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RURAL (IN)EQUITIES:

BUILDING UNDERSTANDING AND OFFERING SOLUTIONS

Written by rural school leaders in partnership with the Small School Districts' Association and

THRIVE

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Abstract

Every day, rural schools and school districts throughout California face an uphill battle to provide a great education to students in their communities with the resources they possess. At times, their geographic distance from the state's urban centers seems to mean distance from decision-makers' mindshare and the resources they need. As such, they remain overlooked and misunderstood, although they are resilient and adaptable community schools that provide a diverse population with innovative, hands-on, personalized education.

To better understand and communicate the challenges faced by California's rural schools today, the authors conducted interviews with more than 75 superintendents, either one-on-one or in small groups over a five-month period from November 2022 to March 2023. 12 months later, a second round of interviews was additionally conducted. They found that despite comprising a significant portion of California's population, rural school students' needs are underrepresented in major policy changes regarding education and resource allocation, and their concerns are often unaddressed.

To help shed light on the difficulties rural learning institutions face, the report outlines twelve challenges (visibility, accountability, cost, safety, staffing, capacity, health, technology, support, facilities, funding, and awareness issues) that, left on their own, will further erode our rural schools' ability to bring transformative education to rural youth. To counter these obstacles and begin to chart an inclusive way forward to rural representation and resourcing, the authors recommend the crafting of a clear definition of rural schools, simplifying compliance by streamlining accountability calculations, a reduction in the cost of "rurality," increased representation in decision-making processes, re-imagined support, inclusive criteria for funding, incentives for rural staffing, additional statutory flexibility for smaller rural schools, and potential adjustments to existing funding models.

Our goal for this study was to find practical solutions that can reorient the attention of decision-makers, policymakers, and leaders to rural learning institutions. As such, we understand that further conversations must take place with various stakeholders in order to shape a comprehensive approach that addresses the needs of rural populations.

Introduction

In 2000, the now well-known Williams (Eliezer Williams, et al., vs. State of California) case found that certain agencies failed to provide public school students equal access to instructional materials, safe and decent school facilities, and qualified teachers. More than 20 years later, rural schools often are unable to provide equal opportunities for rural students. Lack of equitable support, funding, and representation prevent rural students from reaching outcomes comparable to those of their urban peers. Rural schools are often misunderstood and left out of the conversation about how best to address student needs. Looking at the most conservative estimate, **11.7% of California districts are rural (according to some definitions, 30% are), yet these districts only receive 3.7% of state funding.**[1] Nationally, California has the highest percentage of small rural districts, the 14th largest absolute rural student enrollment, and the most racially diverse schools in the nation. Yet California's per-pupil instructional spending in rural school districts is nearly $1,000 less than the national average, even though the state has the third-highest cost of living in the US.[2]

This report examines the various challenges affecting schools in rural areas and discusses strategies to address them. Poor funding, underrepresentation, lower access to technology, and staffing issues mean rural schools struggle to provide the same quality of education as their urban and suburban counterparts. By building a shared understanding of what it means to live, lead, and attend school in rural areas, we can better serve students enrolled in rural schools.

Percentage of California districts that are rural:

11.7%

(up to 30% by some definitions)

Percentage of state funding rural districts receive:

3.7%

[1]Showalter, D., Hartman, S. L., Johnson, J., & Klein, B. (2019, October 31). Why rural matters 2018-2019: The Time is now. A report of the Rural School and Community Trust. Rural School and Community Trust. Retrieved from https://eric.ed.gov/?id=ED604580

[2]Farkas, J. (2023, March 14). This is the living wage you need in all 50 states. GOBankingRates. Retrieved from https://www.gobankingrates.com/money/jobs/living-wage-every-state/

Background

One in every ten students in California lives in a rural area.[3] This means that the challenges outlined in this report impact over half a million students. Students living in rural areas are underrepresented on the state's public college campuses. Only 28% completed the required coursework for admission to the University of California or California State University, compared to 41% of students in urban areas.[4] Furthermore, rural school students generally have less access to high-speed internet, AP coursework, or extracurricular opportunities. Low-income rural students may face unique challenges related to transportation, childcare, preschool, food insecurity, housing, and healthcare.[5]

