

**BRIEF**



# **PORTFOLIO OF CHOICE**

## School Choice in Rural Communities

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# Portfolio of Choice: School Choice in Rural Communities

## The National Comprehensive Center

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Portfolio of Choice: Charter Schools

Portfolio of Choice: Private School Choice Programs

Portfolio of Choice: Homeschooling

Portfolio of Choice: Virtual Schooling

Portfolio of Choice: District Open Enrollment

Portfolio of Choice: Dual Enrollment

Portfolio of Choice: School Choice in Rural Communities

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## Key Takeaways

- » Rural schools educate nearly 20 percent of all public, preK-12 students nationwide.
- » Only 32 percent of rural families have access to school choice, compared to 41 percent of families overall, and 53 percent of urban families.
- » Transportation, enrollment and funding, and teacher recruitment and retention are challenges that underlie nearly all types of school choice.
- » Policymakers can support equitable access to school choice in rural communities by addressing underlying challenges, as well as incentivizing collaboration across school types and collecting data to understand trends in school choice by geography.

## Introduction

Rural communities are home to almost 60 million people, approximately 19 percent of the total U.S. population.<sup>1</sup> More than 27,000 rural public schools educate 9.7 million students, nearly one out of every five public preK-12 students nationwide.<sup>2</sup> Yet for decades, the attention of state and federal policymakers has largely focused on the needs of the nation's urban schools and communities. Although that dynamic has begun to change in recent years, there remains a need for policymakers to understand whether and how popular education reform initiatives translate to rural contexts.

School choice, which encompasses a broad range of policies that allow parents to choose a school for their child other than the one to which they are assigned through traditional public school district zoning practices, has been a popular reform strategy in cities across the country. Nationwide, more than half of families residing in cities report having access to school choice (see Figure 1).<sup>3</sup> But providing rural families with options is more challenging. These policies rely on having enough students and teachers to sustain multiple schools in close proximity to one another, which many rural communities lack. As a result, school choice policies are harder to implement, and fewer families have access to multiple school options.

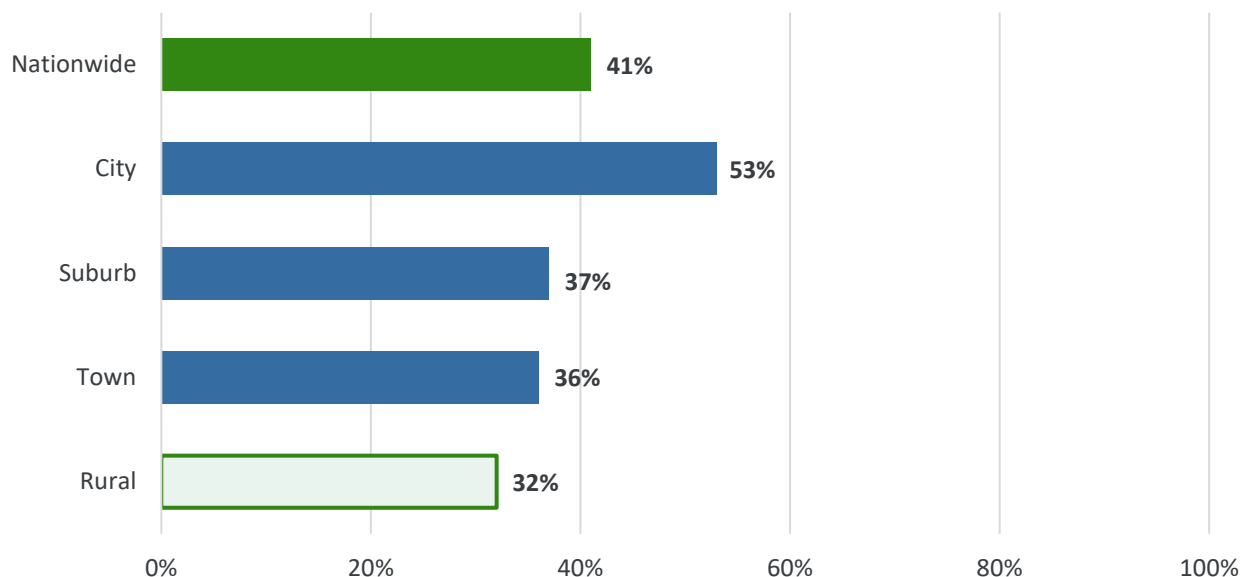
<sup>1</sup> <https://mtgis-portal.geo.census.gov/arcgis/apps/MapSeries/index.html?appid=49cd4bc9c8eb444ab51218c1d5001ef6>

<sup>2</sup> Author's calculation based on 2017-18 data from NCES ELSI.

<sup>3</sup> <https://nces.ed.gov/pubs2019/2019106.pdf>



**Figure 1. Percentage of public school students whose parents report having access to school choice, by locale**



Source: [School Choice in the United States](#).

That said, implementing school choice in rural communities is not impossible. The goal of this brief is to examine the extent to which different school choice policies have been implemented in rural communities, identify the barriers, and provide recommendations for policymakers looking to expand access to school choice in rural communities. The school choice policies discussed in this brief include:

1. **Charter schools:** Charter schools are public schools governed by a charter, or contract, between two entities: those who run the school (typically the charter school’s board) and an authorizer (an independent entity that approves the school’s existence and holds it accountable for academic outcomes).
2. **Private school choice programs:** These programs enable families to access public funds to cover all or part of the costs of private school tuition.
3. **Open enrollment:** Policies that enable families to send their children to a public school other than their zoned school, either in the same district or in a neighboring district.
4. **Dual enrollment:** A set of programs that, through agreements between secondary and postsecondary institutions, enable high school students to earn postsecondary credits.
5. **Homeschooling:** Policies that enable families to educate their children at home.
6. **Virtual schooling:** Programs that enable students to take their entire course load online.

