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Voices from Rural Oklahoma

Where's Education Headed on the Plain?



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Foreword

Tyler Norvell, Executive Director, Oklahoma Youth Expo

The mission of the Oklahoma Youth Expo (OYE) is to train and prepare Oklahoma's youth to become the future leaders of our state. Raising and showing livestock provides our youth with the skills and work ethic they need to be successful in life.

For more than 100 years, the expo has been deeply intertwined in the heritage of rural Oklahoma and has played a vital role in agriculture education for thousands of Oklahoma families.

Our state's education funding crisis has, no doubt, impacted agriculture education. The families that participate in the OYE are often active in their local schools and in the communities in which they live. The leadership and board of the OYE have felt their anxiety and understand their concerns about declining school quality.

All too often in our state's public policy debate on rural education quality, the voices of the students, parents, and community members living in these communities are lost.

As such, the OYE felt compelled to provide a platform for these voices to be heard as the legislature moves through the 2017 session and faces critical decisions over the future of public education.

It should be noted the OYE commissioned this research through private funds. We hope this report will provide a resource for thoughtful discussion among policymakers and stakeholders to consider rural viewpoints in determining our state's education policy going forward.

Executive Summary

Rural schools make up a considerable portion of Oklahoma’s public education system. Statewide, three out of four of Oklahoma’s 513 school districts and half of the state’s 1,789 schools are located in rural communities. These institutions educate approximately 205,000 PreK–12 students—nearly one in three students statewide.¹

These schools are an integral part of community life for many rural towns. They are also a critical part of Oklahoma’s economy, responsible for training the next generation of thinkers, workers, builders, and leaders. Unfortunately, data suggest that many of Oklahoma’s rural schools are not providing their students with the academic and non-academic skills necessary for them to be successful in their next steps after high school.

This is probably unsurprising to policymakers familiar with Oklahoma’s rural schools. However, what is often missing from conversations about how to fix the problems facing rural schools are the voices of the students, parents, community members, and business leaders living in these communities and experiencing them firsthand.

This report is an effort to raise the collective voices of rural community members and convey their thoughts and perspectives to policymakers in the state capital. Through a series of 12 focus groups and nine interviews, we spoke to more than 80 individuals living in rural communities throughout Oklahoma. We asked them about the issues facing the schools in their communities, including topics ranging from course options for students in high school to students’ post-college job prospects to their perspectives on policies like charter schools and consolidation.

Our 10 findings fall into three overarching themes:

Theme 1: High School Alone is Not Enough

Findings

- Graduating high school does not indicate preparation for college, the workforce, or life.
- Students have a variety of opportunities to access diverse course options, but online platforms are not seen as a widespread solution.
- Extracurricular leadership opportunities are valuable, but some are concerned about an overemphasis on sports.

Summary

Participants feel Oklahoma's high schools do not adequately prepare students for their next steps. In particular, participants believe students lack academic skills like math, science, and communication as well as life skills like financial literacy and interpersonal skills. As a result, a high school diploma may show students persevered to earn their degree but carries little value as an indicator of academic knowledge or skill. However, students have access to a variety of course options, which participants appreciate, and extracurricular activities like sports and agricultural programs (FFA and 4H) offer opportunities for students to gain important life and leadership skills.

Theme 2: Students Need More and Different Guidance Navigating Their Options

Findings

- Students who want to attend college often lack the information and support to explore and understand their options.
- Community and business leaders can do more to help students navigate career opportunities.
- There is genuine disagreement about the goal of PreK–12 public education.

Summary

Students have access to several postsecondary options including career-tech schools, community colleges, and four-year universities. However, students do not always have access to the information or support they need to decide their next steps.

Moreover, Oklahoma's rural communities vary in industry and economy; jobs across the state are different and require different levels and types of education. As a result, parents and community members have different, and sometimes conflicting, beliefs about the goals of Oklahoma's PreK–12 system based on the opportunities that they see in their own communities.

Theme 3: Concerns with Education Policy

Findings

- Limited, decreasing, and inconsistent funding affects schools' ability to recruit and retain teachers and offer robust course options to students.
- Administrative consolidation is seen as a viable way to save money, but participants resist closing schools.
- Four-day school weeks can help attract teachers and might save money, but could have a negative impact on families and students.
- Few participants were familiar with charter schools, but most felt that a new school in their community would drain already-scarce resources.

Summary

Participants expressed concern about state funding levels for public PreK–12 education and its impact on districts' ability to offer robust course options and to recruit and retain top-notch teachers. Moreover, participants have concerns about some of the efforts to address budget shortfalls, like consolidation and the four-day school week, as well as about the impact that charter schools could have on their communities.

Conclusion

As legislators in the Sooner State seek to address the challenges in Oklahoma's rural schools, it is critical that they understand how the students, parents, community members, and business leaders living in rural communities perceive and experience the education system and the policies and programs that surround it. We hope this report facilitates better understanding and responsive policymaking.

Introduction

Parents, community members, and business leaders across rural Oklahoma are concerned about the youth in their communities. They worry that young people are not getting the education they need or the opportunities they deserve. Their concerns are merited.

Rural students in Oklahoma are struggling. By the time they reach eighth grade, they are less likely than rural students nationwide to be proficient in math and reading (on the National Assessment of Educational Progress, or NAEP).² And while Oklahoma's students have a high school graduation rate slightly above the national average, they are less likely to pursue two- or four-year degrees.³ Those who do not pursue education beyond high school will have fewer and fewer job opportunities: Of approximately 30 occupations projected to decline the most in Oklahoma over the next ten years, 27 are those that require a high school degree or less.⁴ Of those students who do enroll in some form of post-secondary education, more will drop out than will complete their degrees.⁵ And small rural communities often have relatively few jobs that require a bachelor's degree, so those who do complete college may not be able to find employment in their hometowns.

Rural education in Oklahoma must be a top priority for state policymakers. Students deserve a high-quality education, and the economy depends on it.

A first step for policymakers is to understand the perspectives of those living in Oklahoma's rural communities. Teachers and administrators can often voice their viewpoints through professional associations, but the voices of parents and community

members tend to be more diffuse and more difficult to access, especially for those in rural communities far from the state capital. This report seeks to bridge that gap.

We conducted focus groups and interviews with dozens of parents, community members, business leaders, and students about the schools in their communities. The report that follows provides an analysis of the themes that emerged in our discussions and seeks to elevate the needs, desires, and challenges facing the families that live in rural Oklahoma. Some of the issues we discussed—like school funding, online education, and consolidation—have been part of conversations about education in rural communities for decades. Other issues, like charter schools, are just beginning to make their way into rural Oklahoma. Still others, like access to advanced coursework and postsecondary options, have shifted over time as technology has advanced and the economies of rural communities have evolved.

Our goal was not to reach consensus on any topic area or to offer concrete policy recommendations to address the issues and concerns participants raised. Instead, we sought simply to understand and communicate the various perspectives we heard. Our research reveals nuances in how policies affect rural communities and identifies points of convergence and divergence. Ultimately, we hope it helps policymakers better understand how their constituents in rural communities experience the policies and laws they shape.

In the report that follows, we begin with a description of the methodology for conducting the study. We then present an overview of some of the contextual factors currently affecting education in Oklahoma's rural communities. Finally, we present the key findings from a series of focus groups and interviews conducted throughout rural Oklahoma.