> ***"Systemic barriers in rural places perpetuate unequal outcomes for the vulnerable and diverse students living in California's most remote areas."***

Rural schools in California consistently perform in the bottom 10% on the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP).[6] Contributing factors include California having one of the lowest rural preschool enrollments out of any state and some of the highest (rural) transience rates; more than one in eight students has changed residences in the past year.[7] Research shows that mobility disrupts relationships and students' educational programs, leading to lower test scores and high school graduation rates.[8] The adverse effects of transient activity on students' performance, classroom administration, lesson planning, and overall school structure are far-reaching.[9] Furthermore, college readiness indicators of California's rural students, such as dual-enrollment coursework and ACT/ SAT participation rate, are among the lowest in the U.S.[10] Additionally, research found that rural children throughout the US are significantly more likely than their urban counterparts to have four or more adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) — 6.9% of rural children had four or more ACEs,[11] compared to 3.8% of urban children — and are much less likely to have zero ACEs. ACEs include events such as experiencing violence, abuse or neglect, witnessing violence in the home or community or having a family member attempt or die by suicide. The trauma experienced by students in rural places directly impacts their needs in school, which means rural schools need to be even more equipped to meet students' needs.

Despite the challenges they face, rural schools play a vital role in the education and development of students in isolated communities. Preserving and supporting rural schools and the students they serve is critical to the educational fabric of rural communities in California, extending to the entire state. These schools serve as critical hubs

[3]Jones, C. (2020, December 2). The Long Road to College from California's Small Towns. EdSource. Retrieved from https://edsource.org/2019/the-long-road-to-college-from-californias-small-towns/621428

[4]ibid

[5]Crain, A. (2018, May 1). Serving Rural Students. Serving rural students. Retrieved from https://www.naceweb.org/career-development/special-populations/serving-rural-students/

[6]Kirby, A. (2019, November 13). Study finds California's rural students falling behind in college readiness. CSBA Blog. Retrieved from http://blog.csba.org/rural-college-readiness/

[7]Showalter, D., Hartman, S. L., Johnson, J., & Klein, B. (2019, October 31). Why rural matters 2018-2019: The Time is now. A report of the Rural School and Community Trust. Rural School and Community Trust. Retrieved from https://eric.ed.gov/?id=ED604580

[8]Rumberger, R. (2015, June). Student Mobility: Causes, Consequences, and Solutions . Retrieved from https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED574695.pdf

[9]Bowen, D. C. (n.d.). An analysis of how student transience is related to achievement test scores in a northeast Tennessee Elementary School. Digital Commons @ East Tennessee State University. Retrieved from https://dc.etsu.edu/etd/1021/

[10]Showalter, D., Hartman, S. L., Johnson, J., & Klein, B. (2019, October 31). Why rural matters 2018-2019: The Time is now. A report of the Rural School and Community Trust. Rural School and Community Trust. Retrieved from https://eric.ed.gov/?id=ED604580

[11]The Impact of Adverse and Positive Childhood Experiences on Rural Children, with Elizabeth Crouch. Exploring Rural Health Podcast. (n.d.) Retrieved from https://www.ruralhealthinfo.org/podcast/aces-jul-2022

for communities and families, and without them, families would have to shuttle their children over long distances for public education — an expensive, time-consuming, and mentally burdensome process.

> ***If equity means students get what they need to have a chance to reach equal outcomes, then equity is currently lacking in how we support rural students and learning institutions.***

In order to create equal opportunity for successful outcomes for rural students, state leaders must first gain a greater understanding of the challenges rural communities face and subsequently address inequities through comprehensive, targeted assessment and resource allocation decisions. These include providing equitable funding, aligning support across the state and within the State System of Support, and creating opportunities for the representation of rural leaders in decision-making bodies.