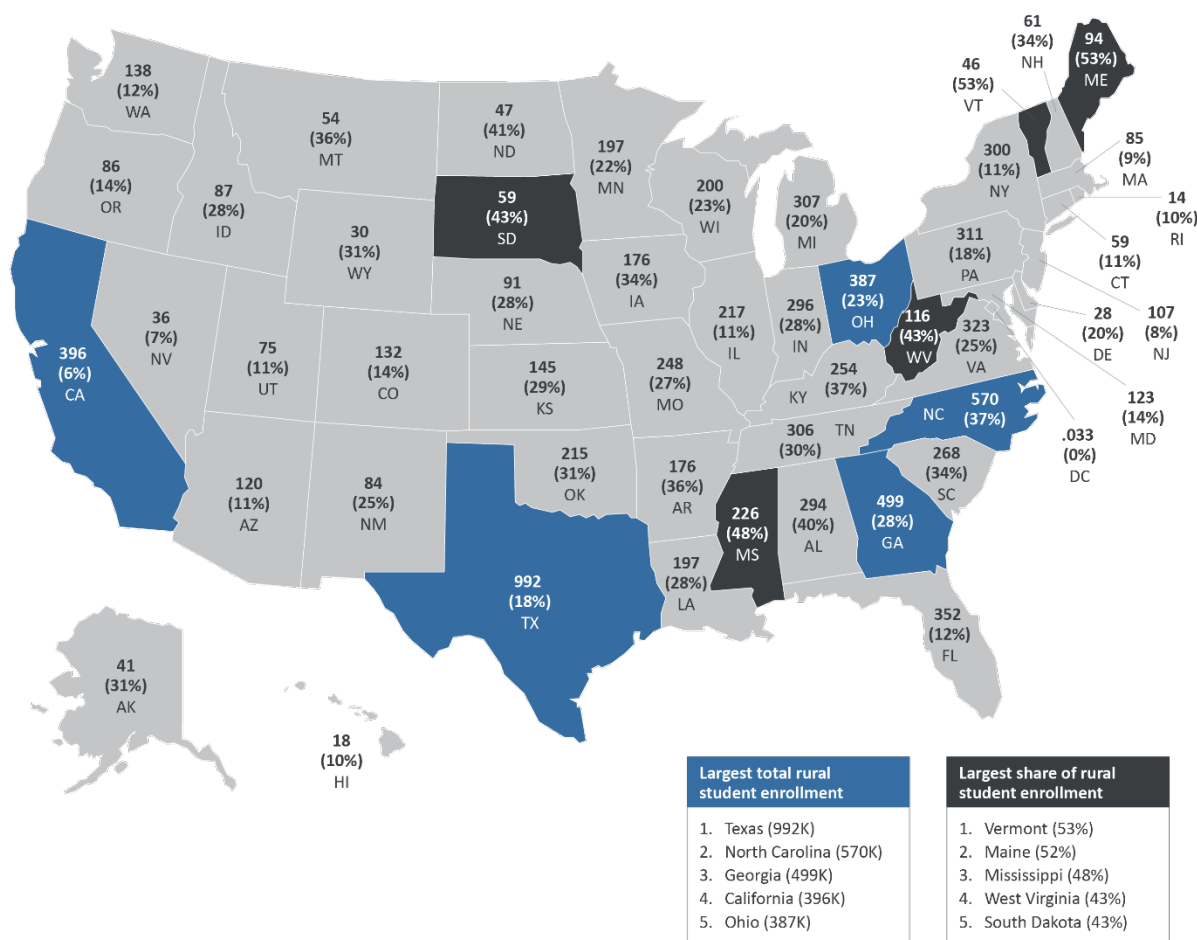
The final section of this brief offers a discussion of the main barriers facing policymakers and education officials in implementing school choice policies in rural communities and recommendations for addressing them.



## An Overview of Education in Rural Communities

Twenty-eight percent of the nation’s public schools are located in rural communities. These schools enroll about 9.7 million preK–12 students.<sup>4</sup> While rural schools and students exist in all 50 states, there’s substantial variation in the number and proportion of rural students across states. Texas and North Carolina lead the nation in terms of the largest absolute rural student enrollment, however smaller states, including Vermont and Maine, have the highest proportions of rural students (see Figure 2).

**Figure 2. Total preK–12 student enrollment in rural schools (in thousands) and rural student enrollment share by state, 2018–19**



<sup>4</sup> Author’s calculation based on 2017–18 data from NCES ELSI.



### Defining “rural”

Although the term “rural” is used regularly to describe particular geographies, there is no single, universally agreed-upon definition of what constitutes a rural community. Government agencies use different definitions. For example:

- » The Census Bureau defines “rural” as encompassing all population, housing, and territory not included in an urbanized area (populations of 50,000 or more) or an urban cluster (populations of at least 2,500 but less than 50,000).<sup>5</sup>
- » The National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) uses an “urban-centric” classification system with four major locale categories: city, suburban, town, and rural. All categories are further subdivided; “rural” has three subcategories:
  - › Rural-fringe: Census-defined rural territory that is less than or equal to 5 miles from an urbanized area, as well as rural territory that is less than or equal to 2.5 miles from an urban cluster.
  - › Rural-distant: Census-defined rural territory that is more than 5 miles but less than or equal to 25 miles from an urbanized area, as well as rural territory that is more than 2.5 miles but less than or equal to 10 miles from an urban cluster.
  - › Rural-remote: Census-defined rural territory that is more than 25 miles from an urbanized area and is also more than 10 miles from an urban cluster.<sup>6</sup>
- » The Office of Management and Budget designates counties as “metropolitan,” “micropolitan,” or “neither,” and considers counties to be rural if they are not part of a metropolitan statistical area (MSA).<sup>7</sup>

The existence of so many definitions of rural complicates data analysis and information about rural communities. In this brief, we rely on a variety of sources that use different definitions of rural. Where relevant, we specify the exact definition.

Moreover, there is considerable variation among rural communities, by whatever definition you choose. Some rural communities, for example, are resource-rich, creating a strong tax base and plentiful jobs. Others are vacation destinations, resulting in a steady stream of tourism. Still others have been devastated by economic shifts such as the closing of manufacturing plants and struggle with high rates of poverty and community distress.<sup>8</sup> Although we do not try to distinguish among the types of rural communities in this brief, it is important for policymakers to recognize that rural communities are not a monolith. Each community has a unique set of assets to build upon and challenges to be addressed.

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.census.gov/programs-surveys/geography/guidance/geo-areas/urban-rural.html>

<sup>6</sup> <https://nces.ed.gov/surveys/ruraled/definitions.asp>

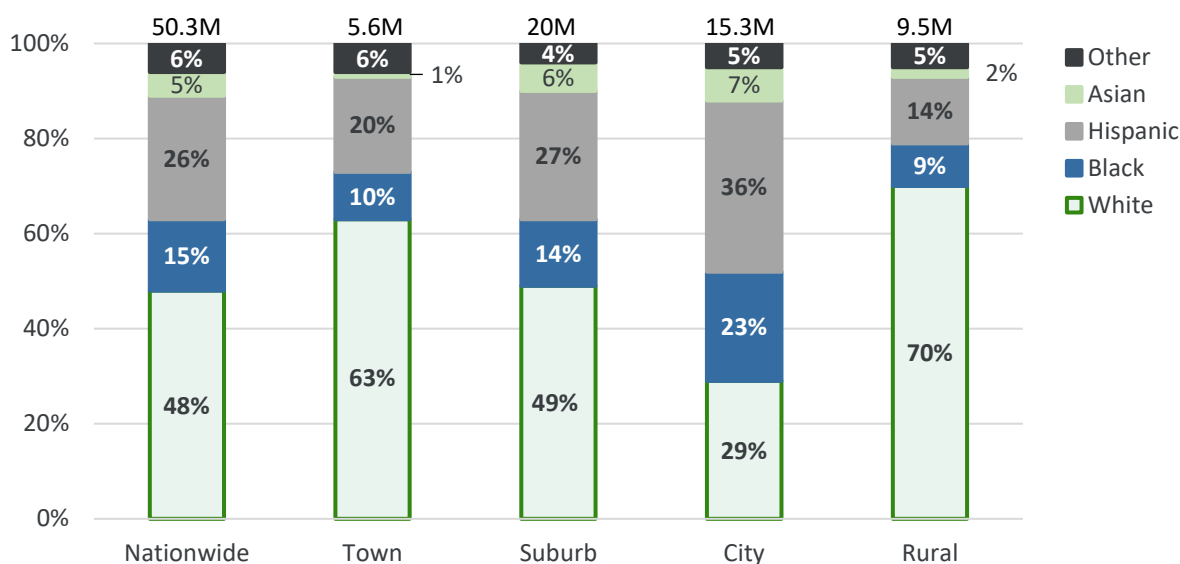
<sup>7</sup> <https://www.census.gov/programs-surveys/metro-micro.html>

<sup>8</sup> [https://corporate.walmart.com/media-library/document/america-at-work-report/\\_proxyDocument?id=00000168-dec5-d9f9-a7f8-deed73c70001](https://corporate.walmart.com/media-library/document/america-at-work-report/_proxyDocument?id=00000168-dec5-d9f9-a7f8-deed73c70001)



The vast majority—70 percent—of rural students nationwide are White (see Figure 3). However, in some states, Black and Hispanic students make up substantial portions of rural student enrollment. In Mississippi, for example, 38 percent of students enrolled in rural schools are Black, compared to 9 percent of the rural student population nationwide. In Texas, 42 percent of students enrolled in rural schools are Hispanic, compared to 14 percent of the rural student population nationwide.

