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TO:

The Honorable Linda McMahon
U.S. Secretary of Education
U.S. Department of Education
400 Maryland Ave SW, Washington, DC 20202

RE: GEAR UP Application Packages for Partnership and State Grants (1894-0001)

Dear Secretary McMahon:

At Partners for Rural Impact (PRI), we believe that place matters—and that strategic investments in rural communities fuel long-term prosperity. Our mission is to accelerate cradle-to-career outcomes for rural youth through deep partnerships, resource alignment, and systems change.

Since 1999, we have held GEAR UP grants to expand access to postsecondary opportunities and support students and families in navigating the path to college and career success. We believe that GEAR UP is one of the most impactful federal programs serving students in underserved communities. Its strength lies in its long-term, place-based approach, which empowers local leaders, educators, and families to prepare students for success beyond high school.

Based on our experience serving rural communities across the U.S., we are submitting one focused comment on what we see as a critical component to retain within the GEAR UP priorities. Overall, we urge the Department to avoid imposing a “one-size-fits-all” approach or introducing administrative requirements that may unintentionally disadvantage high-need, rural communities. GEAR UP’s flexibility and responsiveness to local context are key to its success—particularly in places where capacity is limited and challenges are complex.

We specifically urge the U.S. Department of Education to strengthen what is currently Invitational Priority 3 – providing GEAR UP services to rural communities – by designating it as a Competitive Priority. Making this competitive priority would provide meaningful incentive for applicants to center rural students in their program design. Rural communities continue to face unique and persistent barriers to postsecondary access—ranging from limited college advising resources and geographic isolation to underfunded schools and broadband gaps. Given that the majority of the nation’s highest-poverty areas are rural, competitive priority would help ensure more equitable outcomes across geographies.

We have seen other federal grant programs recognize rural communities with competitive priority status, and we urge the Department to follow suit in future GEAR UP competitions. GEAR UP remains one of the most effective federal strategies to support rural youth success. We strongly support continued emphasis on rural access in future GEAR UP competitions.

Sincerely,

Dreama Gentry
President & CEO
Partners for Rural Impact