Executive Director Comments

John Hill, Executive Director of the National Rural Education Association, announced the selection of Virginia Sautner as the Monsanto Fund National Rural Teacher of the Year.

Sautner teaches at Lake Havasu High School where she has taught 9th grade English Language Arts and Student Government for the last 13 years. She achieved National Board Certification and is an Arizona Master teacher.

Sautner shares, “While student impact is at the heart of good teaching, my experience has taught me that being an effective teacher means lifelong learning and leading. Strong schools and strong communities go hand in hand – I recognize how collaboration with parents and the community at large is integral for our students and our education system as a whole.”

Lake Havasu principal, Scott Becker, describes Saunter as placing “sincerity and compassion into all of her extra responsibilities as well as her teaching assignment.” Katie Henderson, Lake Havasu parent says, “Mrs. Saunter is the reason my children are as successful as they are in their peer and community leadership efforts.”

Sautner’s peers hold her in high esteem. Kelsey Balint, fellow staff member, emphasized: “Sautner is one of a kind. She is a well-rounded educator who inspires those around her to have love for education.” “She is the biggest role model to me and continues to surprise me with leadership, knowledge, and genuine care that she shows her students,” says Lake Havasu student, Savannah Causey.

In her letter of support, Jaime Festa-Daigle, Lake Havasu High School assistant principal, stated, “She never lets the fact that we live in an isolated community, where education is not always the focus, stop her. She continues pushing our school forward.”

Sautner will receive the award at the 108th National Rural Education Convention and Research Seminar and National Rural Education...
Forum on October 14th in Columbus, Ohio. She will receive a $2000 award and Lake Havasu High School will receive $1000. All finalists for the award will be recognized at the banquet.

Finalists for the 2016-17 Monsanto Fund Rural Teacher of the Year were:
- Tiffany Adair – Mexia, TX
- Brenda Bowman – Galveston, IN
- Scott Lambley – Benkleman, NE
- Kristen Richerson – Oakfield TN
- Leah Shannon – Livingston, MT
- Ronald Von Glahn – De Soto, WI

The Rural Teacher of the Year program is sponsored by the Monsanto Fund, who works to substantially and meaningfully improve the lives of people around the world. We're focused on one goal – strengthening both farming communities and the communities where we live and work.

The National Rural Education Association Research/Higher Education team has announced the selection of Dr. Shelby L. Davidson as the 2016 Edward W. Chance Dissertation award winner. Davidson’s study, “A Phenomenological Investigation of Rural Superintendents’ Experiences in the Application of Principle-Centered Leadership”, was completed in partial fulfillment of a Doctor of Education degree from Lamar University in Beaumont, Texas. The dissertation advisor was Dr. Jennifer Butcher.

Davidson will be honored at the 108th NREA Convention and Research Symposium and National Rural Education Forum in Columbus, Ohio, October 13-15. The National Rural Education Association sponsors the Edward W. Chance Memorial Rural Education Dissertation Award. The Chance family, through the NREA Foundation, funds this award in order to recognize doctoral research which makes a significant contribution to rural education and addresses issues of current concern. The Edward W. Chance Dissertation Award includes a $500.00 cash stipend. Dr. Davidson is Principal at Van Middle School in Van, Texas.

Lauren Camera has written an article in Newsweek, “Rural Schools Improving Despite Continuing Obstacles”. Consider reading and getting fired up for the new year. View Article

Speak Your Piece: 'Heart & Soul' Planning Process Engages Diverse Voices by Shane Hale appears in the Weekly Yonder. It speaks to a different way of implementing rural economic development. A small Colorado city participated in a pilot study to test an innovative community planning process that emphasizes participation and self-help. The results were a better
In our efforts to work with the US Department of Education regarding rural education issues, please read the following communication from the Office of Rural Outreach:

When it comes to serving schools across rural America, it’s important to remember that no two rural communities are alike. From the remote fishing villages in Alaska, to the sugar maple towns of Vermont, to the American Indian reservations in Montana, America’s rural communities are incredibly diverse. Nationwide, rural America contains over 70 percent of our landmass, one-third of our schools, and 59 million Americans, according to the 2010 Census. In addition to the need for the same educational opportunities as urban and suburban students, we recognize the unique challenges faced by many, if not most rural students: high rates of childhood poverty, limited health care, fewer career opportunities, isolation from basic services, as well as schools that don’t have the necessary transportation, technology, teachers, courses, and resources to provide students with a truly 21st century education they deserve.