**Figure 3. Nationwide preK–12 student enrollment by region and race/ethnicity, 2017**



A smaller percentage of the rural student population is eligible for free or reduced-price lunch compared to the populations of students attending schools in towns or cities. However, states in the South, including Texas, Louisiana, Mississippi, and Georgia, have much higher rates of poverty among their rural student populations compared to the national average.<sup>9</sup>

In terms of student outcomes, such as those measured by reading and math scores on the NAEP, rural students lag behind suburban students but outperform their peers in cities and towns. They also tend to graduate from high school at the same or higher rates than their peers in other geographies across most student subgroups. At the postsecondary level, rural students matriculate to and complete two-year degree programs at similar rates as their peers, but lag behind in terms of enrollment and completion at four-year universities.<sup>10</sup>

Equitable and excellent education outcomes for rural students are essential for the lifetime well-being of both rural students and their communities, as an increasing share of jobs require advanced training and employers will settle in communities with well-prepared workers. While many rural schools afford students excellent opportunities, the fact remains that where local schools are not high quality, many of the strategies employed to improve schools are challenging to implement.

<sup>9</sup> [https://bellwethereducation.org/sites/default/files/Wide%20Open%20Spaces\\_Rural%20Education\\_Bellwether.pdf](https://bellwethereducation.org/sites/default/files/Wide%20Open%20Spaces_Rural%20Education_Bellwether.pdf)

<sup>10</sup> [https://bellwethereducation.org/sites/default/files/Wide%20Open%20Spaces\\_Rural%20Education\\_Bellwether.pdf](https://bellwethereducation.org/sites/default/files/Wide%20Open%20Spaces_Rural%20Education_Bellwether.pdf)

School choice is one strategy to increase students' access to high quality school options, but as noted, only about one-third of rural families report access to it. The sections that follow provide an overview of how individual school choice policies play out in rural communities.

## Charter Schools in Rural Communities

Charter schools are public schools that are granted flexibility from many of the state laws and policies that govern traditional district schools. In exchange for that flexibility, charter schools are held accountable for student outcomes through contracts with their authorizer (the entity that approves the school to open and oversees its financial, operational, and academic outcomes). If charter schools fail to meet expectations, authorizers can intervene—up to and including closing the school.

There are 7,500 charter schools serving 3.3 million students nationwide.<sup>11</sup> Of those, just 11 percent (about 800 schools) operate in rural communities. And the more remote a community is, the less likely it is that a charter school exists: Just 15 percent of rural charter schools serve students in rural-remote areas (the most distant communities based on NCES' definition).<sup>12</sup> Given the small number of charter schools operating in rural communities, it is no surprise that very few families have access to them. In fact, data suggests that while 59 percent of all families, and 68 percent of urban families, have access to a charter school within 10 miles of their home, just 17 percent of rural families do.<sup>13</sup>

There are several factors that make it difficult for charter schools to open and thrive in rural communities. To begin with, the five states that still do not have a charter school law on the books as of 2020—Montana, Nebraska, North Dakota, South Dakota, and Vermont—are among the states with the highest proportions of rural student enrollment nationwide.<sup>14</sup> And the three states that most recently authorized charter schools—Alabama (2015),<sup>15</sup> Kentucky (2017),<sup>16</sup> and West Virginia (2019)<sup>17</sup>—also have large proportions of rural students. The nonexistence or relative recency of charter school laws in heavily rural states is an obvious barrier to their establishment.

But even where legislation enables charter schools to operate in rural communities, they are relatively scarce. There are a number of reasons for this. First, charter schools rely on student

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<sup>11</sup><https://data.publiccharters.org/>

<sup>12</sup>[https://www.edweek.org/ew/articles/2014/05/07/30rural\\_ep.h33.html](https://www.edweek.org/ew/articles/2014/05/07/30rural_ep.h33.html)

<sup>13</sup><https://www.brookings.edu/research/who-could-benefit-from-school-choice-mapping-access-to-public-and-private-schools/>

<sup>14</sup>Smarick, Andy. A new frontier: Utilizing charter schooling to strengthen rural education. *Bellwether Education Partners*, 2014. <https://eric.ed.gov/?id=ED553987>. Figure 1, p. 7.

<sup>15</sup><https://www.publiccharters.org/our-work/charter-law-database/states/alabama#:~:text=Alabama%20law%20provides%20that%20authorizers.Choice%20and%20Student%20Opportunity%20Act.>

<sup>16</sup><https://www.courier-journal.com/story/news/education/2019/02/20/kentucky-charter-schools-funding-shelved-another-year/2906911002/>

<sup>17</sup><https://www.heartland.org/news-opinion/news/west-virginia-enacts-states-first-charter-school-legislation>





enrollment to survive. Often rural communities simply have too few students to sustain an additional school. In addition, challenges such as financing, facilities, and transportation tend to be more acute in rural communities, making it harder for charter schools to operate successfully.<sup>18</sup> Charter schools in general tend to operate on about 30 percent less per-pupil funding than their district counterparts.<sup>19</sup> And depending on state funding structures, rural schools often receive less per-pupil funding than urban schools.<sup>20</sup> As a result, rural charter schools are at a real funding disadvantage. The availability of facilities is another challenge that is particularly acute in rural communities. Compared to urban areas where unused and repurposed buildings are in greater supply, creating charter schools in rural areas can be significantly more costly as many schools need to be built from scratch.<sup>21</sup> Moreover, due to sparsely populated students within rural communities, higher transportation costs create additional financial strain for charter schools already competing for limited resources.

