Educational Equity for Rural Students:
Out of the Pandemic, but Still Out of the Loop

Part 5: Parent and Community Supports Are Assets of Rural Schools

Table of Contents

Table of Contents

Why This Study

Nearly 1 in 5 U.S. students attend rural schools. Researchers report that at least half of public schools are rural in 12 states (i.e., Montana, South Dakota, Vermont, North Dakota, Maine, Alaska, Oklahoma, Nebraska, Wyoming, New Hampshire, Iowa and Mississippi) (Showalter et al., 2019). However, "Rural schools are largely left out of research and policy discussions, exacerbating poverty, inequity and isolation" (Lavalley, 2018).

Providing quality education to all rural students is a daunting task and needs the support of policy and research. In 2018, the Center for Public Education (CPE) of the National School Boards Association published a comprehensive report on the U.S. rural K-12 public education, titled "Out of the Loop." Today, the data and research presented in the report are about five years old, but the facts, together with the suggested policies and practices about rural education, are still valid and accurate. After a two-year pandemic, issues such as funding, teacher recruitment and retention, and serving disadvantaged students are becoming more serious in rural school districts.

Based on the 2018 report, the CPE conducted this follow-up, data-driven study to inform policymakers, school leaders, educators, and parents. Our main research goal was to examine educational equity for rural students. According to the Educational Equity Project, educational equity means that each student should receive what they need to develop to their full academic and social potential, regardless of who they are and where they go to school. With this goal in mind, in this series of reports we examined relevant data about the education conditions of rural students, and tried to answer the following research questions:

- Why should rural students be actively included in the discussion about educational equity?

- What are some unique challenges of rural education?

- How can policies be more aligned with rural circumstances in terms of providing each student with equal access to all learning opportunities?

- What practices have rural school districts adopted to provide quality education to all students?

The study includes an executive summary and five parts. This concluding part unveils three compelling stories of rural families, stories that go beyond statistics. We also delve into four specific challenges rural parents encounter when getting involved in their children's education. Based on the strength of rural communities and the challenges that rural parents often face, we offer seven strategic recommendations for rural school districts to better support their communities and enhance educational outcomes.

- Executive Summary

- Growing Diversity of Rural Students

- An Urgent Need to Fix the Digital Divide

- Thinking Broadly and Deeply about Rural Student Achievement and Teacher Pipelines

- School Safety and Mental Health Matter for Rural Students

- Parent and Community Supports Are Assets of Rural Schools

Three Stories About Rural Families That Statistics Have Missed

Rural families and parents have unique strengths that are the result of a life that is often as rough as the land where they live and work. Their supports for their children's education are assets of rural schools. Understanding how rural communities come together and pass down knowledge is instrumental in addressing and seeking solutions to the needs that students in these communities may be facing.

The National Center for Education Statistics (NCES, 2023) reported that "In 2019, parents of students in rural areas, in general, had lower expectations for their children's education attainment, compared with parents of students in cities and suburban areas." The federal agency then points out that "the percentages of kindergartners through fifth-graders whose parents reported doing various education-related activities with their children outside the home generally were lower for those in rural areas than for those in other locales" (NCES, 2023).

While statistical data are meant to convey a representation of facts, these numbers certainly missed valuable assets and features of rural parents and families. In rural settings, life is intimately intertwined with the land and the community. In many cases, rural families and parents have particular ways to educate their children, such as passing on traditions and telling stories that illuminate the resilience, resourcefulness, and profound connections of their families.

The Shared Harvest

In the United States, 19.3% of the population lives in rural areas, but 97% of the country's land mass is rural (Census, 2017). Because of the sparseness, shared harvesting — a collaborative and communal approach to agricultural and natural resource practices — has been a tradition in American rural communities. Beyond the data points of crop yields and income, there are stories of families gathering during planting and harvest seasons, not just to reap the fields but to share burdens and joys (Clark, 2020).

Shared harvesting practices help rural children and youth to understand the sense of community, mutual support, and the efficient use of labor and resources. Parents and families in rural communities often use shared harvesting as a valuable educational tool to teach their children a wide range of skills, values, and knowledge (Brennan, 2023).

Examples:

• Rural students can learn life skills through shared harvesting, since it involves various practical skills such as planting, weeding, harvesting, and food processing (Farm Bureau Financial Services, 2018). Parents often take advantage of these activities to teach their children basic life skills that are essential for self-sufficiency and daily living. Parents naturally use shared harvesting to educate their children about the nutritional value of different crops and the benefits of consuming fresh, locally grown produce. This fosters a lifelong appreciation for healthy eating habits. Additionally, harvesting involves quantitative skills such as counting, measuring, and estimating; children learn about proportions, weights, and volumes as they participate in activities like dividing the harvest or measuring ingredients for preservation.

• Rural students often learn about agricultural practices (e.g., planting seasons, crop rotation, soil health, and pest control) through hands-on experience (KTTN, 2022). They learn from their families and communities about the importance of timing in planting and harvesting and how it aligns with the natural rhythm of the environment. In some cases, shared harvesting may be linked to economic aspects of rural life, and children learn about concepts such as supply and demand, market cycles, and the economic impact of agriculture on the community.