How we gathered data

A survey of rural school systems in California was conducted during a five-month period from November 2022 to March 2023 to identify the challenges experienced by rural systems and to determine the extent to which a lack of rurally conscious practices in the state affected rural schools and students. Data was collected through interviews with more than 75 superintendents, conducted either one-on-one or in small groups. Follow-up interviews were conducted 12 months later.

Rural schools:

Why we love them and why we want to make a change

We believe that California's rural schools are crucial to the development and well-being of learners, parents, and the community at large. Among the many things we love about rural schools are the following:

1. Rural schools are community schools.

Rural schools, being small and close-knit communities, embody the concept of a "community school" where everyone is engaged and involved — an integral component of the way of life in rural areas. In these environments, educators are not just teachers but neighbors, friends, and sometimes relatives, creating a strong, interconnected community. This level of personal interaction and familiarity enriches the educational process, making it deeply personal and responsive to individual student needs. The family-like atmosphere is not merely academic but is woven into the daily lives and experiences of the community. Rural schools are often a key hub of their communities. In addition to education, schools in rural areas often provide important resources such as health checkups, meals, and shelter to students and their families.[12]

2. Rural schools serve diverse students.

Rural schools are often more diverse than their urban counterparts. As they are often the only school in their communities, they are mosaics of the community: rural schools serve general education, gifted, migrant, and student with disabilities in the same room. In many cases, they also do it with multiple grades in one room (see #4 below)

3. Rural communities are resilient and adaptable.

A strong sense of community pride and support for kids has allowed small rural schools to find innovative solutions to various challenges from climate emergencies such as floods and fires to declining enrollment. Because of their size, rural districts are often highly in touch with all families and can pivot to address the needs within their community quickly.

4. Rural schools offer innovation and hands-on experiences.

Multi-aged grouping and project-based learning, popularly associated with innovative private schools, are often the norm in rural settings. Rural places leverage their small size and tight-knit staff to meet their learners in new ways. It is not unusual to see a rural district offer community-based learning initiatives, physical education, or offer other unique learning opportunities beyond the classrooms in ways that urban schools often do not.

5. Rural teachers provide personalized education.

Small communities afford members greater personal connections. Additionally, rural schools are often large employers for small communities. As such, many rural students attend schools where relatives, neighbors, and close friends work. This tight-knit community ensures members know each other and hold each other accountable at and beyond school. As a consequence, teachers tend to know their students better than their counterparts in urban settings.

[12]Scott, C. (2022, December 12). Rural schools are already the hub: How a community schools approach can capitalize on this strength. Marzano Research. Retrieved March 16, 2023, Retrieved from https://www.marzanoresearch.com/rural-schools-are-already-the-hub-how-a-community-schools-approach-can-capitalize-on-this-strength/

Challenges facing rural learning institutions

Rural institutions of learning face a number of challenges that prevent them from realizing their full potential when it comes to serving students in California's rural communities. By themselves, rural LEAs will not be able to overcome them: they require systemic support or changes to existing systems to be able to fulfill their missions. Among these key challenges, we foreground eleven that merit attention and reflection.

1. Visibility: Without a definition, there is no clear path to support.

While urban schools are clearly defined by the US Census Bureau, there are more than twelve different definitions of rural schools and not a single agreed-upon list of rural schools in California. This means that the count of rural school districts in California ranges from 11% to over 30% based on the varying definitions. One way this ambiguity impacts rural schools is that sometimes, communities are rural enough to be impacted by forest fires and flooding, but don't meet classifications under one or more definitions (such as proximity to a city) to make them eligible for relief funds for natural disasters. For example, some of California's rural schools have been damaged or burned during forest fires but are not considered far enough from cities to qualify for funding to address natural disasters. Others have 100% of their students qualify for free and reduced lunch, but are disqualified from seeking ESSER funds for high-needs schools because of their small size. Without a record of their existence, rural schools face barriers to services and support, are forgotten, and remain anonymous.

"There is no one definition for rural schools."