Lastly, charter schools may experience greater opposition in rural contexts. Charter schools are often in direct competition with the local school district for students, teachers, and other critical resources. In small rural districts with few students and resources—many of which are already struggling to make ends meet—a charter school could mean enrollment declines (and accompanying declines in per-pupil funding) that could have outsized effects on the local school system. While this can be true across geographies, local schools tend to play a particularly central role in rural communities, serving as a key employer as well as a community hub where the community gathers for athletic, cultural, and other events. The loss of a school can devastate a rural community and, as a result, rural community members may be particularly sensitive to school choice options that result in enrollment declines.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>18</sup><https://www.ruralcharterschools.org/key-themes>

<sup>19</sup>[http://www.publiccharters.org/sites/default/files/migrated/wp-content/uploads/2016/03/myths\\_facts-KM\\_030416.pdf](http://www.publiccharters.org/sites/default/files/migrated/wp-content/uploads/2016/03/myths_facts-KM_030416.pdf)

<sup>20</sup><https://iop.harvard.edu/get-involved/harvard-political-review/little-school-prairie-overlooked-plight-rural-education#:~:text=Student%20enrollment%20drives%20public%20school,district%2C%20the%20less%20the%20funding.&text=In%20states%20like%20Connecticut%2C%20Michigan,poor%20pupil%20than%20urban%20counties>

<sup>21</sup><https://fordhaminstitute.org/national/commentary/harvesting-success-charter-schools-rural-america>

<sup>22</sup><https://www.ruralcharterschools.org/key-themes>



### What makes charter schools successful in rural communities?

Despite the challenges, successful rural charter schools do exist. However, they often look different or serve a slightly different purpose than charter schools in urban and suburban communities. For example, communities whose district-operated schools have closed or have been consolidated, can use their state's charter school law to open a charter school as a means to give the community back its local school. Charter schools can fill other gaps in communities as well, such as the need for a high-quality school in a community where the district schools are struggling, or the need for a specialized school to meet the learning needs of students who have struggled to be successful elsewhere.<sup>23</sup>

In contrast to urban and suburban charter schools, which are often managed by professional charter management organizations (CMOs), rural charter schools face a greater likelihood of success if they are launched and operated by members of the local community. This helps create the buy-in and support that rural charter schools need.<sup>24</sup>

Policymakers looking to support the development of charter schools in rural communities ought to address many of the same barriers that inhibit charter school growth in other communities: inequitable funding, access to facilities, and transportation. In addition, policymakers should consider ways to support community members to start charter schools, such as providing training or support through the application process.

## Private School Choice Programs in Rural Communities

Private school choice programs provide avenues for families to access public dollars to cover some or all of the cost of tuition at private schools. There are four main private school choice policy structures:

- » **Vouchers:** Voucher programs direct state education dollars to families and allow them to use those funds for the cost of private school tuition. Under this option, all or part of the per-pupil funding allocated for a given student are instead used to cover the cost of tuition at the private school chosen by the student and their family.<sup>25</sup>
- » **Tax credit scholarships:** Tax credit scholarship programs use tax credits to incentivize businesses and individuals to donate money to nonprofit scholarship-granting organizations (SGOs) that, in turn, disburse those donations in the form of scholarships to eligible students to attend participating private schools.<sup>26</sup>
- » **Education savings accounts (ESAs):** ESAs allow the state to deposit a set amount of money, typically based on the states' per-pupil funding for public schools, into a bank account that families who have chosen to withdraw their children from public schools can access and use to pay for private school tuition among other educational-related activities.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>23</sup><https://www.ruralcharterschools.org/key-themes>

<sup>24</sup><https://www.ruralcharterschools.org/key-themes>

<sup>25</sup>[Portfolio of Choice: Private school Programs](#)

<sup>26</sup>Ibid.

<sup>27</sup>Ibid.



- » **Individual tax credits and deductions:** Individual tax credits and deductions allow parents to receive state income tax relief for approved educational expenses, which can include private school tuition.<sup>28</sup>

Taking advantage of private school choice programs requires families to have access to one or more private schools in close proximity. However, while approximately 92 percent of all families, and 96 percent of urban families, have a private school within 10 miles of their home, just 69 percent of rural families do.<sup>29</sup> And this data is for proximity to *any* private school. Given that private schools typically have to opt-in to participate in voucher and tax credit scholarship programs—and not all of them do—it’s likely that rural families have even less access to private schools in which they could enroll through choice programs.

The lack of private school options in rural communities is the result of many of the same barriers facing rural charter schools: small student populations that make it difficult to sustain an additional school, fewer options for facilities, and higher transportation costs. In addition, state policy structures can further limit the potential of private school choice programs in rural areas.

Many voucher and tax-credit scholarship programs cap the number of students who can participate. These caps typically either set an established number of vouchers or scholarships that are available statewide, or limit participation to a certain percentage of a district’s enrollment. These caps are often a result of finite funding, but also serve to mitigate the effect of enrollment losses on traditional school districts. Caps that limit the number of available vouchers to a percentage of each district’s enrollment can disincentivize the participation of rural private schools. In Wisconsin, for example, enrollment in the statewide voucher program, the Parental Choice Program, is capped at 4 percent of each district’s enrollment (and increases annually by 1 percentage point until it reaches 10%).<sup>30</sup> In small, rural districts like Cassville School District, which has a student enrollment around 200 students in total, only 8 students would be eligible under the current policy structure. The cost of participation for private schools (e.g., addressing additional regulations, fulfilling paperwork and documentation requirements) may not be worth it for rural private schools if they can only enroll a very small number of students. In fact, one analysis found that only 14 percent of Wisconsin’s rural private schools participate in the program due to program caps.<sup>31</sup>

In addition to caps on the number of students who can participate in private school choice programs, student eligibility guidelines can further limit who participates. States’ program eligibility requirements often limit participation to families at or below certain income thresholds. This is meant to ensure that voucher and tax credit programs support the highest-need students and families. In states with a single voucher or tax-credit program, these income thresholds are

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<sup>28</sup>Ibid.

<sup>29</sup><https://www.brookings.edu/research/who-could-benefit-from-school-choice-mapping-access-to-public-and-private-schools/>

<sup>30</sup><https://www.edchoice.org/school-choice/programs/wisconsin-parental-choice-program-statewide/>

<sup>31</sup><https://www.will-law.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/04/REPORT-Rural-Schools-Need-to-Expand-WPCP.pdf>



applied equally statewide. However, some states have multiple programs in place that have different income eligibility requirements that result in more restrictive requirements for rural students. In Wisconsin, families making up to 185 percent of the federal poverty level are eligible for a voucher under the statewide program. But Wisconsin also operates a voucher program exclusively for students living in communities served by the Milwaukee Public School District. Families making up to 300 percent of the federal poverty level are eligible for vouchers under the Milwaukee-specific program. The difference in income thresholds between the two programs effectively means that higher percentages of students living in the urban community of Milwaukee are eligible for a voucher compared to students living in other communities in Wisconsin—including rural communities. In fact, due to differences in eligibility requirements, just 1 percent of the 384,871 students living in rural areas or small towns in Wisconsin are eligible for the statewide voucher program, while 75 percent of all students living in Milwaukee are eligible for the Milwaukee voucher program.<sup>32</sup>

A similar situation plays out in Ohio, which has a total of five voucher programs. One hundred percent of students living in the urban neighborhoods served by the Cleveland Metropolitan School District are eligible for a voucher under the Cleveland Scholarship Program. On the other hand, just 29 percent of students are eligible for the EdChoice Scholarship Program and 34 percent of students are eligible for the Income-Based Scholarship Program, both of which operate statewide and cover the state’s many rural districts.<sup>33</sup>

### What makes private school choice successful in rural communities?

A smaller proportion of rural families have a private school located within 10 miles of their home compared to urban families. Still, nearly 7 out of every 10 rural families have access to a private school. While not every state has a private school choice program in place, these numbers suggest that private school choice may be a viable option for larger numbers of rural families if other barriers were eliminated. Policy barriers, such as restrictive eligibility requirements; logistical barriers, such as transportation; and regulatory barriers, such as the paperwork burden on participating schools regardless of the number of students enrolled, could all make a difference. Policymakers looking to expand private school choice policies in rural communities ought to consider all of these barriers and find ways to mitigate them.

## Open Enrollment in Rural Communities

Open enrollment policies allow students to attend a different public school than the one they are assigned to through traditional school zoning processes. **Intra-district open enrollment** allows students to transfer to another school within their resident district while **inter-district open enrollment** allows students to transfer to schools outside of their resident school district.