• Starting at a very young age, rural children learn to take care of plants, animals, or harvested goods from their parents and communities (Nandi et al., 2021). Shared harvesting can instill a sense of responsibility in children and foster a sense of independence and accountability, as the related activities often involve communitywide efforts and promote a sense of civic engagement and social responsibility. Through shared harvesting, rural students witness the importance of contributing to the well-being of the community, gain insights into sustainable farming practices, biodiversity, and the impact of human activities on the environment, and learn how to care for the land and respect natural resources (Bonnie et al., 2020).

• Working together with family members and community members during shared harvesting teaches children the value of teamwork and collaboration. Many rural communities have cultural traditions associated with shared harvesting (Abeyrathne and Jayawardena, 2014). Parents use these experiences to impart knowledge about their cultural heritage, passing down traditions and rituals to the younger generation.
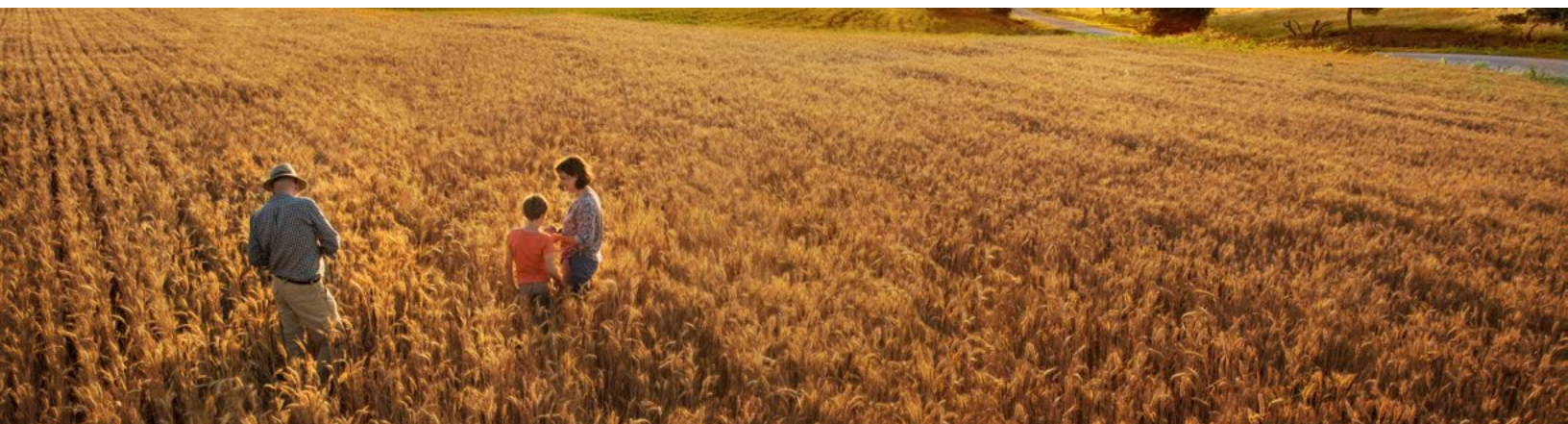
The Front Porch Chronicles

In a study from McKinsey & Company, researchers (Kerlin et al., 2022) used economic data to identify five archetypes of rural American communities. One of the archetypes is "Distressed Americana." According to the study, "Distressed Americana communities comprise 18 million people living in 973 counties (many in the South) facing high levels of poverty, low labor force participation, and low educational attainment." These communities have experienced economic decline because of the struggles of agriculture, extractive industries, and manufacturing that used to support families.

Numbers, however, cannot capture the warmth of community exchanges dispensed on the worn front porches of rural homes. The concept of "front porch chronicles" is a metaphorical representation of the stories, conversations, and informal education that takes place on the front porches of rural homes (Halperin, 1998; The Henry Ford, 2024). In rural communities, front porches often serve as social hubs where families and neighbors gather to share experiences, stories, and wisdom. Importantly, these neighbors don't just share proximity; they share stories of life's highs and lows (Hills, 2023).

In rural settings, the front porch serves as a dynamic space for informal education, where the transmission of knowledge, values, and traditions occurs organically (Patterson, 2020). Through the front porch chronicles, rural parents create an educational environment that goes beyond textbooks, incorporating the richness of lived experiences and community connections into the learning process. Front porch chronicles provide opportunities for parents to engage children in discussions that stimulate critical thinking.