Methodology

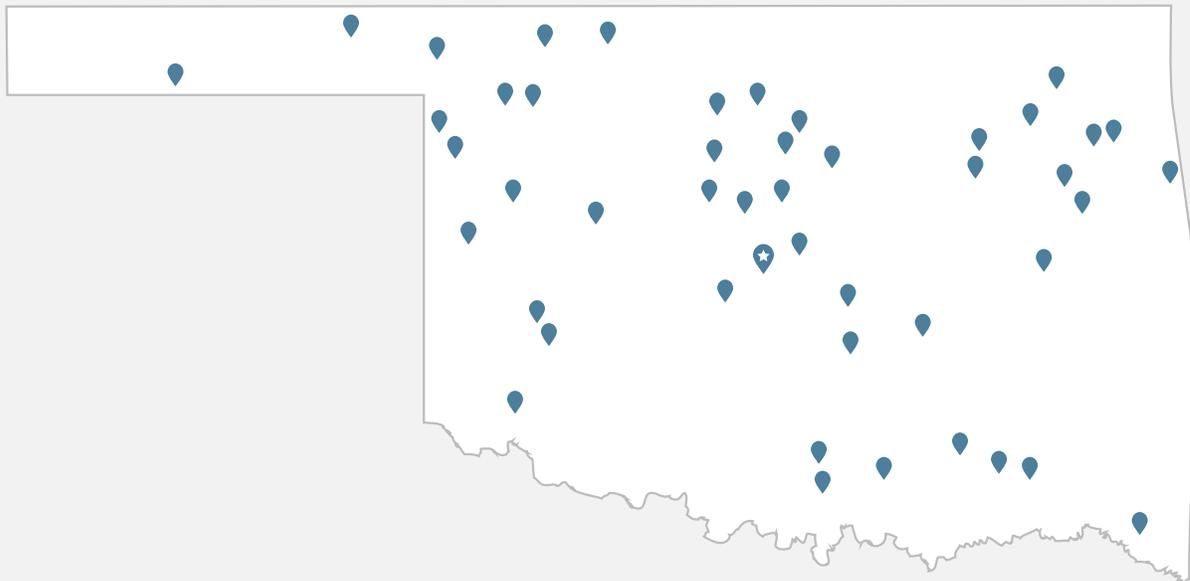
The goal of this research was to better understand the perspectives of students, parents, business leaders, and community members on rural education in Oklahoma. Through a series of 12 focus groups and nine phone interviews, we spoke with more than 80 individuals about the schools in their communities, the opportunities students have for employment and post-secondary education, and a number of policies under consideration in the state capital. Appendix A includes a detailed description of the study's methodology, including how we assembled the focus groups and analyzed the data. We complemented these focus groups with desk research and our experience studying rural education.

In all, our focus group participants included 55 adults and 19 students. Figure 1 shows the hometowns of the individuals we spoke with.

In addition to including individuals from many of Oklahoma's rural communities, our sample also includes individuals with a variety of backgrounds and income levels. Ten percent of our participants reported an annual income of less than \$25,000 and 20 percent indicated annual income below \$50,000. One out of four focus group participants was non-white. For nearly 40 percent of participants, a high school diploma was their last formal education credential. Nonetheless, our sample is moderately more male, more highly educated, and earns a higher income than Oklahoma's rural population. This could mean that divergent perspectives of other groups (particularly Native Americans, women, or those with lower income or educational attainment) are not fully represented, though our focus groups generally revealed very consistent themes and findings across these differences.

Figure 1

Map of Focus Group Participants' and Interviewees' Hometowns in Oklahoma



We asked focus group participants and interviewees a series of questions about eight key topics:

- The role of schools in the community
- School quality
- Post-secondary outcomes
- Course diversity and online options
- Education funding
- School consolidation
- The four-day school week
- Charter schools and school choice

We recorded, transcribed, and analyzed these conversations to identify key themes for each of the eight topics discussed, as well as other findings that developed organically as participants shared their thoughts and experiences. (See Appendices B and C for copies of the focus group and interview protocols.)⁶ In order to place these findings in their broader context, we supplement them with desk research, including data and analyses from existing reports and databases.

The findings presented here do not necessarily represent the opinions of *all* Oklahomans and should not be interpreted as such, but we hope they provide policymakers new and useful perspectives to inform their work.

Current State of Education in Rural Oklahoma

Three out of four of Oklahoma’s 513 school districts and half of the state’s 1,789 schools are located in rural communities. These institutions educate approximately 205,000 PreK–12 students—nearly one in three students statewide⁷—and play an important role in Oklahoma’s rural towns. From sporting events to fundraisers, schools draw community members together and give them something to rally behind and support. Members of our focus groups described schools as “the heartbeat” of their communities, “the glue” that holds them together, and “a point of unity” for young and old.

In each of our 12 focus groups, participants shared stories of high school graduates going away to college and returning to the school to teach and give back to the community that raised them. As a current Oklahoma State University (OSU) student said, “I would love to move home to where I grew up. I think it’s the greatest place in the world.” Another college student shared her gratefulness for the close-knit community in which she was raised: “There’s something about small-town Oklahoma, small-town schools that just do a lot of good for a person.... I’m just so thankful for my small town.”

Despite the pride that parents, community members, and students expressed for their schools, however, they also acknowledged that the schools are facing very real challenges. Data from state and national reports support these concerns.

Outcomes for Oklahoma’s rural students are well below the outcomes of other rural students nationwide. In 2015, just 18 percent of students in rural Oklahoma schools scored proficient or advanced on the eighth-grade mathematics NAEP assessment,

“There is something about small-town schools that just do a lot of good for a person. I’m just so thankful for my small town.”

compared to 32 percent of rural students nationwide. In reading, 27 percent of rural Oklahoma students scored proficient or higher, compared to 33 percent of rural students nationwide.⁸ In 2013, in both English and math, the average ACT score for districts located in rural areas or towns (18.9 and 18.8, respectively) was below the college-readiness threshold set by the state Regents.⁹ Furthermore, compared to a national average of about 58 percent, just 46 percent of Oklahoma students who enroll in bachelor degree programs complete that program within six years.¹⁰

In addition, poverty has a profound impact on students. In rural communities in Oklahoma, nearly one in five families lives in poverty,¹¹ compared to 14 percent of families in Oklahoma City and 16 percent in Tulsa.¹² Growing up in poverty negatively impacts a child's health, welfare, and education. Children who grow up in low-income families often experience poor health and limited access to educational resources.¹³ They often start school academically behind their non-poor peers, and these gaps—particularly in reading—tend to widen as students progress through school.¹⁴ Ultimately, children who grow up in poverty complete fewer years of school, earn less money, work fewer hours, receive more government aid, and are more likely to have chronic poor health than their more-affluent peers.¹⁵ The significant poverty rates in rural Oklahoma pose a real challenge to schools to ensure that all students have access to the academic and non-academic skills they need to be successful adults.

The challenges facing Oklahoma's rural schools are daunting. Nonetheless, the pride and ownership community members feel toward their schools are a promising foundation on which to build.



Key Findings

The sections that follow present 10 key findings from our research. These findings are organized into three overarching themes. The first theme focuses on high school outcomes, specifically that participants feel high school does not prepare rural students for their next steps, whether college or career. The second theme focuses on the transition between high school and college or career. Disagreement among participants about the goal of public education surfaced larger questions about what rural high schools should be preparing their students to do after graduation. Should all students go to college? What about trades like plumbing or welding? How can high schools better inform students about their various options? What is the role of the business community in helping students learn about career opportunities? The findings in this theme offer insight into how rural community members are thinking about these questions.

The final theme seeks to highlight participants' thoughts, reactions, and questions as they relate to a set of pertinent education policy issues: funding, consolidation, the four-day school week, and charter schools. These issues hit close to home for many participants, and it is important that policymakers understand how rural community members are experiencing the effects of various policy decisions made in the capital.

Theme 1: High School Alone is Not Enough

Overwhelmingly, participants feel Oklahoma's high schools do not adequately prepare students for their next steps, whether that be the workforce, a technical school, a community college, or a four-year university. In particular, participants believe students lack academic skills like math, science, and communication as well as life skills like financial literacy and interpersonal skills. As a result, a high school diploma may show students persevered to earn their degree but carries little value as an indicator of academic knowledge or skill.

Despite these challenges, participants identified a few bright spots. In particular, they pointed to opportunities for students to use online and/or concurrent enrollment to expand their course options. Extracurricular programs like Future Farmers of America (FFA) and 4-H also provide students with valuable and relevant leadership experiences.

Finding: Graduating high school does not indicate preparation for college, the workforce, or life.

At 83 percent, Oklahoma's high school graduation rate is on par with the national average.¹⁶ Yet the resounding sentiment expressed in our focus groups is that Oklahoma's high schools inadequately prepare graduates for their next steps.