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<sup>32</sup><http://www.will-law.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/04/REPORT-Rural-Schools-Need-to-Expand-WPCP.pdf> Table 4.

<sup>33</sup><https://www.edchoice.org/school-choice/programs/ohio-income-based-scholarship-program/> and <https://www.edchoice.org/school-choice/programs/ohio-educational-choice-scholarship-program/>



Rural families tend to have less access to school choice through intra-district open enrollment than families in other geographies: 89 percent of all families, and 95 percent of urban families have access to two or more traditional public schools within 10 miles of their home through intra-district open enrollment. However, just 60 percent of rural families do.<sup>34</sup> This discrepancy is largely a result of small rural districts that operate just a few schools. According to one analysis, 9,000 of the more than 13,000 school districts nationwide are considered “sparse,” meaning that they have four or fewer schools.<sup>35</sup> Families living in a district with one elementary school, one middle school, and one high school have no other in-district options. As a result, intra-district open enrollment policies do not increase these families’ schooling options.

Access to schooling options through inter-district open enrollment is much more equal across geographies, however. Seventy-three percent of all families—and 72 percent of urban families and 74 percent of rural families—have access to one or more public schools in another district within 10 miles of their home.<sup>36</sup>

Like with other school choice options, transportation can be a barrier for rural families looking to send their child to school in a neighboring district. Not all states require school districts to transport students who enroll through open enrollment programs, and rural areas tend to lack public transportation options. Where district-operated or public transportation options are unavailable, the transportation burden falls to families. If families are unable to transport their children to school in another district, then inter-district open enrollment policies are limited in their ability to provide additional school options to families.

In addition, like charter schools, inter-district open enrollment can have a negative effect on the enrollment of small, rural school districts. In Massachusetts, for example, open enrollment has led to substantial enrollment declines in the state’s rural schools. Between 2008 and 2017, the rural districts of Palmer and Savoy have experienced enrollment declines of 24 percent and 34 percent respectively.<sup>37</sup> As schools’ enrollment declines, so too does their revenue (since per-pupil funds are a major source of funding, and those funds tend to follow the students). Palmyra-Eagle School District in Wisconsin, for example, is located in close proximity to Milwaukee. Between 2010 and 2018, the district lost more than half of its enrollment and more than \$3 million in revenue.<sup>38</sup> Ohio’s rural districts experienced similar enrollment declines and revenue losses soon after the state’s open enrollment policy was implemented. For example, in a single year, the rural Federal Hocking

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<sup>34</sup><https://www.brookings.edu/research/who-could-benefit-from-school-choice-mapping-access-to-public-and-private-schools/>

<sup>35</sup><https://www.americanprogress.org/issues/education-k-12/news/2017/03/03/414853/vouchers-are-not-a-viable-solution-for-vast-swaths-of-america/>

<sup>36</sup><https://www.brookings.edu/research/who-could-benefit-from-school-choice-mapping-access-to-public-and-private-schools/>

<sup>37</sup>Hatch, Roger. “Inter-District School Choice in Massachusetts,” n.d., 22. <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED589538.pdf> p. 6.

<sup>38</sup><http://www.will-law.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/04/REPORT-Rural-Schools-Need-to-Expand-WPCP.pdf>



Local School District in Ohio lost more than 100 students and \$384,000 in state aid—nearly 5 percent of its budget—to nearby districts through open enrollment.<sup>39</sup>

### What makes open enrollment successful in rural communities?

Due to the small size of many rural districts, intra-district open enrollment may not provide additional options for families. However, inter-district enrollment, which allows students in one district to enroll in a school in another district, is a viable policy option for providing rural families with more school choice. Many of the same policy structures that support open enrollment policies broadly are applicable to making the policy successful in rural communities: addressing school finance structures that disincentivize district participation, ensuring participating students have access to transportation, developing equitable enrollment processes and ensuring transparent communication, clearly defining exceptions to mandatory policies, and collecting and reporting better data to understand how the policy plays out on the ground.

In addition, policymakers must be cognizant of the effect that enrollment losses that result from open enrollment policies can have on small rural districts. The loss of revenue that results from declining enrollment leads to districts cutting programs, such as sports, the arts, extracurriculars, or even specialized or advanced academic course offerings that may have lower demand, but provide breadth and depth of opportunity for rural students. The loss of these programs often leads to further enrollment declines, creating a vicious circle that can be hard for district leaders to navigate. While that doesn't mean that open enrollment policies should be abandoned, it does mean that policymakers must ensure there are structures in place to support rural schools as they adjust to enrollment declines.

## Dual Enrollment in Rural Communities

Dual enrollment programs, also sometimes referred to as concurrent enrollment or dual credit programs, allow students to earn postsecondary credits while in high school through structured relationships between secondary and postsecondary institutions. About 90 percent of rural high schools offer dual enrollment, on par with the national average and higher than the rates in both suburban and urban high schools.<sup>40</sup> For rural students, who enroll in and graduate from 4-year postsecondary institutions at lower rates than their peers in other geographies,<sup>41</sup> dual enrollment provides a head start and an alternative path toward postsecondary credentials. However, challenges facing many dual enrollment programs—finding qualified instructors, addressing transportation, and other logistical barriers—are especially acute for rural high schools.<sup>42</sup>

The majority of dual enrollment courses are taught on high school campuses by high school teachers.<sup>43</sup> In most states, state law requires dual enrollment instructors to meet additional requirements such as holding a master's degree or a certain number of graduate-level credit hours,

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<sup>39</sup>[https://www.athensnews.com/news/local/open-enrollment-draws-rural-kids-to-city/article\\_f1e0b1fe-3c97-5426-8ae6-2a955d91f774.html](https://www.athensnews.com/news/local/open-enrollment-draws-rural-kids-to-city/article_f1e0b1fe-3c97-5426-8ae6-2a955d91f774.html)

<sup>40</sup><https://nces.ed.gov/pubs2019/2019430.pdf>

<sup>41</sup>[https://nscresearchcenter.org/wp-content/uploads/2018\\_HSBenchmarksReport\\_FIN\\_22OCT18.pdf](https://nscresearchcenter.org/wp-content/uploads/2018_HSBenchmarksReport_FIN_22OCT18.pdf)

<sup>42</sup><http://www.ecs.org/clearinghouse/01/12/61/11261.pdf>

<sup>43</sup><https://nces.ed.gov/pubs2013/2013001.pdf>





or meeting the same requirements as faculty in partner postsecondary institutions.<sup>44</sup> Many rural schools already face barriers to recruiting and retaining high-quality teachers, including lower salaries, a limited local teacher pipeline, and geographic and social isolation.<sup>45</sup> The additional qualifications required for dual enrollment instructors often add to more generalized recruitment and retention challenges.

Dual enrollment courses that are offered online or at postsecondary institutions can alleviate some of the challenges related to securing qualified instructors at the high school level. However, those arrangements pose their own challenges for rural communities. Like virtual schools more generally (discussed below), virtual dual enrollment courses rely on schools and families to have adequate internet bandwidth. Substantial progress has been made in recent years to provide schools with internet infrastructure. Even so, one-quarter of the population in rural communities lacks access to broadband service (compared to 6% of the U.S. population as a whole),<sup>46</sup> and 80 percent of the schools that still lack sufficient broadband connection nationwide are in small towns and rural communities.<sup>47</sup>

Courses offered at postsecondary institutions require students to travel to a different location, which may not be feasible for students living in communities that lack public transportation options. Further, education deserts—communities where there are zero or only one public, broad-access (not selective) postsecondary institution nearby—are concentrated in rural areas.<sup>48</sup> For the students in these communities, taking dual enrollment courses at a local postsecondary institution is simply not an option.