Understanding the diversity of rural schools across our country was made clear in a conversation earlier this month between Secretary King and leaders of rural education advocacy organizations about the struggles rural schools face. As part of our commitment to ensuring equity and excellence for every student in the implementation of this new law, the Department of Education (ED) is committed to understanding how best to meet the needs of rural stakeholders. We are focused on making sure that the voice of rural education is heard and taken into account as we develop policies, priorities, and program initiatives under The Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) and throughout the Department.

This initial dialogue will continue over the next few months with ED hosting listening sessions (virtually and in-person) in rural locations across the country to hear the concerns of those in our rural areas. The feedback received in these sessions will inform us as we conduct a rurally-focused review of the Department, as required under Title V of ESSA. Our review will consider how the Department currently solicits and receives input, and addresses the needs of rural schools in our programs, policies, and
organizational structure. We will identify actions ED can take to increase participation of rural schools in our policy-making efforts, and better serve rural schools in the future. The listening sessions will help ensure that our review includes specific recommendations from actual rural voices: the people who know the needs of rural schools better than anyone else. We recognize that certain obstacles can stop rural districts from fully utilizing federal resources, or applying for grants that can help students succeed. Rural communities face diverse and unique challenges, and are not always well-served by traditional education systems and processes. We heard that the lack of a common definition of “rural” contributes to the confusion about which communities and school districts are eligible for federal funds available across multiple agencies. Rural schools often lack dedicated staff to simply apply for grants, even those that contain specific rural priorities. We acknowledge that simplifying applications and collaborating with other federal agencies to streamline the process for schools is critical to increasing participation and buy-in from our rural communities. We greatly appreciate the efforts of rural advocates in Washington, DC and across the country who have already met and spoken with us about these issues. We look forward to continuing the conversation, and welcome any and all feedback.

If you are interested in sharing input or hearing more about our efforts to engage rural communities, please feel free to contact us at: Rural@ed.gov.

Rural advocates fought hard to ensure the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) contains a formal review by the U.S. Department of Education to ensure its policies, programs, practices and people are meeting the educational needs of students attending schools in rural and isolated communities. To better understand how to most effectively integrate the needs of rural schools and families into the Department’s work, they have asked AASA to facilitate feedback from rural stakeholders. When you have a moment, please take this 6 question survey. It should take approximately 7 minutes to complete. We will be sharing the responses directly with the Department in August.

In order to participate, you may either:
1. Click on this link: Click Here
Report from Washington (Sheryl Cohen, CEF)

• With the public comment period for ESSA coming to close yesterday, August 1, Sen. Patty Murray and Rep. Bobby Scott sent a letter to Secretary King urging the Department to make a number of tweaks to the final regulations. They argued that the “Department’s unique role in upholding the civil rights legacy of this law is critical to ensure implementation honors Congressional intent that states and local educational agencies sufficiently support improving outcomes for the nation’s disadvantaged students, including through improving equity educational opportunity.” Read the letter here and press release here.

1 Yesterday was also the final day for public comment on the Administration’s proposal to make it easier for federal student loan borrowers to have their debt forgiven when defrauded by their college. The Education Department expects to finalize the proposal by the end of October, allowing the rules to take effect by next July.

• After a releasing a controversial draft rule on teacher preparation back in November 2014, the Education Department has sent a final version of the rule to the Office of Management and Budget. In reference to the public comment on the previously proposed regulations, Education Department spokeswoman Takirra Winfield stated that they “believe that this public feedback...greatly improved the proposed regulations.” The regulations are expected to be released this fall.

• On Sunday, July 31, the Washington Post published an editorial discussing a new report on student borrowing issued by President Obama’s economic advisers. The Post argues that student debt, as a whole, might not be too large a problem because most student debt is held by certain groups of students – like those in graduate school
or for-profit institutions. Although it uses a different measure of the burden of student debt than many – looking at debt held by all current undergraduates rather than debt upon completion – the piece concludes that narrowly focused policy proposals would be more effective public policy than the sweeping proposals from both the Sanders and Clinton campaigns this past year. Read the editorial here, and the White House report here.

According to data released last week by the National Crime Victimization Survey, recent efforts to address the problem of bullying in schools have been working. 22 percent of students age 12-18 reported being bullied in 2013, which is down from 28 percent in 2011. It is the lowest rate recorded since 2005. Read the report here.