Focus group participants believe that graduates from Oklahoma's rural high schools are often not prepared for post-secondary education, particularly in the areas of math and science. Data from the state's public universities support participants' observations: Of the nearly 17,000 students who graduated from Oklahoma public high schools and enrolled in a public college or university in the fall of 2014, more than 40 percent enrolled in at least one remedial course.¹⁷ Of the 6,734 students enrolling in at least one remedial course, nearly 90 percent required a remedial math course and 40 percent required a remedial English course.¹⁸ In the words of one focus group participant in Stillwater: "The data in a lot of places tell us that we're doing a decent job in our districts [but] you know that they're not prepared to go do the math and science and communication skills that they need at the post-[secondary] level."

These rates of remediation create additional barriers to degree completion. Students spend more time and money to earn a postsecondary degree because they do not leave high school with the academic knowledge or skills necessary to succeed on day one. "What happens is a two-year degree then becomes a four-year degree because they're spending time in remedial classes...and the more remediation it takes, the less likely they are to graduate," explained one focus group participant in Atoka.

Students themselves recall feeling underprepared for college-level courses. As a student currently enrolled at Oklahoma State University said, “I started out in engineering and I was not prepared at all.” A second Oklahoma State University student concurred: “I think, in the kind of English side of things [I was prepared], but definitely the more math and the STEM fields, I was not ready for that stuff.”

“We’re trying to catch up in our STEM-type classes, but I’ve hired 10 kids in the last two years and they can’t pull a dipstick on a lawnmower.”

In addition to inadequate academic preparation, basic life skills are also seen as a weakness. As one participant in Woodward said, “We’ve taken the common sense out” of schools. “On a practical level, I see a significant deterioration of just basic *how-does-it-work* skills,” another participant in the Woodward focus group explained. “We’re trying to catch up in our STEM-type classes and we think it’s wonderful [and] everybody knows it’s important, but I’ve hired 10 kids in the last two years working over the summers and they can’t pull a dipstick on a lawnmower.”

Participants in 10 of the 12 focus groups expressed concern that students lack financial literacy skills like balancing a checkbook, paying taxes, or getting a mortgage. A participant in Enid explained the importance of these skills for all students: “Whether they go to college or not...[kids] still have to have a really good understanding about how to balance a checkbook, how to pay bills, what a mortgage looks like...and how to prepare for buying the first house and getting their car paid off and all the things that smart consumers need to know. We don’t spend any time doing that.”

Participants also highlighted gaps in how students approach job applications and interview processes. A number of focus group participants own their own businesses, and 34 of the 55 adult participants indicated they are responsible for hiring employees in their current role. These participants identified gaps they witness as they interview and hire employees, including how to dress for an interview and the importance of showing up to work on time. These participants believe a high school diploma serves as the bare-minimum expectation for getting a job. It means little to employers beyond that.

Overall, participants in eight of the 12 focus groups believe schools are pushing students through to graduation, regardless of whether they have mastered the content. “The way I see the high schools, [they] just kind of push everybody out and...it’s kind of expected to graduate high school,” one participant in Atoka explained. A student at OSU expressed that he wished his teachers had made “us learn instead of just letting us go through [the class] just getting by.” These observations suggest that a high school diploma isn’t particularly difficult to get. It is unsurprising, then, that a high school diploma has lost much of its value.

In the words of a Locust Grove participant, a high school diploma is “going to show that you completed your schooling, but as far as it really meaning something education-wise, I don’t think it does.”

Finding: Students have a variety of opportunities to access diverse course options, but online platforms are not seen as a widespread solution.

A broad diversity of platform offerings at the high school level can help expose students to a variety of skills and topics and provide them with a well-rounded education. However, many rural schools with small populations struggle to offer upper-level or specialized courses to their students. In a single rural high school there may just be a handful of students who want an upper-level calculus or robotics class, for example, making it difficult to justify or fund a full- or even part-time teacher to teach these classes. Moreover, rural schools may struggle to find teachers with the necessary skills and qualifications.

Oklahoma provides students with access to courses through career-tech, concurrent enrollment, Advanced Placement, and online options.

Oklahoma has a robust career-tech program. During the 2014-15 school year, nearly half of Oklahoma's ninth- through 12th-grade students were enrolled in career-tech classes.¹⁹ The network of 29 career-tech centers (offering courses on 58 campuses across the state) serve high school students and adult learners seeking specialized career training.²⁰ High school students who live in a technology center district²¹ can attend the career-tech school for free, and earn college credits or a program certificate in one of more than 90 program areas.

High school juniors and seniors who meet certain eligibility requirements (typically a certain GPA or SAT/ACT score) are also able to enroll in college credit-earning coursework through the state's concurrent enrollment program.²² Eligible students can take these courses online or by commuting to the local college or university. They receive a tuition waiver of up to six credit hours per semester.

Finally, some students have the opportunity to earn college credit by taking AP courses. Some districts offer AP courses in-house, while others utilize online platforms to give students access to these classes. In order to earn college credit this way, students must pass the AP exam. Students do not earn credit if they either opt out of the exam or do not pass it.

Policymakers and education officials have championed online options,²³ believing that they can provide rural students with greater course diversity and improve access to high-quality instruction. In Oklahoma, students can access online courses through the Oklahoma Supplemental Online Course Program; they can access concurrent enrollment courses at colleges and universities through interactive television (ITV); or they can enroll in one of the state's five virtual charter schools.

Through these pathways and with online access, students can access courses and training not offered at their local high school.

In our focus groups, participants talked about these pathways for accessing coursework in a variety of ways. Most commonly, students and parents praised concurrent enrollment options as a way for students to earn free college credits. As a student from OSU recalled, “If you know pretty early on what you want to do, you can have 50 hours of college credit. You can have half of your college done as an engineer and then you’re taking all the Calc III, differential equations, thermodynamics courses that you actually need to take in college, and you have all the kind of little piddly stuff out of the way.”

However, participants also noted some redundancies in the system that may make it less efficient and more difficult for students and families to navigate. For example, students noted that access to college coursework through concurrent enrollment programs might make AP classes less important. One student from OSU explained it this way:

We had a satellite campus where...we can take most of our college courses. And so...what was the point in our school spending so much money on AP courses or trying to get AP courses [when] we could actually just send the people who were college-bound straight into the classroom?

Some participants also had concerns that students do not always earn high school credits for courses they take through concurrent enrollment. They suggest that it would be helpful to have common standards across the state. In one Woodward participant’s words, “At a lot of schools [Composition] 1 and [Composition] 2 will replace senior[-year] English. Not in our town.... That, in my opinion, ought to be in stone.... So there’s a standard around the state.”²⁴

Participants in all 12 focus groups were generally aware of options to take online coursework, though participants in four focus groups thought it was primarily an option for students who were not successful in the traditional classroom setting. Participants also had different opinions about the value of online courses. On the one hand, many believed that it provides greater course access for students. As a participant in Atoka explained, online education is “an excellent opportunity for those kids who maybe have maxed out all that we have to offer them and [who] really want to take German four years.”

But on the other hand, participants identified two major drawbacks to online education. First, there was significant concern about how much time students already spend on computers, smartphones, and the internet, and the impact of this screen time on students’ interpersonal skills. A participant in Stillwater said:

What concerns me about online things is that their life revolves around a screen, whatever size it is, and when we talk about...simply interacting with people, looking someone in the eye, having a conversation, I think we have this huge gap.

Second, participants worry that students at the middle and even high school level do not have the maturity to successfully engage in online coursework. Student participants agreed that, without a teacher present, they would struggle to stay motivated and on track with the work. They stressed the importance of face-to-face interaction with a teacher to help them when they get stuck, motivate them when content gets difficult, and provide guidance they feel they cannot get from online instruction.

Overall, focus group participants observe that students have numerous opportunities to access a diverse set of course offerings. While this is a strength for rural education in Oklahoma because it enables rural students to access courses that their schools may not otherwise be able to offer, participants indicated that the system is not always easy to navigate, credits don't always transfer, and online education isn't a silver bullet for bridging the geographic distance between students and instruction.