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<sup>44</sup><http://ecs.force.com/mbdata/MBQuest2RTanw?Rep=DE1913>

<sup>45</sup><https://www.ecs.org/wp-content/uploads/Teacher-Shortages-What-We-Know.pdf>

<sup>46</sup><https://www.fcc.gov/reports-research/reports/broadband-progress-reports/eighth-broadband-progress-report#:~:text=In%20rural%20areas%2C%20nearly%20one.Americans%20still%20do%20not%20subscribe>

<sup>47</sup><https://s3-us-west-1.amazonaws.com/esh-sots-pdfs/2019%20State%20of%20the%20States.pdf>

<sup>48</sup><https://www.thirdway.org/report/place-matters-a-closer-look-at-education-deserts>



### **What makes dual enrollment successful in rural communities?**

Dual enrollment programs are well-established in many rural schools. However, policymakers and practitioners have needed to be creative in addressing the challenges related to instructor qualifications. Policymakers in Ohio successfully addressed these challenges through the creation of the Ohio Appalachian Collaborative (OAC). Launched in 2013, the OAC's mission is to strengthen and leverage educator effectiveness to accelerate college and career readiness for students.<sup>49</sup> Increasing dual enrollment course offerings is one of the OAC's key strategies. To ensure districts had enough qualified teachers, the OAC worked across 21 rural districts in Ohio to deliver teacher-friendly Master's options, including blended learning models, which reduced travel time and transportation costs for rural instructors.<sup>50</sup> This approach enabled the OAC to eliminate many of the barriers that rural schools and teachers face related to instructor credential requirements for dual enrollment programs. As a result of these efforts, OAC's partner districts have seen substantial growth in dual enrollment offerings and participation: Between 2011 and 2015, the number of districts offering dual enrollment increased 117 percent, the number of dual enrollment courses offered by those districts increased 476 percent; the number of credentialed teachers increased 609 percent, and the number of students enrolled in dual enrollment programs increased 429 percent.<sup>51</sup>

## **Homeschooling in Rural Communities**

NCES defines homeschooling as, "school-age children who receive instruction at home instead of at a public or private school either all or most of the time."<sup>52</sup> For parents in rural areas, homeschooling presents one of the most feasible alternatives to traditional public schools because barriers such as the proximity of schools, transportation, and funding are less of a constraint. Recent data from NCES suggests that, of the 1.7 million students who are homeschooled nationwide, approximately 22 percent live in rural communities, roughly proportional to the proportion of all public school students living in rural communities (see Figure 4).<sup>53</sup>

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<sup>49</sup>[https://www.battelleforkids.org/docs/default-source/publications/the-ohio-appalachian-collaborative\\_paving-a-new-path-for-rural-education.pdf](https://www.battelleforkids.org/docs/default-source/publications/the-ohio-appalachian-collaborative_paving-a-new-path-for-rural-education.pdf)

<sup>50</sup><https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED561909.pdf> p. 4.

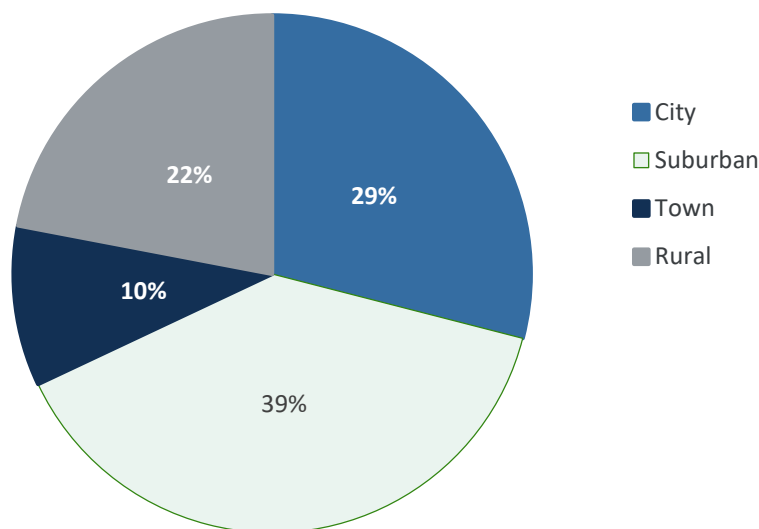
<sup>51</sup><http://www.ecs.org/wp-content/uploads/Appalachian-Collaborative-Pam-Noeth.pdf>

<sup>52</sup><https://nces.ed.gov/pubs2020/2020001.pdf>

<sup>53</sup>Table 1.2: <https://nces.ed.gov/pubs2019/2019106.pdf>



**Figure 4. Percentage of homeschooled students by locale, 2016<sup>54</sup>**



The data on homeschooling is limited, however. States vary substantially in whether and how they capture homeschooling data. Eleven states do not require parents to notify the state, or any other governing body, that they are participating in homeschooling.<sup>55</sup> This makes it difficult to gain a robust understanding of the distribution of homeschooled students within and across states.

**What makes homeschooling successful in rural communities?**

Homeschooling in rural communities does not differ substantially from homeschooling in other geographies, given that challenges like transportation or teacher quality tend not to apply. Even so, states with large populations of homeschooled students living in rural communities may opt to provide additional resources or support. In Alaska, for example, where there are many remote communities with populations too sparse to operate a traditional school, the state has set up so-called “correspondence schools” to support families in homeschooling their children. There are 31 correspondence schools statewide. Some enroll students from across the state, while others are operated by local school districts to serve the families living within district boundaries.<sup>56</sup> Importantly, while these schools are technically operated as district or charter schools, they do not operate as traditional schools or virtual schools in the sense that they instruct students or prescribe a curriculum; rather, they are designed to support conventional homeschooling families. Correspondence schools support parents in choosing their own curriculum and planning their own school years. Enrollment requires that families develop an annual education plan, provide quarterly progress reports, and participate in annual testing. Parents who enroll their homeschooled students in a correspondence school receive around \$2,000 per year to cover the costs associated with homeschooling, such as textbooks or tutors.<sup>57</sup>

<sup>54</sup>Table 1.2: <https://nces.ed.gov/pubs2019/2019106.pdf>

<sup>55</sup><https://responsiblehomeschooling.org/research/summaries/homeschooling-numbers/>

<sup>56</sup>[https://education.alaska.gov/Alaskan\\_Schools/corres/docs/2020%20Correspondence%20Program%20List.pdf](https://education.alaska.gov/Alaskan_Schools/corres/docs/2020%20Correspondence%20Program%20List.pdf)