Without an agreed-upon definition and, therefore, a list of rural schools, legislators cannot consistently take them into consideration. A clear definition of rural could allow the state to better address the needs of schools, districts, and communities in rural places.

2. Proportionality: Rural schools are unfairly penalized based on small sample sizes of students and/or teachers.

Measures intended to protect students and advocate for teachers often fail to consider the role that proportions and sample size play in small districts.

i. Due to smaller enrollment numbers, any one student in a subgroup (English Learner, Special Education, Free and Reduced Lunch) can paint an inaccurate district data profile for performance, attendance, or suspension. These misrepresentative indicators can lead to performance based penalties that are difficult to resolve. For example, a school flagged for disproportionate representation in special education with an additional ethnic, income, or language indicator could inadvertently penalize a rural district. As a result of magnifying one student's underperformance, a rural school or district may have to develop additional plans and implement often burdensome processes to address a situation that would be considered negligible in an urban school. The extra work to meet the compliance requirements takes away from a school's already limited capacity and removes the focus from properly servingstudents, families, and the community.

ii. Proportionality also impacts rural schools when it comes to staffing ratios. In California, a district's ratio of administrative employees to teachers is governed by Education Code Section 41402 and is reviewed as part of a district's annual audit. Regulations limiting staff to administrator ratios often prevent districts from being able to hire additional administrators, even when funding is available, due to the small number of teaching roles within the district.

3. Cost: Being small and rural is expensive.

Living in a small rural district brings its own challenges, including additional costs. A particular challenge is rural schools' distance from production centers and vendors; they often must pay more for services and goods because of associated travel costs. Additionally, rural districts lack the economies of scale that allow their urban counterparts to negotiate more favorable terms with vendors; districts that already have smaller budgets (as discussed in the introduction) must pay more to meet state mandates (for specific state-approved curricula, for example) and have to spend comparatively more to buy the same textbooks and other materials. In other cases, geography raises the cost of needed services: to create internet access in mountainous areas, for instance, will require a greater infrastructure investment of cables and cell towers than doing so in plains, where cities and larger populations are typically located.

4. Safety: Keeping learners safe in rural settings is more difficult.

Rural communities experience higher rates of gun violence than urban counterparts.[13] Furthermore, response times for emergency services in rural areas are nearly double that in urban areas nationwide[14]; rural parts of Trinity and Mendocino counties have recorded wait times of 4 hours for emergency response, and Humboldt County has recorded emergency wait times of 3.5 hours.[15]

Rural schools' distance from law enforcement makes partnering for school resource officers prohibitively expensive. This means that in addition to being disproportionately impacted by issues of safety, schools without appropriate access to external support systems often need to spend more of their own resources to keep students safe.

5. Staffing: Staffing issues are compounded in rural places.

When it comes to recruitment, schools nationally are struggling to hire and retain teachers. Rural schools face even more challenges in attracting and retaining highly qualified teachers: a reduced pool of local candidates and a "brain drain" of potential teachers to other areas.

i. *Reduced pool of local candidates.* Not only is the pool of qualified candidates significantly reduced in rural communities, but limited (and strained) budgets, low college graduation rates[16] in rural communities, and district offices lacking human resource staff mean that rural schools struggle to attract, train, and retain the talent they need.

ii. "*Brain drain.*" Additionally, aspiring teachers must often leave their rural communities to obtain the education and credentialing necessary to enter the profession. While away, many often find or are offered employment near where they attended school and do not return to their rural communities.

As a consequence, rural communities experience a dearth of teacher talent that can significantly affect the quality of the education delivered. Specifically, these circumstances often lead to two

[13]Shultz, J. M., Cohen, A. M., Muschert, G. W., & Flores de Apodaca, R. (2013, April 1). Fatal School shootings and the epidemiological context of firearm mortality in the United States. Disaster health. Retrieved from https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC5314897/

[14]Mell, H. K., Mumma, S. N., Hiestand, B., Carr, B. G., Holland, T., & Stopyra, J. (2017, October 1). Emergency medical services response times in rural, suburban, and urban areas. JAMA surgery. Retrieved from https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC5831456/