In many rural areas, there is a strong emphasis on oral tradition. Front porches are spaces where oral tradition thrives (Davis, 2020). Parents share family histories, cultural stories, and local legends with their children. These narratives contribute to the preservation of cultural identity and values. When families engage in storytelling, parents not only pass down tales from one generation to another, but also help their children with language development and foster an early interest in narratives.
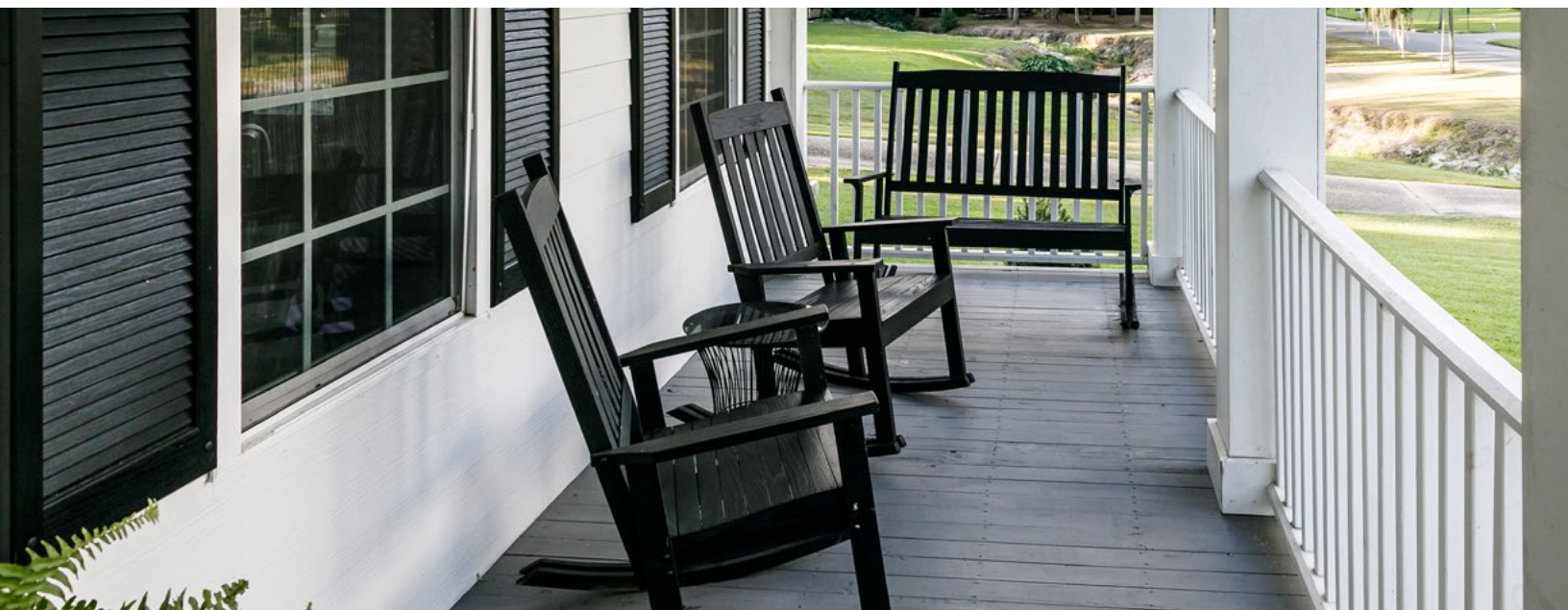
The Generations of Wisdom

Among rural students ages 5-17 in kindergarten through grade 12, 76% live with two parents (vs. 66% of city students) (NCES, 2019). "The biggest age cohort in rural America is 55-64, compared to 25-34 in nonrural areas" (O'Dell, 2021). Researchers (Smith and Trevelyan, 2019) found that 3 in 4 older people in rural areas (75.9%) lived in households with others, a percentage much higher than in urban areas (68.7%).

Unfortunately, statistics are incapable of showing the silent passing down of traditions, values, and an unspoken connection to the land that binds these rural families across time. A scene missed by the numbers is that of parents telling tales of hardships and triumphs and grandparents imparting wisdom to grandchildren.

According to the National Indian Education Association, 24% of American Indian and American Native (AI/AN) students attend rural schools, a rate more than 2.5 times that of any other racial or ethnic group. While Native American communities are characterized by rich cultural diversity, each with its unique traditions and educational methods, researchers find that Native American parents and grandparents often have unique ways to pass their knowledge to their children.

Examples:

• Elders, parents, and community members may actively engage children in hands-on activities that involve practical applications of mathematical concepts, fostering a collaborative learning environment. They often teach children math through measuring quantities during traditional craft-making, understanding patterns in beadwork, or utilizing mathematical concepts in agricultural practices (Landon, 1993).

• Elders and community members may share knowledge about spatial relationships, measurements, and patterns through storytelling (e.g., narratives and discussions). Cultural events, such as traditional dances, help Native students learn and understand mathematical patterns and spatial relationships (Landon, 2016).

• Native American parents often teach their children concepts related to math, such as geometry or measurement, through activities like observing natural patterns, understanding seasonal changes, or studying wildlife. Traditional practices like hunting, fishing, or agriculture not only teach Native students practical life skills but also play a role in helping them learn measurements, calculations, and resource management (Facing History & Ourselves, 2020).

In rural Appalachian areas, reading is often a shared activity involving multiple generations (Green, 1997). In many cases, reading prayers, hymns, or ceremonial texts is seamlessly integrated into local traditions and cultural practices (Bach, 2013). Grandparents, parents, and other family members often read together, creating a supportive environment where children witness the importance of literacy and gain from the collective wisdom of their family.

Rural parents and grandparents share their wisdom, traditional values, and knowledge with their children and grandchildren through certain cultural activities such as sharing harvest and front porch time. Based on these unique types of learning, educators have developed models in which "teaching and learning are place-focused, project-based, asset-driven, and democratically oriented" (Casapulla and Hess, 2016).

Examples:

• In California, a rural elementary school leads the charge in the state, teaching STEM through the lens of local agriculture. Every student in the school, from kindergarten through eighth grade, learns science standards through the prism of agriculture. The curriculum encompasses plant and animal science, marketing and business, and technology used in the growing of crops and rearing of animals. In the science class, students learn pressing issues such as drought and its effects. The hands-on science lessons aim to help students acquire foundational knowledge and understand the crucial role of farming in their community, which is one of the world's top food-producing regions.

