



Current Challenges and Opportunities in Preparing Rural High School Students for Success in College and Career: What Federal Policymakers Need to Know

Facts-at-a-Glance

Number and Size of Rural Schools

- *One in five students attends rural schools:* More than half of all school districts and one third of all public schools are in rural areas. Fully 20 percent of the nation's public school students are enrolled in rural schools.¹
- *Rural enrollment on the rise:* Overall, public school enrollment has increased by 1 percent (approximately 602,000 students) while enrollment in rural schools (communities with populations under 2,500) has increased by 15 percent (approximately 1.3 million students).²
- *Prevalence of small schools:* A larger percentage of public school students in rural areas (10 percent) attend very small schools (schools with fewer than two hundred students) compared with towns (4 percent), cities (2 percent), and suburbs (1 percent).³
- *Private school enrollment:* Only 6 percent of rural students were enrolled in private schools, less than the overall national rate of 11 percent.⁴
- *Rural charter schools:* In 2006–07, only 2 percent of rural high schools were charter schools, compared to 13 percent of urban, 5 percent of suburban, and 3 percent of schools in towns.⁵ In 2006–07, just 1 percent of rural high school students attended charter schools.⁶
- *Homeschooling in rural areas:* In 2003, 2.9 percent of rural students (compared to 2.2 percent nationwide) were homeschooled and 28 percent of the homeschooled population lived in rural areas.⁷

Poverty in Rural Schools and Communities

- *High rural poverty rates:* Although rural child poverty rates have recently declined, they remain significantly higher (21 percent) than poverty rates for urban children (18 percent).⁸ Minority children are overrepresented in the count of poor children relative to their share of the population.⁹
- *Students in moderate-to-high-poverty schools:* The percentage of public school students in remote rural areas attending a moderate-to-high-poverty school (45 percent) was higher than the percentages in all other locales except large and midsize cities.¹⁰
- *Highest-need rural education regions:* The highest-need education regions are generally located in the Southwest, the Southeast, the Mid-South Delta, and Appalachia, due to a combination of poverty, fiscal challenges, and low levels of adult education and student achievement.¹¹

Diversity in Rural Schools

- *States with the largest populations of minority students:* Minority students make up 25 percent or more of the student population in eleven states (Alabama, Delaware, Florida, Georgia, Louisiana, Mississippi, North Carolina, Oklahoma, South Carolina, Texas, and Virginia). These states serve 80 percent of all rural minority students in the nation.¹²
- *Impact of poverty on minority populations:* Larger percentages of black and American Indian/Alaska Native public school students in remote rural areas attended moderate-to-high-poverty schools (87 percent and 79 percent, respectively) than in large cities (78 percent and 62 percent, respectively).¹³
- *States with no ethnic majority:* In five states (Alaska, Arizona, California, Hawaii, and New Mexico), there is no racial or ethnic majority group in rural schools.¹⁴

High School Graduation Rates

- *Overall rural graduation rates:* The graduation rate for public high school students is higher in rural areas (73 percent) than in cities (59 percent) or towns (70 percent) but slightly lower than in suburban areas (74 percent).¹⁵
- *Graduation disparities for rural minorities:* Compared to the overall high school graduation rate for rural high school students (73 percent) and the overall graduation rate for white rural high school students (75 percent),
 - 51 percent of rural American Indian/Alaska Native students graduate from high school;
 - 68 percent of Asian and Pacific Islanders graduate from high school;
 - 61 percent of Hispanic students graduate from high school; and
 - 54 percent of black students graduate from high school.¹⁶

Rural College Enrollment and Graduation Rates

- *College enrollment rates:* College enrollment rates for eighteen- to twenty-four-year-olds and twenty-five- to twenty-nine-year-olds are generally lower in rural areas than in all other locales.¹⁷
- *College completion rates:* Only 17 percent of rural adults age twenty-five and older had completed college in 2000 – half the percentage of urban adults.¹⁸
- *Rewards of a college degree:* Rural college graduates currently make more than twice as much as rural high school dropouts and have significantly lower unemployment rates.¹⁹ However, rural areas have a smaller percentage of adults with a four-year college degree than either cities or suburbs.²⁰

Aspirations and Out-migration

- *Education expectations:* Based on a recent study, nonmetro youth have lower expectations for future schooling than suburban and urban youth. Nearly one half (47 percent) of nonmetro youth reported “little chance they would be enrolled in regular school in five years.”²¹
- *Out-migration of young people:* Only one in five youth who were living in nonmetro areas in 2000 were still living in a nonmetro area in 2005. The rest migrated to either a suburban area (50 percent) or a central-city metro area (29 percent).²²

Rural Employment Rates

- *Median earnings:* Regardless of educational attainment, persons in rural areas generally have higher median earnings than those in cities but lower median earnings than those in suburban areas, when adjusted to reflect local cost differences.²³
- *Rural unemployment rates among young people:* In 2004, a larger percentage of teenagers in rural areas compared to suburban areas were neither enrolled in school nor employed (6 percent vs. 4 percent).²⁴
- *Adult unemployment rates:* The unemployment rate for adults ages twenty-five to thirty-four was lower in rural areas (7 percent) than in cities (8 percent) and towns (8 percent). The unemployment rate for adults ages thirty-five to sixty-four was lower in rural areas (4.5 percent) than in all other locales (5–6 percent).^{25, 26}

¹ Provasnik et al., *Status of Education in Rural America*.

² Johnson and Strange, *Why Rural Matters 2007*.

³ Provasnik et al., *Status of Education in Rural America*.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Alliance for Excellent Education, *Original Calculation Using Typical Universe of High Schools Based on U.S. Department of Education, National Center on Education Statistics 2006–2007 Common Core of Data* (Washington, DC: Author, August 2009).

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ D. Princiotta and S. Bielick, *Homeschooling in the United States: 2003* (NCES 2006-042) (Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Education, Office of Educational Research and Improvement, National Center for Education Statistics, 2006).

⁸ Rogers, *Rural Children at a Glance*.

⁹ Savage, *Children in Central Cities and Rural Communities*.

¹⁰ Provasnik et al., *Status of Education in Rural America*.

¹¹ Johnson and Strange, *Why Rural Matters 2007*.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Provasnik et al., *Status of Education in Rural America*.

¹⁴ Johnson and Strange, *Why Rural Matters 2007*.

¹⁵ Editorial Projects in Education, *Diplomas Count 2009: Broader Horizons: The Challenge of College Readiness for All Students* (Bethesda, MD: Editorial Projects in Education, June 2009).

¹⁶ Swanson, *Special Analysis of Rural Graduation Rates*.

¹⁷ Provasnik et al., *Status of Education in Rural America*.

¹⁸ Whitener and McGranahan, *Rural America*.

¹⁹ Gibbs, *Rural Education at a Glance*.

²⁰ Provasnik et al., *Status of Education in Rural America*.

²¹ A. Snyder, D. McLaughlin, and A. Coleman-Jensen, *The New, Longer Road to Adulthood: Schooling, Work, and Idleness Among Rural Youth* (Durham, NH: University of New Hampshire Carsey Institute, 2009).

²² Ibid.

²³ Provasnik et al., *Status of Education in Rural America*.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ It should be noted, however, that despite lower overall percentages of unemployment, some rural areas may also have lower overall numbers of workers, especially in those areas where portions of the local workforce have “out-migrated” to higher-paying jobs in nearby suburban and urban areas.