[14]Van Arsdale, J., & Jones, M. (2010, March 6). Emergency Preparedness Skills: Human and Social Capital in the Redwood Coast Region. Retrieved from https://ccrp.humboldt.edu/sites/default/files/emergency-preparedness-skills-human-and-social-capital-in-the-redwood-coast-region.pdf

[16]Jones, C. (2020, December 2). The long road to college from California's small towns. EdSource. Retrieved from https://edsource.org/2019/the-long-road-to-college-from-californias-small-towns/621428

unfavorable scenarios: the presence of unqualified teachers and the underserving of special education students.

i. *Underqualified teachers.* It is common for districts to have to rely on teachers with intern credentials for harder-to-staff areas such as math, science, and special education. Yet,
ii. because of lower enrollment numbers, having just two intern teachers can land a district in "Williams" monitoring.

iii. *Per-pupil allocations for SPED lead to underserving students.* As SPED funding is allocated on a per-pupil basis, rural schools often lack the scale to afford a dedicated SPED teacher, especially one equipped to support students with drastically different needs. Instead, most rural schools rely on COE's regionalized SPED services, which results in an additional cost and services that are shared between many districts. This means rural students do not have access to the consistency of an on-site SPED teacher, and providers spend time traveling from site to site that would be better spent serving students.

iv. *Universal Prekindergarten.* As part of California's Universal Prekindergarten program, Transition Kindergarten must be universally available, and free of cost, for all four-year old children as part of California's public education system. However, Transitional Kindergarten teachers who are first assigned to a TK classroom after July 1, 2015, must complete additional professional requirements, further exacerbating finding eligible talent in an already challenging staffing environment.

6. Capacity: Rural staff members are overloaded because they must take on multiple roles.

Educating young people can be a demanding task for educators everywhere, but rural staff can find themselves stretched thin to meet challenges their urban and suburban counterparts may not experience. More specifically, they are frequently asked to take on additional responsibilities beyond their job roles, sometimes doing the work of multiple people.

For example, it is not unusual for rural teachers to take on additional duties such as driving the school bus or serving lunch. The single-school LEA administrator must also wear multiple hats and attempt to be the LEA expert on all programs, funding sources, and accountability measures. By necessity, they lead curriculum and instruction, handle state and federal accountability, serve as the substitute bus driver and dishwasher, and act as the mental health coordinator, substitute teacher, human resources expert, and finance officer all in one. The rural administrator often is alone in bearing the workload and responsibilities typically managed by a team of superintendent, principal, administrative support staff, and various departments in urban and suburban school systems. In other words, the rural all-in-one school leader takes on state reporting, development of plans, submission of legal documentation, grant writing, and many other tasks. This leaves little to no time to focus on their rural community needs, instruction, and relationships that are proven to close the access and opportunity gap for students.

As if the job weren't not complex enough, it typically is held by new administrators who have limited training and capacity because they lack the (local or national) support network needed to meet the professional learning needs of the single school LEA administrator.

7. Mental Health: Mental health issues are exacerbated in rural settings.

In addition to the operational hurdles rural learning institutions face, they must also tackle human challenges they are inadequately resourced to address. Chief among them are mental health issues.

Residents of rural places in California see significantly higher Adverse Childhood

[17]Stewart, K. et al (2021). Adverse Childhood Experience (ACE) Screening in Rural Northern California. Retrieved from https://phinstitute.wpenginepowered.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/07/NAC-ACEs-provider-research.pdf.

Experiences (ACE) scores[17] than urban and suburban counterparts. A lack of adequate services available to rural students compounds the challenges for the large proportion of children experiencing abuse, neglect, and household challenges: rural communities are often far from mental health providers: an estimated 65% of nonmetropolitan areas do not have psychiatrists, and more than 60% of rural areas in the US are designated areas of mental health provider shortage.[18] To make matters worse, mental health specialists cannot work across state lines to help close the staffing gap in rural communities near state borders. Rural districts in California rank in the bottom 10% of the nation for access to mental health and counseling.[19]

Even when in-person service is available, rural students may face additional barriers: in a small, tight-knit community, it can be difficult to access services privately or anonymously, which may discourage them from seeking care.