<sup>57</sup><https://responsiblehomeschooling.org/the-alaska-data/>



## Virtual Schooling in Rural Communities

Virtual schools enable students to take their entire course load online, via an independent, charter, or district-sponsored program.<sup>58</sup> In addition to fully online virtual schools, online courses provide students with access to individual courses to supplement their education (for example, students attending a traditional brick-and-mortar school could take a foreign language course online that their school does not offer). The virtual nature of these schools and courses, which allows students to access them from anywhere with an internet connection, provides significant flexibility for families living in rural areas. Moreover, virtual schools can eliminate some of the barriers that constrain other forms of school choice. Because students do not need to be transported anywhere, rural students can access virtual schools and online coursework without the need for transportation. Instructors can live anywhere in the country, or even the world, and teach rural students, eliminating the practical and financial challenges rural schools face in recruiting and retaining qualified instructors. This makes virtual schools a common reform strategy for rural communities.<sup>59</sup>

The major practical barrier to virtual schooling for rural communities is access to broadband. As noted above, while 6 percent of the U.S. population lacks access to broadband service, fully one-quarter of the population in rural communities does.<sup>60</sup> Without fast, reliable internet access, rural students cannot access virtual schools or courses. Even when rural districts have access to internet services, they often lack the highest-speed services that are common to students and families in other geographies.<sup>61</sup>

It's important to note, however, that despite the fact that virtual schools mitigate or eliminate the most common barriers to school choice for rural students, virtual schooling is not a panacea for rural communities. Full-time virtual schools, on the whole, are failing to produce results for students. On average, the test scores of students attending virtual schools lag far behind their peers in brick-and-mortar schools, regardless of students' race, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, or prior achievement.<sup>62</sup> The promise of virtual schooling is still far from a reality. It should not be seen as the default option for rural schools and districts.<sup>63</sup>

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<sup>58</sup><https://charterschoolcenter.ed.gov/sites/default/files/Virtual%20Schools%20Accountability%20Report.pdf> p. 7.

<sup>59</sup><https://education.wsu.edu/documents/2018/12/center-public-education-rural-schools-report.pdf/>

<sup>60</sup><https://www.fcc.gov/reports-research/reports/broadband-progress-reports/eighth-broadband-progress-report#:~:text=In%20rural%20areas%2C%20nearly%20one.Americans%20still%20do%20not%20subscribe>

<sup>61</sup>[https://www.aasa.org/uploadedFiles/Equity/AASA\\_Rural\\_Equity\\_Report\\_FINAL.pdf](https://www.aasa.org/uploadedFiles/Equity/AASA_Rural_Equity_Report_FINAL.pdf)

<sup>62</sup>See, for example: <https://fordhaminstitute.org/national/research/enrollment-and-achievement-ohios-virtual-charter-schools> and [https://credo.stanford.edu/sites/g/files/sbiybj6481/f/online\\_charter\\_study\\_final.pdf](https://credo.stanford.edu/sites/g/files/sbiybj6481/f/online_charter_study_final.pdf) and <http://nepc.colorado.edu/sites/default/files/publications/Virtual%20Schools%202019.pdf>

<sup>63</sup><https://static1.squarespace.com/static/528fd1d3e4b023ca755e1561/t/5c51dfe340ec9aeb41f03940/1548869604563/2018+-CASTLE+Brief+02+-+Barbour+Mann+Melchior.pdf>



### What makes virtual schools successful in rural communities?

Because students can enroll in virtual schools from any location, many of the barriers to rural student participation in other school choice options do not apply for virtual schools. As a result, all of the practices that would strengthen virtual schools generally apply to virtual schools serving rural students, including: developing policies to support the recruitment, retention, evaluation, and training of virtual school teachers; developing tailored measures to track attendance and enrollment in virtual schools; establishing virtual school-specific funding formulas; strengthening oversight and accountability of virtual schools; and curbing the operation or reach of for-profit operators.

In addition, for virtual schooling to be a viable option for rural communities, policymakers must ensure that all rural communities—even the most remote—have the necessary and appropriate internet bandwidth. In some communities, rural school districts have led the charge to improve internet access for schools and families. In 2009, for example, the rural Piedmont School District in northeast Alabama launched the mPower Piedmont initiative. Through this initiative, all students in grades 4 through 12 received a laptop. Students living within the district’s boundaries also received home internet access, with the costs covered by the school district and municipal government. District officials worked with Verizon to install MiFi.<sup>64</sup>

## Barriers to School Choice in Rural Communities

The geographic isolation and small populations that characterize many rural schools and the communities they serve creates a unique set of challenges that policymakers must consider as they work to implement school choice policies that meet the needs of rural students and families. While each choice policy has its own unique set of constraints (discussed at length above), there are several common challenges that underlie all or most of the policy options presented in this brief.

### Transportation

Rural communities are, by any definition, geographically isolated. Their remoteness, and the small populations and slower pace of life that often accompanies their distance from heavily populated cities and suburbs, is often part of their appeal. In the context of school choice policies, however, their remoteness creates several unique challenges and opportunities for creative problem-solving. Chief among them is transportation. Transportation is a barrier to school choice in all types of communities. If students do not have access to safe, reliable, and affordable transportation to and from their school of choice, then that school is not a *true* choice. In rural communities, where population density is low and families may live many miles from each other and from schools, transportation challenges are acute. Rural schools face particularly unique challenges because they both transport fewer students than urban districts and those students tend to be less concentrated and live farther from the schools they attend.<sup>65</sup> This leads to longer bus rides for students and higher costs for districts.

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<sup>64</sup><https://digitalpromise.org/2014/08/27/a-model-for-21st-century-rural-education-at-piedmont-city-school-district/>

<sup>65</sup>[https://bellwethereducation.org/sites/default/files/The%20Challenges%20and%20Opportunities%20in%20School%20Transportation%20Today\\_Bellwether.pdf](https://bellwethereducation.org/sites/default/files/The%20Challenges%20and%20Opportunities%20in%20School%20Transportation%20Today_Bellwether.pdf)



The costs of transportation may simply be prohibitive to implementing school choice policies that require transporting students to and from school—such as charter school policies, private school choice programs, open enrollment programs, and some dual enrollment programs. Transportation costs may mean prospective charter school leaders opt not to open a school, private school leaders choose not to accept students using vouchers or tax credit scholarships, or district leaders may opt out of voluntary, inter-district open enrollment policies. Without adequate transportation, there are fewer school options available to rural students and families.

## Enrollment and Funding

Rural schools tend to be small, often with just a few dozen students per grade level. Because of this, they take in fewer per-pupil dollars, which can result in tight budgets. Rural districts also account for a disproportionately low amount of state funding. Despite 28 percent of all public schools being classified as rural, just 17 percent of state education funding goes to rural districts.<sup>66</sup>

In any geography, when students leave the local school district to attend school elsewhere, the district loses those per-pupil dollars. For small, rural school districts, the financial implications can be devastating. Losing just a few dozen students to homeschooling or a virtual school, for example, could result in the loss of tens of thousands of dollars from a rural school's already-tight operating budget. Persistent budget challenges can lead districts to close or consolidate schools. Rural schools often play an important role in rural communities, as both major employers and as important community institutions. When they close as a result of funding and enrollment losses, that can have lasting effects on the local community.

## Teacher Recruitment and Retention

The small population size and geographic isolation that characterize rural communities can exacerbate teacher recruitment and retention challenges. Teachers tend to teach in schools close to where they grow up.<sup>67</sup> Rural communities are at a disadvantage as a result, given both their smaller populations (meaning that there are likely fewer individuals who grow up to become teachers) and their lower rates of postsecondary completion (meaning that they have fewer individuals who hold the prerequisites necessary for even an emergency or non-traditional teaching credential). The geographic and social isolation of rural communities can make it harder to recruit and retain teachers from outside of the community,<sup>68</sup> as can lower average salaries.<sup>69</sup> And robust teacher recruitment initiatives can be time-consuming and expensive, requiring human capital and financial resources that small, rural districts simply do not have.

