 15 minutes in advance, 8 - 10 minutes for each presentation.

Audience: Hill staff from both Senate and House offices, especially from major committees dealing with rural schools which would be Education, Agriculture, Interior, Budget, Telecommunications, Appropriations, and Indian Affairs.

Purpose: Give Hill staff the feeling that the key to rural education opportunity and achievement is community, and that there is an important role for the federal government to play. Focus remarks on the impact and importance of federal policy in the work that you do, linking your community to federal policy and legislation. All will focus on how important the federal government is as a partner in assuring rural equity.

### PRESENTATION:

Good afternoon, and thank you for the invitation to speak with you today.

My name is Ken Greene, and I am the Superintendent of the Newton Public Schools in Sussex County, New Jersey's rural northwest corner. I am also a Regional Coordinator of the NJ Consortia for Excellence Through Equity, and served previously as President of the NJ Association of School Administrators, the state affiliate of the American Association of School Administrators.

My focus today will be on community schools as an organizing model that explicitly recognizes that rural public schools can, and should serve as hubs for their communities, as vehicles for equity, and that Congress has an important role to play in supporting them.

I want to acknowledge the great work being done to promote community schools throughout our state by my colleagues in rural, urban, and suburban districts with the guidance and support of the New Jersey Community Schools Coalition led by Julie Borst and Greg Stankiewicz.

Newton is a small town of 8,000 people with a school enrollment of 1,600 students. It is the county seat, and was founded as a regional center for business, education, government, health care, and the arts. The town has many of the challenges of other rural communities (a deteriorating infrastructure, increased poverty, and a general need for economic development) and our schools mirror that profile (older facilities, insufficient funding, and program limitations). 55% of the town's households live either

in poverty, or in what the United Way defines as ALICE (Asset Limited, Income Constrained, Employed).

One of the key pillars of our district mission states, “We believe parents, teachers, support staff, and citizens must partner in order to help children achieve their highest potential. Therefore, we organize ourselves as community schools to ensure we allocate sufficient resources to the social, emotional, and physical well-being of our students as well as to their academic achievement.”

According to the Coalition for Community Schools, “a community school is both a place and a set of partnerships between the school and other community resources. Its integrated focus on academics, health and social services, youth and community development, and community engagement leads to improved student learning, stronger families, and healthier communities.” In short, they serve as community hubs for delivering necessary services and supports to students and their families.

There are a variety of partnership types around which a community school may be designed. In urban and suburban contexts, they are often built around a primary relationship with a large non-profit, a corporate entity, a hospital network, or a local university.

In smaller communities like ours this can prove difficult, when there is no dominant entity with whom to partner. In Newton, we developed a grass roots, home-grown approach that built and expanded upon existing partnerships we had with local organizations. Those relationships had been cultivated over many years in an ad-hoc manner. Here is what we did to formalize our model:

First, district and school level teams conducted student needs assessments. We created a Design Team with representatives from local nonprofits, government agencies, corporate entities, parents, and school district staff. We began with a broad needs assessment as part of a grant application. Although the application was unsuccessful, the data from the assessments proved useful in helping us refine our model. Each school updated and readministered its staff, student, and parent climate surveys. And the Design Team added the results of their own organizational assessments of community needs. One major finding was a need to prioritize and coordinate some 113 existing initiatives involving the school district with 71 local organizations.

Next, school teams identified specific areas of focus and developed measurable goals. The preschool and elementary schools identified a need to improve early literacy and childhood wellness, and the middle and high schools identified a need for greater access to mental health and behavioral services. The goals that followed included access to on-site wellness services; free full-day preschool for all 4 year olds, a 33% increase in English Language Arts proficiency by Grade 4; and a 50% reduction in the percentage of middle and high school students identified as needing counseling and behavioral services.

Let me highlight some of the key partnership activities in which we are engaged:

1. Our Design Team meets regularly to provide guidance and support at the macro-level to the district model, and members engage in partnerships at the micro-level that employ organizational strengths toward mutual benefits.
2. We have joined with Project Self-Sufficiency, First Impressions, and Head Start with guidance from the United Way of Northern New Jersey to grow preschool education to cover some 75% of our community universe of 3- and 4-year olds.

3. We have worked with the Northwest New Jersey Community Action Partnership to help eligible families apply for subsidies to offset the cost of after-care in grades preK-2.
4. Our Nita M. Lowey 21st Century Community Learning Center is a STEAM-themed, afterschool program for grades 3-8 including collaborations with 13 local entities such as the Greater Newton Chamber of Commerce, Sussex County Department of Health & Human Services, Sojihuggles Children's Foundation, NJ Snap-Ed, and the Town of Newton to name a few.
5. We have agreements with the Center for Prevention & Counseling, Lakeside Counseling Associates, Youth Advocate Programs, and Zufall Health Center to open our school sites to on-site wellness and mental & behavioral health services.
6. We engage with Pass It Along, ThorLabs, Newton Medical Center, and the DreamGirls Initiative to offer wellness-based pathways to mental and behavioral health through student self-discovery, leadership, and volunteerism.
7. We have partnered with the Mental Health Technology Transfer Center at Rutgers University on a mental health resources map, staff training opportunities, and revisions to our crisis response plans.
8. We have collaborated with local internet service provider Planet Networks on their network build out into underserved areas, particularly for families with limited English proficiency.
9. And our School Coordinators have planned and executed two Community Connection Events to develop more purposeful linkages between our parents and local providers.

Essential to the success of these and other initiatives is an environment in which school-community collaboration is not only encouraged but normalized. Key elements in that environment are: (1) trust, respect, and support - essential building blocks of any good relationship; (2) mutual benefit - relationships don't last long if they move in only one direction; (3) connection to school objectives - these efforts must advance student learning; and (4) connection to organizational objectives - helping our partners accomplish their mission and purpose.

So, what role can the federal government play to support rural community schools like ours? Let me name a few.

1. Expand opportunities for rural schools to qualify for Title IV programs such as Full-Service Community Schools and 21st Century Community Learning Centers. The overwhelming majority of current awards go to large urban and suburban systems. A special set-aside for rural communities would be a good start.
2. Include the construction and renovation of school facilities for community schools uses in any funding for a national infrastructure bill.
3. Ensure that internet access becomes a basic utility for families in all communities as an equity measure to promote 21st Century educational practices, and to eliminate the digital divide as one among many inequities in our political economy.

Thank you for your time and attention.