Finding: Extracurricular leadership opportunities are valuable, but some are concerned about an overemphasis on sports.

Extracurricular activities, in particular sports and agricultural programs, play a critical role in preparing Oklahoma's rural students for success. While we did not ask participants specifically about extracurricular activities, participants in all 12 focus groups emphasized the importance of these non-academic programs, which provide opportunities for teamwork, hands-on learning, and leadership.

Agricultural programs like Future Farmers of America (FFA) and 4H, in particular, were identified as valuable programs for students. Participants from seven focus groups explicitly identified the skills gained in FFA and 4H. As one participant from Enid explained, "[FFA] prepared our girls to speak.... They know how to interview.... They know how to show up, and they know how they're supposed to look." Another participant in Woodward described FFA as "a leadership factory." In some districts where these programs have been cut from the budget, families have stepped up to privately fund the programs and/or their teachers to ensure students can continue to participate.

Extracurricular participation in small rural schools tends to be high because, with fewer total students, a larger percentage must participate in order to make it possible to have a full football team or debate team. One study found, for example, that 85 percent of sixth-through eighth-graders in Oklahoma's rural K-8 school districts participate in at least one extracurricular activity.²⁵ An OSU student described his high school's extracurricular activity participation like this:

There's no sitting back and being on the sidelines in a small school.... Everyone had to be involved for us to have a student council or an FFA program. We all had to kind of step up, and I think that maybe it's because of the class size, but I also think that, like, the people—the school leaders—just really encouraged us to be involved in everything we could. I think that's pretty common in most of those schools.

There's no sitting back and being on the sidelines in a small school.

In fact, student participation in extracurricular activities is such that the key challenge students identify is fitting everything into their schedules. Sometimes this requires tough decisions for students who want to do it all. A student at OSU explained, "...say you were in FFA, it was really hard for our FFA adviser to work with like the football or the basketball or the baseball coach. So usually you did your one thing...you either—you showed your hogs and you judged livestock or you played on the baseball team and the football team."

Though participants in all 12 focus groups were overwhelmingly positive about the opportunities and experiences students gain by participating in extracurricular activities, individuals in six focus groups expressed some concern about an overemphasis on sports at the expense of academics. In most cases, these participants recognized the benefits of sports but think the balance with academics is off. "Sports...play a very important role in the schools, but it shouldn't be dominant. And in many schools, it's the primary factor," explained a participant from Atoka. A participant in Stillwater expressed frustration about parents with "Friday Night Lights Syndrome" who are willing to petition district officials or the school board for a better football coach but who don't do the same to replace an ineffective English or math teacher.

Sports play a very important role in the schools, but it shouldn't be dominant.

Students also expressed frustration that many of their teachers were teaching because they wanted to coach, and not because they wanted to help students learn. While explaining his lack of preparation for some college-level courses, one OSU student said, "When you have a history teacher that is there to coach basketball and to only coach basketball, they teach you how to read from a textbook...and [that's] really not teaching."

Theme 2: Students Need More and Different Guidance Navigating Their Options

Oklahoma's rural communities vary in industry and economy. Some rural towns rely almost exclusively on farming and ranching; some are struggling to recover from a drop in oil prices; some are taking advantage of the burgeoning wind energy fields; and still others are close enough to cities like Tulsa and Oklahoma City that residents can commute to out-of-town jobs. As a result, jobs across the state are different and require different levels and types of education. Moreover, parents and community members have different, and sometimes conflicting, beliefs about the goals of Oklahoma's PreK-12 system based on the opportunities that they see in their own communities.

Students have access to several postsecondary options including career-tech schools, community colleges, and four-year universities. However, students do not always have access to the information or the support they need to decide their next steps.

Finding: Students who want to attend college lack the information and support to explore and understand their options.

Students interested in career-tech and concurrent enrollment typically have access to information and resources about how to take advantage of those programs. Unfortunately, the same is not true for students who wish to pursue a four-year degree. Overwhelmingly, the OSU students we spoke with agreed their high schools lacked information to help them learn about their college options and navigate the application, enrollment, and financial aid processes. Many had parents who had gone to college and were able to help fill in these gaps. Others took the initiative to learn about their options on their own, by asking their teachers, coaches, and principals for information about the college application process. In many cases, focus group participants indicated that the impetus was on students to figure out the steps necessary to apply to and enroll in college.

Participants identified a number of information gaps that existed at their high schools as they were applying to college. Several students noted they had little understanding of the importance of the ACT. "Personally, I had no idea how important the ACT was until I was like a senior," said a current OSU student. "That's so important with scholarships and everything else. [But] when you don't know that, you don't know."

I probably missed out on a lot of scholarships because I was unaware they were even there.

Participants also wish high school students had more exposure to the scholarship opportunities available to them. As one OSU student said, "I was probably one that missed out on a lot of scholarships that I probably could have gotten because I was unaware that they were even there.... That would have helped me from day one because I wouldn't be so, I guess, financially stressed at this point in my life. [I wouldn't be] so ready to just get the heck out of here and get a job." In fact, just a single participant out of the 83 individuals we spoke with mentioned Oklahoma's Promise, which provides students from families with an income of \$50,000 or less with tuition scholarships to Oklahoma's public universities.²⁶

The need for guidance counselors emerged as a theme in 10 of the 12 focus groups. Adult and student participants emphasized the important role guidance counselors play (or should play) in helping students determine their next steps, whether college, technical school, or career. Having a staff member dedicated to this task is especially important for students whose parents may only have a high school diploma and would therefore be unfamiliar with other options. As a participant in Atoka said, “...especially in our depressed area, [families] don’t believe their kids could ever go to college or to career tech.... And what we have found is that...[information about college] has to come from the counselors.”

A lack of financial and personnel resources appears to be the major barrier to quality guidance counseling services at the high school level. Some participants indicated that their schools lack a counselor altogether. Others thought staff members in their schools fill multiple roles, including the role of guidance counselor, and therefore lack the bandwidth to fully support college-bound students. As a participant in Stillwater said, “I think in a lot of our rural schools, having a dedicated counseling resource just isn’t an option. They probably have several other functions as well.”

I think in a lot of our rural schools, having a dedicated counseling resource just isn't an option.

To help more students succeed after high school, students, parents, and community members believe it is important to ensure an adequate number of guidance counselors are armed with information about all options.

Finding: Community and business leaders can do more to help students navigate career opportunities.

The majority of Oklahoma residents who complete a postsecondary certificate or degree program are employed in Oklahoma five years after graduation.²⁷ However, those with the most advanced degrees are least likely to stay in the Sooner State. Five years after graduation, just 60 percent of doctoral degree holders and 68 percent of professional degree holders were working in Oklahoma, compared to 76 percent of certificate holders and 78 percent of associate’s degree holders.²⁸ These data suggest that those with advanced degrees leave Oklahoma to find a job that matches their education.²⁹

Indeed, participants from all 12 focus groups agreed that job opportunities in rural communities are limited, especially for college-educated individuals. In many small towns and rural communities, banks and schools are the only employers where a college graduate can use his or her degree. An OSU student explained, “...the big employer [is] the school obviously and then financial places—banks, insurance agencies—and then outside of that really there’s not a lot of other jobs that require college degrees.”

The job markets in Oklahoma’s rural communities affect the way current postsecondary students think about their options after graduation. One OSU student said, “I don’t necessarily want to go be a banker, but if I wanted to use my college education, probably I would have to go work at the bank in town—or commute.” A student at Northeast

“I’m pretty sure I’m going to have to travel to find a job.”

Technology Center told us, “I want to do biomedical engineering. And so, that’s not like a real popular thing around here, and I’m pretty sure I’m going to have to travel to find a job.”

Proximity to larger towns like Durant or big cities like Tulsa and Oklahoma City can help make it possible for individuals to both live in a small community and find a job that utilizes their degree. Many participants indicate that they do, or would be willing to, commute a long distance to a job outside of their community.