• In Virginia, students in some rural Appalachian middle schools learn from engineering curricula particularly designed to incorporate facets of their local life. Researchers and educators developed eight topical lessons in partnership with classroom teachers and industry partners addressing culturally relevant topics such as the engineering design and repair of flashlights, the design and building of mountain roads, the importance of ecosystem interaction in community design, and water filtration design and testing. "The major curricular elements in each of these classroom engagements aligned with existing learning standards emphasizing hands-on classroom activities, forging connections to engineering thinking and engineering careers, and creating relevancy for rural and Appalachian youth" (Matusovich et al., 2021).

How to Define Rural

The term "rural" means different things to different people (U.S. Census Bureau, 2017). In general, rural areas are sparsely populated, far from urban centers, and have low housing density. In the U.S., "97 percent of the country's land mass is rural, but only 19.3 percent of the population lives there" (U.S. Census Bureau, 2017).

Federal agencies define rural slightly differently. According to the Census Bureau, rural is defined as all population, housing, and territory not included within an Urbanized Area (i.e., areas with 50,000 or more people) or Urban Cluster (i.e., areas with at least 2,500 but fewer than 50,000 people). In the 2021 Edition of "Rural America at a Glance" (Dobis et al., 2021), researchers from the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) use nonmetropolitan (nonmetro) counties to refer to rural areas, and the terms "rural" and "nonmetro" are used interchangeably in their report.

In our study, we present data from multiple sources. Like the USDA researchers, we use "rural" and "nonmetro" interchangeably. Since most data used in our report are from the National Center of Educational Statistics (NCES) of the U.S. Department of Education (ED), we mainly use the NCES's definitions for rural areas.

The NCES rural locale assignments rely on the Census Bureau's designation of non-urban territory as rural (Geverdt, 2019). With more details about isolation levels, the NCES rural locale provides fringe, distant, and remote subtypes that differentiate rural locations based on the distance from and size of the nearest urban area. The following are definitions from the NCES:

- 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 also more than 10 miles from an Urban Cluster.

Additionally, we use some regional terms in our study, such as Rural Appalachia and Mississippi Delta, to describe some unique features of rural students and their learning environments. These terms are often fuzzy and contextual, pertaining to culture, community characteristics, and local economy. Some states can be included in more than one region. For instance, Alabama, Kentucky, Mississippi, and Tennessee are in both the Appalachian Region and the Delta Region. We report some data about these rural regions in the hope of helping education leaders develop new perspectives and strategies to advocate for rural students and rural schools.

Barriers That Hinder Rural Parents' Engagement in Their Children's Education

Evidence shows that parent engagement in student education is paramount to a child's academic success and overall well-being (Roy and Giraldo-Garcia, 2018). However, rural parents often encounter barriers that impede their ability to support their children's education actively. The COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated the disadvantage of rural parents in supporting their children's education by highlighting issues of limited access to technology, online learning resources, and reliable internet connectivity, further hindering their ability to engage in remote education effectively.
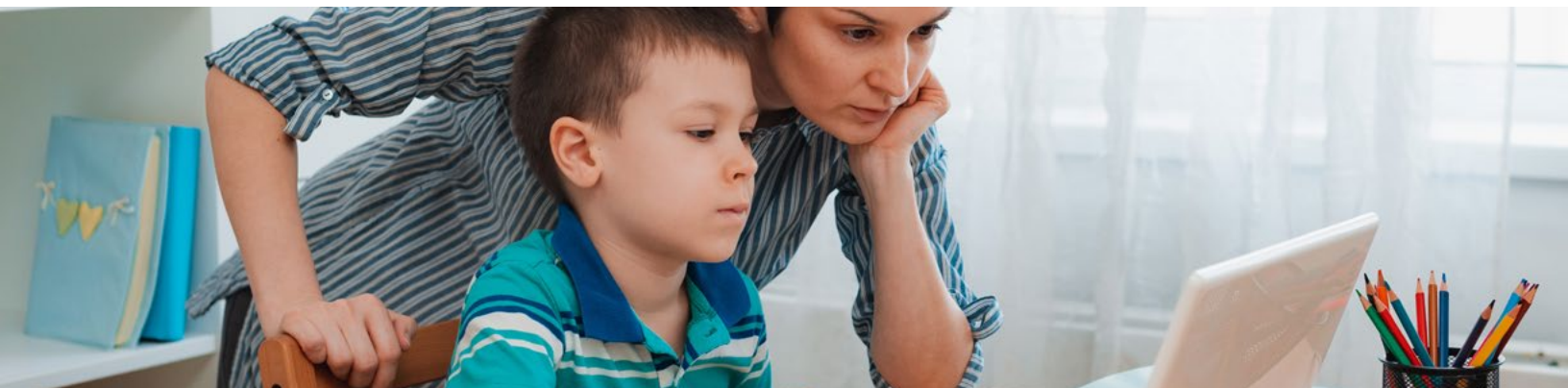
Transportation Challenges

Transportation challenges, characterized by long distances to schools and a lack of public transit, make it difficult for parents to attend school-related events or engage in regular communication with educators. "Average urban school trips range between 3 and 5 miles, whereas average rural trips are longer than 6 miles" (Lidbe et al., 2020). In many rural areas, "if you miss the school bus, you're walking four hours" (Sparks, 2019).

