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Policy Brief: An Interview with U. S. Department of Education Director of Rural Engagement Julia Cunningham

Devon Brenner
dgb19@msstate.edu

Julia Cunningham
U.S. Department of Education, Julia.Cunningham@ed.gov

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Policy Brief

An Interview with U. S. Department of Education Director of Rural Engagement Julia Cunningham

Julia Cunningham joined the Department of Education in March 2023 as Director, Rural Engagement in the Office of Communications and Outreach. Recently, Julia sat down with Devon Brenner, editor of The Rural Educator, to talk about her role and resources at the U.S. Department of Education for rural education.

Brenner: *Tell us a little about yourself and your background before coming to this role?*

Cunningham: I'm both a product of, and former teacher in, rural schools. I was raised in Cazenovia, New York, a town of about 6,000 outside of Syracuse. Fun fact, my dad is still a bus driver for the school district from which I graduated! After college, I spent four years teaching middle school writing in Allen, South Dakota, a community of around 500 within the Oglala Lakota Nation. While, of course, Cazenovia and Allen are vastly different, they are similar in that, like most rural communities, the relationship between the school and the community is critical to the health of the community, students, teachers, and families. This relationship is what has driven my work throughout my career, both in and out of the classroom. Between teaching and joining the U.S. Department of Education, I worked with state legislators around the country to think through cross-continuum, community focused education policy that supports all districts in their states. I am honored to now have the opportunity to connect communities, districts, and all of rural America at the federal level and uplift the great work in education that's happening in rural communities across the country.

Brenner: *Why does the U.S. Department of Education have a director of rural engagement? What is your role and your goals for this work?*

Cunningham: Many of the Biden-Harris Administration's education priorities, including mental health and career pathways, are also huge priorities for many rural communities. Yet, often in national conversations around these topics, rural students and districts are left out. Because of this, the U.S. Department of Education and the Biden-Harris Administration as a whole have prioritized having a rural perspective, advocate, and communicator in key agencies across the federal government. Around 25

percent of students in public schools are considered rural students, and we know that it is critical that there's someone specifically designated to look out for the best interests of those students and their families. In my role, please consider me your connection point at the Department. I am here to listen and respond to your questions, concerns, clarifications, and I want you to feel free to do that at any point. My goals are to both provide rural districts and families with the resources necessary to equip students with a world-class education, as outlined in Secretary Cardona's Raise the Bar Initiative (www.ed.gov/raisethebar/), and to highlight the innovative and critical work that is happening in rural America on a daily basis.

Brenner: *What are some key issues in rural education that we should be paying attention to? What should we know about how the U.S. Department of Education works with rural schools in K-12 and higher education?*

Cunningham: Secretary Cardona's Raise the Bar Initiative works to address a number of goals that will position America to lead the world for years to come. While all of them are hugely applicable to rural schools, the two we've been thinking about the most in relation to rural schools are mental health and career pathways. Within mental health, the Department has a goal of investing in every student's mental health and well-being by increasing school-based health services for students and building schools that support students' overall well-being. As for postsecondary and career pathways, our goal is to ensure every student has a path to postsecondary education in training. This includes establishing and scaling innovative systems of college and career pathways that blur the line between high schools, college, careers, and communities. Every student deserves the opportunity to earn industry-recognized credentials and secure in-demand, well-paying jobs within whatever community they decide to call home.

We know that initiatives in this area require a great deal of partnerships, community engagement, and cross-sector relationships, and we also know that rural leaders are often wearing so many hats that it can be difficult to think through how to embark on this work. On the flip side, rural communities are uniquely positioned to lead in these areas, as they often have the community ties needed to launch these partnerships. Therefore, we are working to provide resources to rural districts around the country on how to get these initiatives off the ground in your community. This includes case studies, implementation guides, or any other supports that would be helpful to both educators and administrators when it comes to prioritizing career pathways and mental health in your rural communities.

Brenner: *I believe there's a new newsletter focused on rural education. Can you tell us more about that? Are there other resources rural educators and rural education advocates should know about?*

Cunningham: Yes! The Department's rural newsletter, *Rural School and Community Updates*, is released monthly. If you're interested in signing up for it, you can visit www.ed.gov/subscriptions. The newsletter highlights Departmental news relevant to rural communities, current funding opportunities that are available across the federal government, upcoming events that may be of interest to rural stakeholders, and also spotlights various programs and news items around the country highlighting the incredible work that's happening in rural America.

In addition to the newsletter, I'd also love for rural leaders to be aware of the United States Department of Agriculture's (USDA) Rural Partners Network (RPN), which uses a community-driven, inter-governmental model to strive for economic prosperity in rural communities. RPN is doing great work to tackle cross-sector challenges across rural America, and I'd highly recommend everyone look

Authors:

Devon Brenner is co-editor of *The Rural Educator*. Contact: dgb19@msstate.edu

Julia Cunningham is Director of Rural Engagement in the U.S. Department of Education. Contact: Julia.Cunningham@ed.gov

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into the work they are doing by visiting www.rural.gov.

Brenner: *How can rural educators get more engaged?*

Cunningham: This is such an important question, and as a former teacher I can't stress enough how important it is to empower teacher voice and engagement. First, I'd recommend staying updated with Departmental resources such as newsletters, press releases, and other major announcements. And don't just limit this to the Department of Education either! Other federal agencies offer resources and funding opportunities that are relevant to rural educators as well. For example, the National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA) is currently leading the NASA Human Exploration Rover Challenge (HERC; see www.nasa.gov/stem/roverchallenge/competition) for teams of students to design, develop, build, and test human-powered rovers capable of traversing challenging terrain and a task tool for completion of various mission tasks.

Second, if you haven't already, connect with your officials. Whether at the local, state, or federal level, share your experiences with your officials. I know when I was in the classroom, the idea of doing that was a bit daunting. But there are organizations everywhere who have a goal of amplifying your unique voice to policymakers, and they can be a great resource to start. One example is your state NREA affiliates, who are working daily to make sure policymakers are hearing rural voices.

Brenner: *Thank you for taking time to talk with us.*

Cunningham: Thank you. I look forward to interacting with rural education leaders in the coming months and meeting many of you at the National Forum to Advance Rural Education, NREA's conference, in November of this year.