Even when there are jobs available in a community, however, there are few formal programs or partnerships between schools and local businesses to make students aware of the types of jobs or industries where they could build careers. One participant explained a program in Enid called Roots and the importance of these kinds of programs:

We take the top kids from the county, the top juniors or seniors depending on what we’re doing that year, and we take them for two days and show them everything Enid has to offer job-wise. Because they don’t understand, “Oh, I can be an HR person here? I can be an accountant here? I can be an engineer here?” You know, it’s not just, “Okay. You can go get on the line with Vance and get a job today.” There’s other possibilities here...something we all have to work on is to keep our best and brightest here by showing them what opportunities and possibilities they have here.... The grass isn’t always greener in Galveston and Oklahoma City.

In other communities, local career-tech centers have been able to design new training programs to fill gaps in the local workforce, and community colleges have helped place students in local industries. In Enid, for example, participants noted that a dearth of subcontractors has caused the cost of construction to increase significantly. They explained that Autry Technology Center is responding by creating the training programs necessary to prepare students to be subcontractors.³⁰ Others we spoke with also identified initiatives, such as the Oklahoma Educated Workforce Initiative and Governor Fallin’s Oklahoma Works Initiative, that are engaged in getting schools and businesses to work together.

Programs like these can help create a pipeline of talent for Oklahoma’s industries, and help students learn about job opportunities in their communities. However, it is equally important that the schools are engaged partners. As one business leader told us in an interview, “The workforce development stuff is all from the outside working in. It would be great to have something that is from the inside working out.” Schools and districts need to actively engage in these and other initiatives in order to bridge the gap between students and the career opportunities in their communities.

Finding: There is genuine disagreement about the goal of PreK–12 public education.

Not everybody needs to go to college.

Across all 12 focus groups, participants indicated that the goal of Oklahoma’s PreK–12 public school system is to “prepare” students. However, there was little consensus about what schools should be preparing students *for*. In eight of the 12 focus groups, some participants explicitly expressed concern about what they saw as an emphasis on “college for all” in many of Oklahoma’s high schools. As a participant in Atoka told us, “The emphasis I see a lot of times is that the public schools are promoting and trying to send everybody to college, which is a mistake in my opinion. Not everybody needs to go to college.” Many participants identified a demand for skilled trades like carpentry, welding, plumbing, or electricity and explained that the trades can provide a good living without a college degree.

Moreover, for some participants in four focus groups, pushing young people to go to college does more than overlook skilled trades. It hurts their communities. As a participant in Woodward explained, “...if you drive them to college, they may have to go to Kansas City. They may have to—they may be set to leap. You know, you’re setting them up to go away [rather than] return and develop our economy.”

Other participants expressed skepticism about focusing on skilled trades. One participant from Locust Grove explained the importance of college based on his own struggle to find employment as a welder:

Just from my experience, I’ve been a welder for 16 years. I’m currently unemployed because of the market falling, bottom falling plum out of it. My boy, since he was big enough to follow me around, was putting my welding hood on. And I tell him, “You better get an education.” Because I don’t want him in the heat and in the cold in the wintertime. Get an education. Get a good job. As far as what I see here, you got to go to Tulsa or to Arkansas or somewhere like that to get a good job. I mean, in our location here, there’s nothing here. When you see Locust Grove, that’s it. Welding, you know, the welding shop where I was at before, they’re shutting one, two plants down. Sold two locations.... My dad grew up doing construction. I grew up doing welding. That’s no longer—not going to be available for very much longer. So education is very high and especially with us, you know, I’m telling my kids, “You got to get an education. You got to go to college.”

Given the economy and industries concentrated in various areas of rural Oklahoma, students have varying access to careers that do (or don’t) require a college education. But they need more information and support to assess their options. Unfortunately, however, students who aspire to college often lack key information about the admissions, enrollment, and financial aid processes. Students who pursue the trades have access to information through career-tech centers, but often don’t know the full range of options available in their communities. Finally, across rural Oklahoma, students sometimes receive seemingly contradictory messages about the value of pursuing college or a career—without the depth of information or support to understand the nuances of the local economy, how it is evolving, and how their decisions will shape their futures.

Theme 3: Concerns with Education Policy Issues

In addition to their concerns about the quality of education and the types of opportunities available to students in rural Oklahoma, focus group participants also expressed their opinions on a number of salient policy issues. In particular, participants discussed state funding levels for public PreK–12 education; efforts to consolidate districts to save money; the effects of a four-day school week on students, their families, and the community; and charter schools.

Finding: Participants feel that limited, decreasing, and inconsistent state funding affects schools' ability to recruit and retain teachers and offer robust course options to students.

Due in large part to recent declines in the oil industry, state funding for education in Oklahoma is currently the lowest it has been in nearly a decade. The state currently collects just half of the tax dollars it did in 2007.³¹ In late 2015, Governor Fallin and Oklahoma State Treasurer Kent Miller projected a \$900 million budget shortfall for 2016 and advised state agencies to brace themselves for a 2 to 4 percent cut in allocations from the state's general fund.³² Even before these cuts, Oklahoma's per-pupil funding was approximately \$8,700, making it the 47th-lowest in the nation.³³

In all 12 focus groups, participants identified low state funding levels for education as a major problem. As a participant in Atoka said, "It's a crying shame what we're doing to the schools, what we're doing in the state, and it's at all levels from public schools to the university. We've got to find some funding source some way."

In addition to the amount of state funding, participants expressed concern about the inconsistency in funding. As a participant in Woodward explained, "I think we need consistent funding sources. We have to find a way to not to be hot or cold based on [how] oil and gas ...goes. I think that this includes not giving away our tax base and having a long-term vision for the next cycle of the state economy, both in good times and bad times."

Many participants expressed support for state question 779. The state question sought to increase the statewide sales tax by one percentage point and generate an additional \$615 million per year for education,³⁴ but it failed in November 2016, with 59 percent of Oklahoma citizens voting against it.³⁵

Discussions of school funding were often closely preceded or followed by discussions of recruiting and retaining teachers. Participants in all 12 focus groups indicated that Oklahoma has low teacher salaries compared to neighboring states like Texas, Arkansas, and Kansas³⁶ and believed that low salaries made it more difficult for districts to attract and retain high-quality teachers. A participant in Atoka lamented, "What reason do we have to have good teachers come back to these schools? [They're] so underpaid. How are we to expect so much from [teachers] when we don't pay them anything?"

“It's a crying shame what we're doing to the schools, what we're doing in the state, and it's at all levels from public schools to the university. We've got to find some funding source some way.”

There was also concern about the impact low state funding levels have on districts' ability to offer students robust course offerings and extracurricular activities. In particular, participants were concerned about the loss of elective courses like technology, arts programs like band or choir, and agricultural programs including FFA and 4H. Participants largely agreed these activities are part of a well-rounded education and provide opportunities for students to find their niche. However, these opportunities are typically the first to go when the district's budget is cut.

Most participants expressed the opinion that state funding for education is too low, and believe that low funding limits students' access to high-quality teachers and valuable activities. However, a handful of individual participants across four focus groups agreed that more funding is necessary but that funding *in and of itself* is insufficient to solve the problems in Oklahoma's rural schools. *How* the available funding is used is equally important. A participant in Atoka explained it this way:

I think if 100 percent of the state revenues went into education, it wouldn't be enough. It's not a matter of funding. It's not a matter of the money going in. It's the matter of how it's being spent. There's 1,000 things broken and more money is not going to solve that ...it starts with administration and it starts with better teachers and part of that is money, but part of it is a commitment, a generational commitment to this community.

Oklahoma's schools are facing tight—and tightening—budgets. This affects critical components of the education system. Parents, students, business leaders, and community members are all concerned about the impact low state education funding will have on the state's young people, and ultimately, on the economic future of the state.

Finding: Administrative consolidation is seen as a viable way to save money, but participants resist closing schools.