"Poor rural households are three times more likely than nonpoor rural households to be without a vehicle," according to an early report by the U.S. Department of Agriculture (Brown and Stommes, 2004). Limited transportation options often isolate the rural poor from government services and programs designed to lift them out of poverty (Brown and Stommes, 2004). For low-income rural families, long commutes and lack of transportation are barriers to not only working but also supporting their children's education (e.g., visiting museums and zoos, going to concerts and art events).

A Lack of Access to Reliable Broadband

Researchers (Pollard and Martinez, 2021) report that 4 in 5 counties with the lowest levels of broadband access in the United States — below 40% — are in the country's most rural areas. In 2019, 11% of students in the remote rural sublocale lived in homes without internet access, which was higher than the national percentage. It has been known that rural families often face challenges accessing reliable broadband, limiting their opportunities for online education, remote work, and other essential digital resources. While the situation is improving in some rural areas, the digital divide generally has not been closed between rural and nonrural families.

Limited Access to Educational Resources

In 2022, 80% of public schools in rural areas reported that parents expressed concerns about their children meeting academic standards (NCES, 2022). Transportation challenges and the digital divide are obstacles to equal access to educational resources in rural areas. Additionally, few schools and a lack of essential facilities are often the reality in rural, particularly remote areas.

- In 2019, among rural children under 6 years old and not yet enrolled in kindergarten, 31% could not enroll because of a lack of open slots for new children in the kindergarten, and 13% could not have childcare services because of location-related issues (vs. 5% of city children and 6% of suburban children).

- In 2023, only 9% of public schools in rural areas offered childcare services to the community through existing partnerships (vs. 22% in city schools and 14% in suburban schools).

Limited Health Care Access

In 2023, 50% of rural schools reported that parents worried about students' physical health and safety. Compared with schools in nonrural areas, particularly suburban schools, fewer rural schools provided family-based mental health intervention (27% vs. 42%), mental health needs assessment (48% vs. 55%), group-based mental health intervention (41% vs. 66%), and individual-based mental health intervention (79% vs. 87%) in 2022.

Rural parents often encounter challenges related to health care access. Remote locations may have fewer health care facilities, specialists, and emergency services. In 2023, there were 310 rural students to every school counselor or psychologist in their community, while in nonrural districts, that ratio was 295 students to one counselor or psychologist (Showalter et al., 2023).

Discouragingly, more than half of rural schools did not have any external mental health provider for students; nearly half of rural schools could not conduct needs assessments for students who may have required mental health services; nationwide, 5% of rural schools did not provide any type of school-based mental health services (Center for Public Education, 2023). The considerable distances to health care providers can result in significant travel time for medical appointments. This situation may lead to delays in obtaining necessary health care for their children, as the logistical hurdles of reaching medical facilities become a major concern.

How Can School Districts Support Parents in Rural Areas?

Considering both the strength of rural families and the challenges that rural parents encounter when engaging in their children's education, rural school districts can support parents in the following ways:

1. Enhance Communication and Outreach

Rural parents recognize the importance of their active role in their children's education and expect schools to enable their involvement. They anticipate clear communication regarding the schools' visions and the expectations set for both themselves and their children (Myende and Nhlumayo, 2020). Research exploring the drivers of student success in high-need rural schools identified parent involvement as a critical factor. This, coupled with schools maintaining high expectations for all students and retaining quality teachers, significantly contributed to the success of rural schools (Barley and Beesley, 2007).

Rural school leaders might consider using online platforms, organizing community meetings, and regularly distributing newsletters as their communication channels. These channels can keep parents well-informed and actively engaged in their children's educational journey.

Examples:

• District newsletters. A rural school district in southern Ohio regularly published its district newsletter — "Small Schools, Big Futures" — on its website before the pandemic. This publication, rich with images of student achievements and school events, was pivotal in communicating the school's vision to parents. It kept them informed about their children's academic progress and played a crucial role in fostering greater parental involvement in their children's education. This traditional yet effective format of the newsletter is a popular tool among many rural school districts for its ability to engage and inform the community effectively.

• Social media. While getting rural families involved with their children's schools can be challenging due to school day schedules or travel challenges, social media offers an alternative way to maintain engagement throughout the day and week. According to a 2021 report by the Pew Research Center, 94% of rural Americans own cellphones, with 80% possessing smartphones. Many educators have observed that parents and families are keen to interact with their social media posts. Experts in school communications find that whether it's a snapshot from the spelling bee, a video of a kindergarten Zumba session in P.E., or updates on the social-emotional skills highlighted at school each week, these posts receive enthusiastic response — parents readily click, share, comment, and post, embracing these digital platforms (Magette, 2023). In many cases, classroom teachers and school principals use social media as a potent tool to foster relationships, connections, and, ultimately, support for schools and teachers' work.