8. Technology Access: Infrastructure often lags in rural places.

Lack of adequate funding often leaves rural places behind in modernization and technology efforts. While it makes sense for counties to invest in their urban cores first, money often runs out before services and supports make it to a county's rural parts. As mentioned during the cost argument, being small and rural is expensive — and that is particularly true when it comes to expanding technology infrastructure that must be extended to larger, less densely populated areas with tougher topographies. If investment in technology infrastructure is only pursued when the cost per capita is low or the number of people reached is high, rural communities will continue to fall behind their urban/suburban counterparts.

People deserve the same access regardless of where they live, and we have a moral obligation to make peace with lower efficiency in the name of equity.

The challenge is not restricted to the upgrading of infrastructure. Technology maintenance and support are also hampered by the lack of economies of scale in rural environments. Schools are responsible for the maintenance, and without a budget for a dedicated local IT staff because of lower enrollment numbers, rural schools often share services with another district or COE and therefore lack on-site technology support for teachers and students.

Without reliable infrastructure and support, rural schools find themselves with limited access to technology and internet connectivity, which impacts their ability to provide students with a 21st-century education. As one superintendent stated: "In today's connected world, access to the internet is like having water and utilities; even medical appointments or paying bills are often online, and our students cannot access even basic services."

9. Regional Support: County support varies by region.

Small districts rely greatly on their counties for guidance and support. However, these services vary significantly from region to region and are often proportional to the size of the relevant County Office of Education (COEs), its distance from school sites, and the resources it can dedicate to supporting rural schools. Places that are most rural end up being the least supported. Part of the challenge lies, again, in funding structures. Because COEs are funded based on the number of students in their districts, they often prioritize areas with a larger concentration of students — especially COEs that have elected County Superintendents of Schools. However, chances are that larger local districts actually require a COE's financial help the least, because economies of scale allow them to staff a more robust central office — or have one at all.

In some cases, COEs in rural counties also face a similar conundrum to that of rural districts: their

[18]Morales, D. A., Barksdale, C. L., & Beckel-Mitchener, A. C. (2020, May 4). A call to action to address rural mental health disparities. Journal of clinical and translational science. Retrieved from https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC7681156/

[19]Showalter, D., Hartman, S. L., Johnson, J., & Klein, B. (2019, October 31). Why rural matters 2018-2019: The Time is now. A report of the Rural School and Community Trust. Rural School and Community Trust. Retrieved from https://eric.ed.gov/?id=ED604580

regional enrollment numbers (and therefore resources) are also lower than those of neighboring counties, but they may have a greater number of LEAs to support — which creates a higher support workload for the COE and limits the support rural communities receive. In other cases, county lines actually prevent rural LEAs from obtaining support from COEs that are geographically closer to them. Instead, they are forced to seek support from farther away. Additionally, some counties lack awareness of rural settings or pertinent state mandates. When that happens, their guidance is well-intentioned but ineffective because it assumes a model of education and support that does not exist in rural communities. No matter the circumstances, the results seem to be seldom favorable to rural LEAs.

10. Facilities: Rural scales make facilities improvements even harder.

Although facilities are not the most essential component of an educational program, they can be a limiting factor in the delivery of services and require significant attention. Rural budgets are often unable to take on the costs required for medium to larger facilities projects. For example, per-pupil funding for early childhood education or universal pre-K is often not enough to complete, much less even start, constructing facilities to house these programs. Additionally, larger vendors, who may be more cost-efficient at adding or modernizing facilities, often don't bid on rural jobs or refuse to take on such projects. Public bonds, another method of funding the construction and maintenance of school facilities, are often not an option for rural communities. Rural schools have a lower bonding capacity and report struggles in successfully passing bonds[20] for reasons that are not hard to surmise: lower internal capacity and local population numbers. Without crucial funding and credit, schools are unable to comply with requirements to take projects forward.