Oklahoma has always been a state of many, many school districts. In the past four decades alone, the state has annexed or consolidated 112 school districts, still leaving 513 school districts at the start of the 2016–17 school year.³⁷ The theory behind consolidation is that merging small schools and/or districts will enable limited resources to be deployed more efficiently. In practice, few communities welcome talk of consolidation when it means closing their schools. They are concerned that it will damage their communities and economies. In fact, the Oklahoma legislature defeated a bill in January 2016 that would have consolidated low-performing K–8 school districts with nearby independent school districts.³⁸ At the same time, participants were more amenable to consolidation at the administrative level. A recent analysis by the Oklahoma Department of Education found that the number of non-teaching staff in Oklahoma's PreK–12 schools increased 36 percent between 1991 and 2014, compared to an increase of 12 percent in the number of teachers and 17 percent increase in the number of students.³⁹

“Our little towns would just perish. There would be nothing left. All of a sudden, all you have is another memory of the past.”

Participants in all 12 focus groups shared the concern about consolidating schools. As one participant in Stillwater explained, if schools were closed, “Our little towns would just perish. There would be nothing left.” A participant in Enid put it like this: “[Closing schools] creates ghost towns. ...And when that town dies, the churches die. The little industry that’s left is gone. And so, all of a sudden, all you have is another memory of the past.”

Participants express logistical concerns about consolidation as well, especially about the amount of time children must spend on the bus to reach a school in a nearby town. This was of particular concern to participants living in western Oklahoma, where school districts tend to be geographically larger. As a participant in Guymon said, “The poor kids have to travel ...they’ll be on the bus all day, and I just don’t think it’s fair to the kids ... that’s terrible to have to stick him on the bus at six o’clock in the morning and they don’t get off until seven at night. They never see their family or get to do anything.”

Participants in eastern Oklahoma conceded that long commutes for students were less of a concern for their communities, as districts tend to be closer together than they are in western Oklahoma.⁴⁰ However, participants living in eastern Oklahoma communities shared the same concerns about the negative impact closing schools could have on small communities.

Participants across the board resoundingly oppose consolidation if it means closing schools. However, participants were much more open to the idea of *administrative* consolidation. That is, many participants feel it is unnecessary for each small school district to be paying for its own superintendent and administrative staff. They believe that a countywide superintendent supported by a few assistant superintendents would be much more efficient.

A participant in Enid explained, “A lot of us have business experience. We see a bank president running 10 banks. We see a CEO of maybe around 10 stores or whatever, and we know that that’s a touchy subject. It’s a very touchy subject in Oklahoma, but that can be done. That [administrative consolidation] can be done effectively.”

Participants are concerned about the financial challenges in their schools and are open to strategies to create efficiencies and capitalize on economies of scale. However, there is a sense that Oklahoma’s school districts are top-heavy, and steps should be taken to address the inefficiencies at an administrative level first, before taking steps as dramatic—and potentially harmful—as closing schools.

Finding: Four-day school weeks can help attract teachers and might save money, but could have a negative impact on families and students.

Another way some rural school districts have sought to save money is by moving to a four-day school week. The idea is that districts save money because they run their buses and heat or cool their schools for one less day per week, saving money on fuel and electric and gas bills. Ninety-eight of Oklahoma's 513 school districts (19 percent) currently operate on a four-day school week.⁴¹

A four-day school week would be a tremendous burden for parents because there is no availability of child care.

Not all participants in the focus groups live in districts operating on a four-day school week, but participants in all 12 focus groups had thoughts on the policy. The first issue they raised was often the impact the four-day schedule would have on families. Having children home from school one day during the work week can be a huge challenge for families in which both parents work, especially in communities with limited day care options. Paying for child care also adds a financial burden to families. As one participant in Stillwater said:

In most small communities, that would be—a four-day school week would be a tremendous burden for parents because there is no availability of child care...you have to pay out of pocket for child care or you have to find a relative that may be in a town that's a pretty decent distance removed from you to do that, but the provision of child care would be a real challenge in a lot of rural communities in a four-day week.

Beyond the logistical challenges a four-day week may create for families, participants expressed uncertainty about its impact on children's education and well-being.⁴² One participant in Stillwater shared his concern this way:

I would have to be convinced of what it does to the students instructionally. What that means. And I don't know what it means, but there has to be some quantitative data out there somewhere. To me, my simple mind thinks that, you know, in four days, there's not going to be as good of retention or instructional value.

Participants also noted that the four-day week could pose a problem for students who rely on schools for breakfast and lunch. In fact, two-thirds of Oklahoma's students participate in the federal breakfast and lunch program.⁴³ Some participants were concerned that students would not receive nutritious meals on the fifth day.

Finally, there was widespread uncertainty among focus group participants about whether going to a four-day week actually saves districts money. In particular, participants pointed to districts that take Fridays off. These districts often still have sporting events or other extracurricular activities happening on Fridays, which means the school is open, the lights are on, and the buses are running. Many districts also keep their buildings open on the fifth day so that they can serve meals to their students. This was a point of hesitation for many,

as they wondered whether the districts were actually seeing any cost savings from the policy.⁴⁴ A participant in the Stillwater focus group explained how his district approached the question:

When we looked at it, we looked at about 20 schools, and there were no savings as far as money if you took Friday off. The schools that took Monday off, they saved money. So I think it was due to the fact that there were still basketball and football games on Friday, so kids were around the school. Lights were still on. Stuff's still going on. The schools that were off on Monday, there was very little activity. They basically locked the doors and told the teachers that they couldn't even come in.

While participants were, on the whole, skeptical of whether the four-day week was good for students or saved money, they did acknowledge it as a way to recruit teachers. In the absence of funds to pay teachers hiring bonuses or higher salaries, districts can offer teachers consistent three-day weekends. Teacher salaries typically remain the same when a district switches to a four-day week (teachers work fewer days but the days they work are longer). Participants believed that many districts were using this as a hiring incentive.

Finding: Few participants were familiar with charter schools, but most felt that a new school in their community would drain already-scarce resources.

The Oklahoma legislature passed the state charter school law in 1999. Under this legislation, charters were only allowed to operate in Oklahoma City and Tulsa. The legislature passed a bill allowing charter schools to operate in communities throughout the state in 2015,⁴⁵ and the first non-urban charter school was approved in 2016 in the town of Carlton Landing in eastern Oklahoma.⁴⁶

Given the newness of charter schools in rural Oklahoma, it is unsurprising that many participants had little understanding of these schools, their governance, and how they differ from traditional public schools. Participants asked many questions about charter schools and often characterized charter schools as private schools. One participant in Guymon had these questions:

And what defines that? Like, charter school? What's the definition of that? And so, does a charter school write their own regulation or are they regulated just like the public school? How does that work?

In other cases, participants had heard of charter schools and had some negative perceptions of them. In particular, these participants worried that charter schools are “elite” or “exclusionary,” and that it is unfair that charters do not have to follow the same regulations as traditional public schools.

“Does a charter school write their own regulation or are they regulated just like the public school? How does that work?”

In three focus groups there was at least one participant who had a deeper understanding of what charter schools are and how they work. These individuals sensed charter schools could create competition for existing schools, thus improving innovation and overall performance. As a participant in Enid said, “I think competition’s a good thing. It creates innovation. So I mean, I think that having that option of a charter school is not all that bad [because] it does force you to strive for continuous improvement.”

I think competition’s a good thing. It creates innovation. So having that option of a charter school is not all that bad [because] it does force you to strive for continuous improvement.

The business leaders we interviewed tended to be more familiar with charter schools than were participants in our focus groups, with five of the nine individuals expressing a high level of understanding of the policy. All five of these individuals indicated that they support the growth of charter schools in rural communities as opportunities for innovation. One interviewee is actively working to start a charter school in his community but acknowledged that most people don’t understand what a charter school is or what it could mean for their community:

We, and other pro-school choice people, have done a bad job educating people on what the options are. We haven’t invested enough in educating them about charter schools. But we have to create the reality for people to start accepting it. Just educating people won’t have the same impact as three years from now when they see [our school] spitting out kids who outperform the districts.

Given the general lack of understanding about charter schools, we asked participants to think about how their communities would be impacted if a new school, operated by an entity other than the district, were to open. With a handful of exceptions, participants believed this would negatively affect their communities. Dividing a small school would make it impossible to offer sports and other extracurricular activities to students in either school; there simply wouldn’t be enough students to create a team.⁴⁷ Participants also worried that a new school would drain very limited financial resources and ultimately drag down the district.