2. Add Transportation Solutions

The pandemic exacerbated transportation challenges in rural schools, leading to significant issues. For instance, in rural Arkansas, a severe shortage of bus drivers resulted in students being stranded and parents becoming frustrated, a situation highlighted in media reports (Parker, 2023). In response to similar challenges in Virginia, a diverse group of educators, including district superintendents, school principals, school board members, and parent representatives, came together to form a Chronic Absenteeism Task Force. One goal of this initiative is to address how inadequate transportation contributes to student absenteeism in rural schools, seeking to find effective solutions to this pressing problem (Austin, 2023).

Examples:

• Address transportation challenges by organizing school buses or carpooling systems to assist parents in getting their children to and from school. In a long and narrow county — Cumberland, Virginia — students who live in far, remote areas and have an hour-long school bus ride often must leave early or come in late. In many cases, they miss instructional time. One solution is to use vans and other types of smaller vehicles to help fill in the gap where the standard yellow buses may not be the best option (Austin, 2023).

• Advocate for collaboration and prompt policymakers to establish policies tailored to the unique needs of rural families. An exemplary initiative is Virginia's Chronic Absenteeism Task Force, where district leaders, parents, educators, and various stakeholders convene regularly to analyze their data and submit recommendations to the state authorities. The Task Force also examines potential regulatory obstacles or bureaucratic impediments that may hinder the implementation of best practices. If such barriers are identified, the group highlights these issues and communicates them to the public, ensuring transparency and accountability in their pursuit of effective solutions.

3. Foster Parent Education Programs

Parent education refers to specific training and support programs provided by schools and agencies to help parents with parenting skills and with the developmental, academic, social, and health issues of their children (DiCamillo, 2001). Offering workshops and resources on topics like child development, educational strategies, and digital literacy is pivotal in empowering parents to effectively contribute to their children's educational journey. However, in rural settings, logistical barriers like transportation difficulties and a scarcity of educational professionals frequently impede the implementation of these beneficial programs.

One commonly adopted method in parent education is through online parental portals or virtual resource centers. But the digital divide has become an obstacle to equal learning opportunities for both students and parents. In 2022, only 19% of rural schools offered training on digital literacy for students' families, compared with 29% of city schools and 25% of suburban schools (NCES, 2023). Despite these challenges, many rural school districts demonstrate resilience. They strive to offer parents as many learning opportunities as possible. This effort helps parents support their children's education more effectively despite the challenges brought by their rural settings.

Examples:

• Literacy nights and parent workshops. The West Tallahatchie School District in Mississippi is very rural (i.e., rural — remote). In the 2021-22 school year, there were 554 students. Most students were non-White, including 77% Black, 7% Hispanic, and 1% Asian. About 61% of households had broadband internet. More than 41% of families had income below the poverty level, and 55% received Food Stamp or SNAP benefits. To improve student reading performance, the district invites all parents, especially parents of third graders, to attend Literacy Nights. During the event, schools provide food, fun games, and lots of learning; parents have an opportunity to see what students are doing in the classroom. Additionally, the district organizes parent workshops that "offer skills, strategies, and basic knowledge to help ensure students' success on the state MAAP tests and on their academic journey."

• A resource center for military families. The Vernon Parish School District in Louisiana is also very rural. In the 2021-22 school year, there were 7,975 students, and many of them were from military families. The school board has a webpage — "Military Families" — to serve as a resource center for these parents. The resource center consists of more than 10 topics (e.g., military student transition guide, academic opportunities, STEM).

• Engaging families outside of the school building. This approach involves extending family engagement efforts to where families live and work, rather than limiting interactions to school-based activities or events confined within school hours (Fikes, 2018). Educators can connect with families in more personal settings, such as through home visits, meetings at local churches, or casual conversations at community spots like restaurants or stores where family members might work or shop. Research suggests home visiting, in particular, can strengthen relationships between home and school and build academic readiness in young children (Meyer and Mann, 2006; Sama-Miller et al., 2018).

4. Boost Community Engagement

Community engagement means collaborating with local organizations and businesses to create community support networks for families. In 2022, 42% of rural schools used a community school model or wraparound services. Among these rural schools, 84% offered mental health care services to families through their existing partnerships; 51% provided families with nutrition/food assistance through collaboration with local businesses; 38% worked with local organizations to provide parent/family support services (NCES, 2023).

Examples:

• Working with faith-based organizations. During the pandemic, "a rural Illinois district curbed learning loss with help from a local Burmese church" (Lehrer-Small, 2023). The church plays a central role in the local Burmese refugee community. School district leaders reached out to the church and used COVID relief funds to facilitate a tutoring program. In the early days of the pandemic, parents took their children to the church for in-person tutoring after their Zoom classes finished. Paid instructors (recent high school graduates and members of the local community) would coach the students.

• Rural school-business partnerships. Dalton (2021) studied several examples of rural school-business collaboration, which include (1) schools in northern New York partnered with the Champlain National Bank and provided financial literacy education to students and families; (2) eight Vermont and New York schools partnered with International Paper's Ticonderoga mill to help students learn about the balance between the environment and industry through cleaning up trash on the southern end of Lake Champlain; and (3) in Hawaii, Huiana, a nonprofit organization, helps Hawaiian Island youth develop workplace skills through internships.

5. Customize Learning Opportunities Through Flexible Scheduling

Rural school leaders may consider implementing flexible school schedules or after-school programs to accommodate parents' work schedules. In 2014, Tennessee became one of the first states to relax the "seat time" requirement — the amount of time students must be physically present in a class to receive academic credit. According to Sackstein (2018), this change provided rural students with the flexibility needed to complete their coursework, whether at home or in the classroom, and stay on track to graduate.