Lastly, some state funding for facilities exists on a first-come, first-serve basis and, with less staffing (i.e., capacity), rural districts cannot react as quickly as their urban counterparts.

11. Access to Funding: Funding opportunities are biased toward larger districts.

Rural learning systems must also contend with funding systems biased toward the needs and capacities of larger districts. Grants or funding opportunities are often designed without considering whether they are accessible to rural communities. For example, the recent Community Engagement Initiative (CEI) required LEAs to bring together five staff members to form a team to access funding. For some rural districts, this requirement would mean that 50% of their entire staff would have to come together to work on receiving funding, in addition to their other regular roles. This percentage would seem extreme in a larger district.

Problems like these are exacerbated when rubrics skew towards impacting greater numbers of students. Even when large numbers are not explicitly required, rural applicants may face evaluators who are at times unconsciously biased towards serving and funding larger systems. If a prime consideration for awarding funding is the number of students served or impacted, when will rural and smaller communities be able to access funding? Finally, additional barriers exist when grants require matching funds or existing partnerships; they close the door to smaller districts hoping to take their first step in bringing opportunities to their students.

This perpetuates a system in which those who do not yet have adequate infrastructure in place are prevented from moving toward opportunity. Funding authorities must, therefore, be more understanding of rural realities and intentional when it comes to grant design if rural LEAs are to be truly included in new and existing opportunities.

12. Mindshare: Urban innovations are sometimes incompatible with rural realities.

The dearth in understanding of rural realities and

[20]Vincent, J. M. (n.d.). Small districts, big challenges. Retrieved from https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED586248.pdf

needs sometimes disqualifies rural participation from engaging or benefiting from new solutions. While some ideas sound good in urban areas, many don't make sense in rural places. Electric buses, for example, do not hold sufficient battery life to complete the extensive bus routes in rural communities, especially in areas where colder temperatures mean that the buses would deplete their battery life even quicker to run their heaters or defrosters. In many ways, this is emblematic of the smaller mindshare rural communities occupy with decision-makers.

This issue is not limited to operations. Instructional initiatives can also be challenging to implement in rural communities as they are often designed with broader, urban contexts in mind. For example, California's Multi-Tiered Systems of Support (MTSS) framework is valuable and relevant for rural schools, but common examples and resources are not always reflective of the resources and manpower available in small schools.

Well-intentioned initiatives at times assume a model of education and support that are not congruent with circumstances in rural places. As a consequence, rural communities are disenfranchised from participating in or benefiting from some innovative practices and efforts.

Recommendations

We present a series of suggestions that we believe would open the way for rural LEAs to maximize their potential in serving their communities in a caring, effective, and innovative manner. We understand that no stakeholder group holds all the answers, and that systemic solutions may take time and require a coalition of decision-makers and stakeholders acting together. As such, we offer our best thinking to date as a starting point for additional conversations that should follow.

1. Develop a clear definition of "rural."

The term "rural school" elicits different concepts for different people. Different definitions create confusion and, ultimately, inaction. We think that one of the first steps toward helping rural districts is the crafting of an official, agreed-upon definition of "rural", which can evolve with time. We believe this to be a stepping stone toward solving many of the challenges described in this paper, as it would allow stakeholders, decision-makers, and elected officials to design and implement specific solutions to help rural LEAs level the playing field.

States like Colorado have taken on similar efforts with great success. Per the Colorado Department of Education, "a Colorado school district is determined to be rural, giving consideration to the size of the district, the distance from the nearest large urban/urbanized area and having a student enrollment of 6,500 students or less. Small rural districts are those districts meeting these same criteria and having a student population of less than 1,000 students" (Colorado Department of Education, 2023). We believe California can quickly and effectively implement a definition that will allow stakeholders to understand which schools are rural and what they have in common.