In four focus groups, participants felt that, instead of creating new schools, the state should give existing schools and districts greater flexibility to meet the needs of their students and communities. As a participant in Stillwater explained, “I think in a lot of rural areas, we could alleviate the pressure or the desire for a completely separate charter institution by having more flexibility in our school programs.”

Participants had limited firsthand exposure to charter schools and were skeptical of their effects on the district and community. In general, however, those with the most familiarity with the charter concept were also most likely to see some potential value in providing options and fostering competition.

Conclusion

The people we spoke with throughout this project routinely expressed a deep sense of pride and attachment to their schools, while recognizing that they aren't where they need to be. This report highlights some needs specific to Oklahoma's rural communities, some of which differ markedly from those of more urbanized parts of the state. Despite these differences, however, rural Oklahomans want the same things for the students in their communities: education and opportunity.

As the national spotlight tracks to the economies, communities, and citizens of rural America in the wake of the 2016 election, it is essential for policymakers to recognize that improving education in rural communities isn't just important to those who live and work there. It's important for all Oklahomans, and all Americans. Students in rural Oklahoma have enormous potential for contributing to the social, political, and economic well being of their state and country. Yet some sense that they aren't a priority for state policymakers. In the words of one OSU student,

I would just ask [lawmakers] to remember that there is life outside of Oklahoma City and Tulsa.... So just keep us in mind out here in the rural areas. We are competing [for] the same jobs that those kids from Norman are competing for. I'm going up against those guys for finance jobs and for accounting jobs and whatever job we're going for, we're all competing. ...And so, just remember us, you know, out here in the smaller communities.... We have talent and intelligence too and we have a lot of potential. I think we have just as much potential as anyone else.

It is essential for policymakers to recognize that improving education in rural communities isn't just important to those who live and work there. It's important for all Oklahomans, and all Americans.

Throughout our conversations, we heard rural Oklahomans express a desire to engage and contribute, reflecting explicitly named values. “Our kids know how to work” was a refrain heard frequently from participants. This work ethic will come in handy. So, too, will values like teamwork and self-reliance. The all-hands-on-deck approach to problem solving will be vital as individuals, deeply committed to their communities, come together to create change.

But for all of their strengths, rural communities would benefit from increased attention from state leaders. They need policymakers and other leaders to listen to them, engage with them, and act on their behalf. Though we don’t attempt to identify or assess specific policy solutions, there are a number of challenges that policymakers can help address.

For one, policymakers might start with concerns about high school outcomes and students’ (lack of) preparation for their next steps. Policymakers can help ensure that a high school diploma in Oklahoma signals not just perseverance, but also that a student has the knowledge and skills necessary to be successful in whatever their next steps may be. In particular, policymakers might be in a unique position to open a dialogue about how to balance valuable extracurricular activities, like sports, with strong academics.

Policymakers can also do more to address the gap many students experience between high school and college or career. Whether through greater resources for guidance counselors, more meaningful partnerships between schools and the business community, better outreach from public universities, or other efforts, students in Oklahoma need more and better information to make informed decisions for their future.

Further, many rural community members have opinions or questions about prevalent policy solutions. They recognize funding as a critical issue, but are concerned about the effects of four-day school weeks and school consolidation. State leaders could shed more light on these issues by collecting relevant data, conducting research, and communicating more with their rural constituents. In the same vein, state leaders could help inform rural communities about charter schools—what they are, how they function, and how they can make informed assessments of the risks and benefits to their communities.

Finally, policymakers can address school funding. Whether the issue is the amount of funding or how funds are used, state policymakers can do more to ensure that rural schools have the resources and flexibility they need to meet the needs of their students.

Ultimately, the future pipeline of talent into Oklahoma’s industries is dependent upon PreK–12 students gaining the skills and knowledge necessary to be successful. Policymakers have a critical role to play in shaping this process. In doing so, they must carefully consider the needs and wants of the students, parents, and business leaders living in the state’s many rural communities and develop a shared vision of Oklahoma’s future.



Appendix A: Data Collection and Analysis

Study Population and Sample

The population for this study includes students, parents, community members, and business leaders living in rural communities in Oklahoma. The exact parameters of this broad population are not knowable, so we identified criteria for participants and used a purposeful sampling technique to identify focus group participants.⁴⁸

Our criteria for identifying business leaders included: owning or being in a leadership position of a local company; having hiring authority; and living in the community in which the business operates.

Our criteria for parent and student participants were more straightforward: Parent participants had to have at least one child currently or recently in a PreK–12 public school in the community. Student participants had to be currently enrolled in a public career-tech program or university in Oklahoma.

For the focus groups that took place in Guymon, Woodward, Enid, Stillwater, Muskogee, and one of two groups in Atoka, the Oklahoma Youth Expo (OYE) utilized its network of members to identify business leaders willing to participate. For the focus groups that took place in Locust Grove, at the Northeast Technical Center (NTC), and the second group in Atoka, local school district officials used their networks to identify groups of individuals who met the criteria.

For the two student groups that took place at Oklahoma State University (OSU), OYE used a snowball sampling technique to identify participants. OYE staff began by identifying current OSU students in their network and asking those individuals to identify and bring other students to participate in the focus group.

Finally, we identified participants for the focus group in Altus by using a convenience sampling strategy. We recruited parents and grandparents from a group of community members who were at a local community center on the morning we were in town.

The non-random nature of our sample selection meant that some groups of individuals were overrepresented in our focus groups compared to their frequency in the general population. Our focus on business leaders likely led to the overrepresentation of advanced degree-holders and upper-income families as compared to the population of rural Oklahoma as a whole. Our focus on parents meant that the majority of our participants were between the ages of 35 and 64. Finally, we were unable to schedule a focus group with a Native American tribe and thus the Native American community is underrepresented in our sample. Tables 1–5 below compare the demographics of the adults in our focus group sample to the demographics of rural Oklahoma as a whole.⁴⁹

Table A1. Gender breakdown of focus group participants compared to rural Oklahoma population

	Focus Group	Rural Oklahoma⁵⁰
Male	58%	50%
Female	42%	50%

Table A2. Age breakdown of focus group participants compared to rural Oklahoma population

	Focus Group	Rural Oklahoma⁵¹
20 to 24	0%	6%
25 to 34	9%	12%
35 to 44	33%	12%
45 to 54	33%	14%
55 to 64	20%	13%
65 to 74	5%	9%
75 or older	0%	7%

Table A3. Racial group breakdown of focus group participants compared to rural Oklahoma population

	Focus Group	Rural Oklahoma⁵²
White	76%	71%
Black	0%	3%
Hispanic	5%	8%
Asian	0%	1%
Native American	5%	12%
Two or more races	13%	5%
Other	0%	0%

Table A4. Education levels of focus group participants compared to rural Oklahoma population

	Focus Group	Rural Oklahoma⁵³
Some HS	0%	11%
HS grad	22%	37%
Some college	15%	22%
Associate's degree	2%	6%
Bachelor's degree	22%	12%
Advanced degree	24%	6%

Table A5. Income levels of focus group participants compared to rural Oklahoma population

	Focus Group	Rural Oklahoma⁵⁴
Less than \$24,999	11%	30%
\$25,000 to \$49,999	9%	28%
\$50,000 to \$99,999	22%	29%
\$100,000 to \$200,000	29%	11%
More than \$200,000	24%	2%

Our sample of students was drawn from two key populations: students enrolled at Oklahoma State University who grew up in rural Oklahoma and students enrolled in career-tech training programs at Northeast Technology Center. These students study a wide range of disciplines and include current and former students in Oklahoma’s rural high schools. Tables 6-8 below summarize the data we collected on our student participants.