Examples:

• Personalized learning and flexible scheduling through blended instructional models. The Putnam County School District is located in a remote town in Tennessee, where approximately one-third of children in Putnam County live in poverty, more than half are economically disadvantaged, and one-third have a single head of household. The district leaders prioritized flexibility by rethinking the traditional school model. The district launched the Virtual Instruction to Accentuate Learning (VITAL) Program in 2008 as an alternative to traditional schools. VITAL has evolved to offer a virtual home-school component and allows classroom teachers to leverage online learning programs to differentiate instruction. The district has been shifting toward a 1-to-1 digital learning environment.

• Tailor educational programs to the specific needs and interests of the rural community, incorporating local culture and industry. The Crown Point Central (CPC) school district, a small rural district in New York, had only 329 students in the 2019-20 school year. By the start of the 21st century, a group of local leaders decided that if their town was going to thrive, quality education was going to have to be the catalyst (Dalton, 2021). Today, 85% of CPC students attend college, with an 80% on-time college diploma attainment rate (Dalton, 2021). The district has been closely working with CFES Brilliant Pathways, an organization that started partnering with rural schools in Central New York in 1991, with the goal of increasing the number of rural students on the pathway to pursue a college degree. Through this partnership, this small rural district can provide students with high-quality career and college readiness advisors and relevant programs.

6. Improve Access to Technology and the Internet; Build Parent Resource Centers

Providing resources and assistance for accessing technology and reliable internet is crucial for students learning in today's digital age. It also is critical for schools to establish resource centers where parents can access educational materials, technology, and guidance.

In 2018, NCTA — The Internet & Television Association, formerly known as the National Cable & Telecommunications Association (NCTA) — reported that "when GCI—Alaska's largest ISP—came in and invested in TERRA, a large project that included a massive buildout to provide terrestrial, low-latency broadband services for rural areas in Alaska," the Lower Kuskokwim School District reportedly has increased learning opportunities for its students due to the improved internet access. The Alaska district serves 22 remote villages, with some schools serving as few as 15 students.

"Over the last two decades, cable providers have invested more than $310 billion in the construction and enhancement of their networks nationwide" (NCTA, 2023). According to NCTA, there were 10G network deployments in 2023, which marked a monumental leap in connectivity. Many rural areas in Kansas, Minnesota, Nebraska, North Dakota, South Dakota, and Wisconsin have improved broadband access.

While rural school districts can be creative in solving the internet connectivity gap, they do need support from the federal and state governments (Opalka et al., 2020). The good news is that many rural school districts with improved broadband access have developed handy parent/family resource centers.

Examples:

- "For Parents" — The Northumberland County Public Schools is located in rural Virginia. The district had 1,181 students in the 2019-20 school year. In the district community, 22% were Black, 4% Hispanic, and 6% multiracial; about 31% of families had income below the poverty level. The district website has a page, "For Parents," which serves as a parent/family resource center. Parents can find adequate information on school transportation, special education, student academic programs, social and emotional learning, etc. According to the district, "Parents and schools need to work together for the betterment of the students. Parents play an important role in providing support and building the confidence of their children. Parents should check some of the tips or activities they can use to develop their children's confidence and improve their school experience."

- "Teacher Wishlist" — The Grand Canyon Unified District is in an extremely rural area of Arizona. The district had 274 students in the 2019-20 school year. In the district community, 35% were American Indian/ Alaska Native (AI/AN) and 14% were Hispanic. The district also has a "For Parents" virtual hub serving as a family/parent resource center. Additionally, there is a "Teacher Wishlist" that includes stationaries and other supplies every teacher wants and expects students to have in the classroom according to what they study. For instance, the middle school science teacher wanted parents to help students prepare for their science class; her wishlist includes bleach, baking soda, vinegar, dish soap, Borax, etc.

7. Strengthen Mental Health and Wellness Support

"Mentally healthy students are more likely to go to school ready to learn, actively engage in school activities, have supportive and caring connections with adults and young people, use appropriate problem-solving skills, have nonaggressive behaviors, and add to positive school culture" (youth.gov, 2023). However, data show that compared with city schools, rural schools were less likely to offer professional development to teachers to help students improve social, emotional, and mental well-being (44% vs. 64%), hire new staff to focus on student mental health (33% vs. 45%), and create community events and partnerships to improve student well-being (15% vs. 23%). A key to rural student success is to address the unique challenges faced by rural communities and offer mental health counseling and support services for students and families.

Examples:

- Raising awareness. In rural areas, parent education is particularly important to raise awareness of the long-term implications of children's mental health problems and to reduce the perceived stigma associated with treatment for children (Wilger, n.d.). To raise awareness, rural schools can implement a variety of initiatives, such as media campaigns, policy support, and on-site treatment. In Missouri, Monett School District partnered with a local professional agency to assess students who may be exhibiting signs of mental health issues, provide in-school therapy, help students in crisis access care, and educate the community about the signs of suicide risk and other mental health problems (Stanford, 2023). In 2023, the rural district's middle school moved into a newly constructed building with a designated office area for mental health counselors to work with students. It also serves as a calm space where students can go when they're feeling overwhelmed.