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<sup>66</sup><http://neatoday.org/2017/09/12/whos-looking-out-for-rural-schools/>

<sup>67</sup><https://cepa.stanford.edu/sites/default/files/Reininger%20HA%20EPA%202012.pdf>

<sup>68</sup><https://www.ecs.org/wp-content/uploads/Teacher-Shortages-What-We-Know.pdf>

<sup>69</sup>Pandit, Mukta, and Ibitissam Ezzeddine. "Harvesting Success: Charter Schools in Rural America," n.d., 19. p. 6.





School choice options that require new, or specially trained staff may struggle to gain a foothold in rural communities already facing human capital challenges. If charter school leaders or district leaders looking to offer dual enrollment courses cannot find qualified instructors for those programs, they will struggle to comply with state laws and operate high-quality programs.

## Considerations for Supporting the Implementation of School Choice Policies in Rural Communities

Expanding school choice policies in rural communities is complicated by the fact that many of these reforms depend on having enough students and teachers to make it viable to open and operate multiple schools in the same community.<sup>70</sup> As a result, policymakers interested in increasing school choice in rural communities must be prepared to address directly and creatively, the underlying challenges related to transportation, funding, and teacher recruitment. States' approaches to these challenges won't necessarily look the same as they do in urban communities—or even from one rural community to the next. Nevertheless, there are steps policymakers can take to expand access to school choice in rural communities:

- 1. Reevaluate transportation systems and policies and eliminate barriers.** Any school choice policy that involves students attending a different school in person (rather than virtually or at home) will require policymakers to address the issue of transportation. Some rural communities have opted to launch public bus systems that provide consistent and reliable transportation either to schools of choice or within walking distance of multiple schools, to facilitate students getting to and from school.<sup>71</sup> In addition, policymakers may consider revising state laws to allow rural districts to use vehicles other than yellow school buses, such as passenger vans, to transport students. While there are safety concerns to consider, smaller vehicles would allow rural schools to transport small groups of students with fewer empty seats, resulting in lower costs per student per ride.<sup>72</sup>
- 2. Support rural schools to recruit, train, and retain qualified teachers.** Rural schools struggle to recruit and retain high-quality teachers, which is a barrier for many school choice policies that rely on hiring additional, or specially trained, instructors. Lower salaries in rural districts are a key recruitment barrier. State policymakers could provide grants or additional funding to rural schools and districts to enable them to raise teacher salaries or offer stipends. Policymakers could also implement programs to enable rural teachers to obtain the necessary credentials to teach dual enrollment courses for free, as an incentive for current rural teachers to take additional coursework.

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<sup>70</sup><https://www.aei.org/articles/school-choices-rural-america/>

<sup>71</sup><https://www.ruralcharterschools.org/key-themes>

<sup>72</sup>[https://bellwethereducation.org/sites/default/files/The%20Challenges%20and%20Opportunities%20in%20School%20Transportation%20Today\\_Bellwether.pdf](https://bellwethereducation.org/sites/default/files/The%20Challenges%20and%20Opportunities%20in%20School%20Transportation%20Today_Bellwether.pdf)



In addition to addressing teacher salaries, state policymakers ought to consider creating, or supporting rural districts to create, programs to help paraprofessionals or other school-based staff or community members to become certified teachers. These kinds of programs can increase the supply of teachers in rural communities.<sup>73</sup>

- 3. Address funding disparities between school districts.** When parents use school choice policies to choose schools other than their local district school, the local school will experience declines in enrollment. For small rural schools, many of which are already struggling financially, further enrollment losses can be especially devastating. State policymakers must work to address the underlying funding systems that disadvantage rural schools, regardless of whether or not school choice exists in those communities. One option could be implementing a scale or sparsity adjustment in state funding systems for districts that serve small numbers of students over a large geographic area. Another option could decouple local property taxes from school funding. This would help ensure that districts within a particular state are not funded at vastly different levels per student. It would also reduce the tax burden on rural residents, who, because of differing property values across communities, often pay a higher tax rate for lower-funded schools.<sup>74</sup>

Addressing underlying funding disparities can help reduce some of the angst that surrounds school choice in rural communities. Ensuring that losing a few dozen students won't devastate a rural school's budget could go a long way to building community support for school choice policies.

- 4. Incentivize collaboration between schools.** Rural schools with small enrollments have small budgets and, as a result, tend to have fewer specialized course offerings and fewer athletic or extracurricular activities available to students. The limited programming that does exist can be jeopardized if a rural school loses too many students through school choice policies. As a result of this dynamic, school choice policies are often met with skepticism or outright opposition. State policymakers could help mitigate this by creating financial or other incentives for rural schools—regardless of their type—to collaborate and share resources. With the right incentives in place, a district school, charter school, and private school could pool their funds to hire a teacher to teach drama or advanced math or any other course that students and families wanted. Pooling funds would ensure that one school was not responsible for the entirety of that teacher's salary; it would also ensure that students in all three schools could benefit from that teacher's instruction. Policymakers could also incentivize schools to create sports teams or other extracurricular activities that are community-based rather than school-specific. Doing so would have two benefits: it would ensure that more students in the community have access to those activities regardless of the school they choose, and it would also spread the cost across multiple schools, removing the cost burden from a single school.

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<sup>73</sup><https://www.educationnext.org/improve-rural-schools-focus-on-strengths-facilitate-school-choice-charter-conversions-solutions/>

<sup>74</sup><https://scholarship.rice.edu/bitstream/handle/1911/106092/examiner-2019-art05.pdf>



- 5. Collect better data to understand the effect of school choice policies on rural schools and districts.** The data regarding if, and how, the six school choice policies included in this brief are implemented in rural communities varies widely from state to state. On the whole, however, there's very little state-level data that is either aggregated across school choice policies or disaggregated by geography. Policymakers should consider creating robust data collection policies that help them answer key questions about participation in various school choice options, including demographic data about the students who participate, where they go to school, where they live, and their outcomes on statewide assessments (where appropriate). This data will help policymakers understand trends in participation in school choice that will enable them to craft better policies to support the schools and districts that parents and families are choosing. Better data could also help policymakers anticipate where rural school districts might experience enrollment declines that would require additional resources or support, enabling them to intervene before districts are forced into tough decisions about closure or consolidation.



## Key Resources on Rural School Choice

- » [National Center for Education Statistics' School Choice in the United States:](#)
  - › Using NCES survey data, this report examines eight indicators related to enrollment, achievement, safety, and parent satisfaction for multiple types of school choice.
- » [Rural School and Community Trust:](#)
  - › A national nonprofit organization that provides research and services to increase the capacity of rural schools and produces [annual reports](#) detailing the contexts and conditions of rural education in each of the 50 states.
- » [Local Roots Take the Lead:](#)
  - › Provides case studies of successful rural charter schools and recommendations for policymakers to support high-quality charter schools in rural communities.
- » [Education Commission of the States \(ECS\):](#)
  - › Provides state-by-state comparisons of school choice policies among other policy topics.
- » [Ed Choice:](#)
  - › A nonprofit organization whose website provides comparison of choice policies in every state.