Table A6. Percent of student participants enrolled in college versus career tech

OSU	63%
NTC	37%

Table A7. Percent of student participants by year of high school graduation

2011	5%
2012	11%
2013	26%
2014	0%
2015	11%
2016	21%
2017	16%
2018	11%

Table A8. Percent of student participants by major/program area

Agribusiness	16%
Animal science	32%
Business	5%
Computer-aided manufacturing	21%
Economics	5%
Environmental and spatial technology	5%
Environmental science	5%
Health careers	11%

Data Collection

Data were collected through 12 focus groups in rural communities throughout Oklahoma. All focus groups were conducted in person and lasted approximately 90 minutes. The focus groups were semi-structured, meaning that we followed a pre-written script of questions and topics but the exact wording of each question and the order in which the questions were asked were not rigidly set. We used a scripted introductory opening to begin the conversation, and several open-ended, semi-structured questions to guide the conversations. Participants were asked to describe, for example, the role that public schools play in their communities or the impact that the education budget has on their schools. The semi-structured nature of the focus groups and interviews allowed for follow-up probes to gain more insight or information from the participants.⁵⁵ This flexibility made it possible to respond to the flow of the conversation in order to gather as much data as possible.

We recorded all 12 focus groups. They were transcribed by an outside company.

Data Analysis

We uploaded transcripts to a data analysis software program and used the program to code the information. We coded the data in three steps, using three different coding methods. The first step was structural coding. This type of coding applies content-based codes to sections of text that relate to a topic area or research question.⁵⁶ Accordingly, we assigned short, one- to three-word codes to paragraphs, sentences, or words that corresponded with each of the topics we were investigating, plus an “other” category for themes that arose organically during conversation.

The second round of coding was descriptive coding. Descriptive codes summarize the basic topic of a section of text.⁵⁷ These descriptive codes emerged from the data, meaning that a code was assigned to each idea described by participants. These codes consisted of short words or phrases that summarized the main ideas raised by participants.

The final stage of coding consisted of pattern coding. Pattern codes pull together information into emerging themes or patterns.⁵⁸ In order to identify pattern codes, the descriptive codes were reviewed and similar codes were assembled together into meaningful categories to create a pattern code.

The pattern codes identified in the final round of coding formed the basis of the findings for this report. The findings are presented in statement form and discussed in detail in each section. The discussions include direct statements from participants to help readers get a sense of the way participants think and talk about each finding. The direct quotations presented in this report are not ascribed to particular participants. Instead, quotations are identified by the name of the town in which the focus group where the statement was made took place. Quotations from the same town do not necessarily come from the same individual, helping ensure broad representation of participants’ voices. Moreover, the number of direct quotes included is not indicative of how many participants identified the themes presented in the findings. Rather, for each finding, we identify the number of focus groups where that finding was prevalent.



Appendix B: Focus Group Protocol

Introduction

Good morning, and thank you so much for taking the time to be here today. I know a number of you drove a good distance to participate and we really appreciate it.

My name is Julie Squire and I'm here with my colleague Kelly Robson, as well as Kass Pfeiffer from the Oklahoma Youth Expo.

Kelly and I work for a nonprofit organization called Bellwether Education Partners. We conduct research and analysis on education policy and practice across the country. As you know, you are here today to participate in a focus group for a project we are doing with the Oklahoma Youth Expo and the Oklahoma Public School Resource Center. This is the [X] in a series of focus groups that we'll be conducting across the state and the conversations will help inform a report on the perspectives of parents, business leaders, and community members on education.

Have any of you done a focus group before?

For those who haven't, a focus group is kind of like a group interview; we'll be asking questions and listening to you converse with one another. The goal is not for this group to reach a consensus on any of the questions, but rather for us to hear a variety of perspectives, understand how they relate to one another, and identify nuances that might not arise from a survey or from one-on-one conversation. Ideally, the comments you hear from other members of this group will stimulate your own thinking.

A few guidelines for the conversation:

First: We want you to do the talking. You should feel free to share your thoughts openly and not wait for us to ask a question or to call on you. This is about hearing your perspective and there are no right or wrong answers. We want to hear a wide range of opinions, so please speak up if you agree or disagree with something that another participant has said.

Second: For Kelly's sake as she's taking notes, please don't speak over each other.

Third: If we are running over our allotted time on a particular topic, I may interrupt or push us along. Please know that I am not trying to be rude but want to make sure we get you out of here on time.

Fourth: Please put your cellphones on silent, if you don't mind. We know you are all busy people so if you need to take a call, that's OK; just step outside and come back as soon as you can.

Finally, we will be recording today's conversation to make sure we accurately capture everything that is said. However, we will not be including any identifying information—like your names or places of employment—in our report. In addition, we also ask that you please keep this conversation private after you leave here today.

Does anyone have any questions?

Survey and Consent Form

Before we begin, we'd like to ask you all to take a brief survey and also sign a short consent form for recording the conversation. Both documents are in front of you. The survey will allow us to describe the characteristics of the people we are speaking to in each focus group. But again, we will not include any personally identifying information in our report.

Engagement Questions

Question #1: So, to kick us off, how would you describe the role of schools in your community?

Prompt: What role does the school play in the community's social fabric or economy?

Exploration Questions

Question #2: We'd like to hear about the standards students must meet to receive a high school diploma. How would you describe the value of a diploma from your district's high school?

Prompt: What do the schools in your community do well in preparing students for success in college or career?

Prompt: What do the schools in your community need to do better to prepare students for success in college or career?

Question #3: Sometimes families have choices that involve online courses or digital learning. What have you observed or experienced in regard to online education?

Prompt: What role does online education play in expanding the range of courses that are available to students?

Prompt: Sometimes families have options about which school their children attend, perhaps a charter school or a private school. In what ways does school choice affect your community?

Question #4: How does the amount of public funding affect the quality of education in your community?

Prompt: Some rural school districts decide to consolidate or to share administrative resources between districts. What do you think about this strategy being used in your community?

Prompt: Some districts in Oklahoma have sought to cut costs by moving to a four-day school week. If this strategy were used in your community, what do you think the effect would be?

Prompt: How does school funding affect the community's ability to recruit and retain teachers?

Exit Questions

Question #5: The goal of this research is to convey your perspectives to state policymakers. If you had an opportunity to speak with them directly about public education, what would you say?

Prompt: Are there any issues that we haven't touched upon that you would like to discuss?

Conclusion

Kelly has been taking note of key themes that have emerged in this discussion. Kelly is going to summarize for us briefly, and please let us know if you think we've missed anything.

Thank You for Coming

That concludes our focus group. Once again, please know that your perspectives are invaluable to our research and we appreciate the time you took to come and speak with us. Thank you so very much.



Appendix C: Interview Protocol

Description of the Project

We are working with Oklahoma Youth Expo and the Oklahoma Public School Resource Center to write a report that conveys the perspectives of rural parents, business leaders, and community members on education. We're conducting a series of 12 focus groups in Western and Eastern Oklahoma, as well as a number of interviews with business and community leaders from across the state.

Ultimately, we will write a report and release it publicly, targeting policymakers, before they convene for the 2017 legislative session in February.

This conversation is for background. If we want to quote anything you say, we'll get your permission first.

Questions

How would you describe the role of the schools in your community?

What paths do students take after they graduate from high school? College? Military? Straight to work?

Do you feel the state's K-12 academic standards are rigorous enough to prepare students for either a career in local industry or for college-level coursework?

Is there enough diversity in courses offered at the high school level to prepare students for success at the postsecondary level?

Do local businesses align degree programs to work opportunities?

Are there jobs in your community that can attract/keep college-educated kids around?

Is teacher retention a problem for local schools? Is it also a problem at the university level? Why do you think that is?

At the K-12 level, do you think there is an opportunity for administrative consolidation or the sharing of administrative resources among small rural districts?

What about a four-day school week? How do you think that would impact your community?

What would you like to see local schools, businesses, or the university do to help attract and fuel economic growth?

What is the role of charter schools and choice, specifically for rural education in Oklahoma?

What is the role of online coursework in the high schools in your community?

Is there anything else we should know or be thinking about?

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Bellwether Education Partners is a national, nonpartisan nonprofit of more than 50 professionals dedicated to helping education organizations become more effective in their work and achieve dramatic results, especially for the most underserved students. To do so, we work in the public, private, and nonprofit sectors and provide a unique combination of exceptional thinking, talent, and hands-on strategic support.

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