- Early identification through universal screenings. Research suggests that students in rural communities often experience inequities in accessing health care due to lack of insurance, low parental education, lack of transportation, or cultural barriers. Universal screening for mental health disorders administered at schools, either by trained school staff or in partnership with a mental health or primary care practice, can minimize these inequities. Screening tools are designed to identify risk factors and may be administered with other universal health screenings (such as obesity, vision, hearing, and/or oral health screenings) (Wilger, n.d.).

- Integrated care. A best practice that may be particularly critical for rural schools is the integration of mental health and primary health care (Wilger, n.d.). In rural areas where there are severe shortages of mental health providers, both schools and primary care clinics have become a gateway for the behavioral health care system. When a mental health issue is identified by school staff, it is important that the school has internal protocols to govern referrals for clinical assessment and treatment.

- Multi-tiered systems of support. Another best practice for promoting student mental health is to implement multi-tiered systems of support that encompass prevention, wellness promotion, and interventions that increase with intensity based on student need and promote collaboration between school and community (Wilger, n.d.). Rural schools can contract with mental health providers who visit the school to work with students, and train school staff who can work with students on managing their emotions, developing coping skills, cultivating healthy relationships, and mastering other life skills (Stanford, 2023). Some experts suggest that a school-based telehealth clinic can help rural families with transportation and broadband challenges; without leaving the school building, students can be seen by a physician or other health care provider in conjunction with the school nurse (O'Toole, 2023).

Conclusions

Parent support and community culture are assets of rural schools. In many rural districts, it is common for community members to wear multiple hats, contributing to both the community and the school in various roles. Parents and grandparents are school bus drivers, cafeteria workers, teachers, administrators, and school board members. Additionally, parents and local business owners actively engage in supporting schools through fundraising, volunteering for student transportation to events, and sponsoring extracurricular activities. This robust support extends beyond families with enrolled children, embodying a collective effort where the entire community rallies behind its school.

Public schools are vital to the fabric of rural communities, which have distinctive cultural and traditional values. Rural parents, like their urban counterparts, hold high aspirations for their children's education and future. However, rural families face distinct challenges, such as economic difficulties, transportation hurdles, low-quality internet connectivity, and limited educational and health care resources. Such obstacles hinder the delivery of equitable, high-quality education to every rural student. To advance educational equity and effectively serve the rural student population, policymakers should have a deep understanding of rural parents' needs and actively engage with rural communities.

Technical Notes

In this report, we used multiple data sources to conduct a comprehensive and thorough research review. Most of the data are selected from recently published tables prepared by the National Center for Educational Statistics (NCES), federal reports published by the Census Bureau, the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA), and the Federal Communications Commission (FCC), as well as some academic research papers. We provide links to data sources for readers who are interested in the methodology of our data collection and estimation.

While data used in this study are from reliable sources, our research has limitations. First, in the section "How to Define Rural," we explain how federal agencies define rural. It should be noted that in some studies, rural may be combined with small towns. For example, in a study about rural Michigan (Arsen et al., 2022), researchers combine all districts that NCES classifies as "rural" or "town" as rural, while defining "nonrural" as NCES's urban and suburban districts. They believe that their definition of "rural" is more reflective of the shared challenges experienced by the "rural" districts and, importantly, is consistent with the perceptions of people who live in rural places. If we cite such studies, we remind readers of the difference.

Second, in many parts of our study, we report both the count of students and the percentage of students by group. When comparing populations that have a large difference in size, reporting percentages or counts only can lead to ambiguous and even misleading interpretations. For example, a 0.3% increase in students with disabilities represents more than 20,000 students; a 0.8% increase in English language learners means more than half a million students. For students who attend rural schools with more than 75% of students eligible for free or reduced-price lunch, 8.2% of White students means approximately 546,000 students, while 37.6% of Black students represents nearly 339,000 students.

Lastly, while we use different algorithms when searching qualitative data and cite various examples in our study, it does not necessarily mean that we endorse the product, researcher, or organization cited. The views of cited research do not necessarily represent our views. Our purpose in this study is to provide a wide range of data and information for readers to examine and consider. We encourage our readers to exercise their own, sound judgment when assessing and using the information we provide in this study.

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About CPE

The National School Boards Association (NSBA) believes that accurate, objective information is essential to building support for public schools and creating effective programs to prepare all students for success. As NSBA's research branch, the Center for Public Education (CPE) provides objective and timely information about public education and its importance to the well-being of our nation. Launched in 2006, CPE emerged from discussions between NSBA and its member state school boards associations about how to inform the public about the successes and challenges of public education. To serve a wide range of audiences, including parents, teachers, and school leaders, CPE offers research, data, and analysis on current education issues and explores ways to improve student achievement and engage support for public schools.

About NSBA

Founded in 1940, the National School Boards Association's (NSBA) purpose is to ensure each student everywhere has access to excellent and equitable public education governed by high-performing school board leaders and supported by the community.

With members spread across the United States, the Virgin Islands, and Canada, NSBA is the only national organization representing school boards. Along with its member state associations and member public school districts representing locally elected school board officials serving millions of public school students, NSBA believes that public education is a civil right necessary to the dignity and freedom of the American people and that each child, regardless of their ability, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, identity, or citizenship, deserves equitable access to an education that maximizes their individual potential.

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