2. Simplify compliance by streamlining accountability calculations.

When developing measures and regulations for school accountability, it is essential to consider the inherent challenges and operational constraints of small LEAs. Small LEAs typically operate with a significantly smaller workforce, necessitating that staff members fulfill multiple roles. Consequently, the substantial volume of compliance reporting imposes a disproportionate burden on these institutions. These extensive compliance requirements can overwhelm their limited resources, diverting attention from core educational activities. By tailoring accountability measures to accommodate the specific realities of small LEAs, policymakers can mitigate unnecessary administrative burdens, thereby enabling these institutions to allocate more focus and resources toward their primary educational mission. More concretely, a streamlined approach to accountability could mean not duplicating information already on the state dashboard or information already present in other reports. As one example, rural and smaller LEAs could benefit from a synthesized LCAP plan that is easier to share and communicate to their constituents.

3. Reduce the cost of "rurality" via agreements and subsidies.

Offsetting the higher costs faced by schools in rural areas must become a priority. One path forward that the authors see in this area is the creation of regional or state master contracts (or even joint power authorities) to lower existing costs for rural LEAs by leveraging collective purchasing power. Another option is to tie delivery of services to different areas together in such a way that costs are reduced on the whole. A third available mechanism is subsidies for specific services that offset the high costs faced by rural LEAs.

4. Increase rural representation in decision-making bodies and policymakers.

In California, 11% of districts are considered rural and 30% are considered small yet urban, and prominent system leaders often make decisions about them without their input.[21]
Rural and native membership/representation is needed to inform groups, decision-making bodies, committees, commissions, and governing bodies.

> **Simply put, rural-dwelling Californians need a voice in decision-making and a seat at the table when decisions are made about them.**

We urge decision-makers and elected officials to audit their respective channels of action and consider how they can include the rural perspective in the work they do via rural membership in official vehicles such as appointed bodies, commissions, and committees. It would be less ideal but still effective for decision-makers to avail themselves of rural perspective more often ahead of making critical decisions that may affect faraway communities.

5. Provide dedicated staffing support and tools for rural communities.

As we have discussed, rural schools face their own particular set of challenges, and they need informed, dedicated support. For example, CDE and COEs could create positions for rural specialists, who would be specially trained in how to support rural schools and would help them with accountability and other reporting requirements. In addition, CDE could invest in tools for training and professional development that focus on the specific needs of current and future rural leaders.

6. Develop inclusive criteria for evaluating and prioritizing funds

Though most grants, initiatives, and publicly available funds don't exclude rural districts, grant requirements or rubrics can make it challenging, if not impossible, for rural schools to be on an even playing field with larger districts. Grants often require a minimum number of matching funds, specified program partners not available in remote places, a minimum number of participants, and so on. When developing criteria and rubrics for funding, it is important to consider the unique challenges of rural schools to ensure they are eligible, given that many requirements would ultimately prevent them from accessing funds.

7. Incentivize rural staffing

One potential strategy to increase the availability of qualified staff in rural areas could be to expand current Title 1 loan forgiveness programs to include working in rural places as a path to loan forgiveness. This would incentivize educators to choose rural schools, quickly boosting the rural talent pool.

8. Expand flexibilities for other small LEAs to rural schools

Other smaller LEAs already enjoy some flexibility in specific areas,and it makes sense to expand these to smaller LEAs that operate in ways that are not dissimilar. For example, rural LEAs may benefit from the megawaiver exemptions enjoyed by California chartered public schools, including exemption from school district laws and some building code requirements (Section 47610 of Ed Code). This will help level the playing field for rural schools and allow them to access opportunities like construction, involvement with state departments, and waivers.

9. Allow for rurality in existing funding models

Rural enrollment is often such that it often allows for very little staffing. As a consequence, rural staff are often overloaded because they must take on multiple roles. One way to ease this disproportionate burden would be to create a per-school base funding for rural schools, to

[21] Showalter, D., Hartman, S. L., Johnson, J., & Klein, B. (2019, October 31). Why rural matters 2018-2019: The Time is now. A report of the Rural School and Community Trust. Rural School and Community Trust. Retrieved from https://eric.ed.gov/?id=ED604580

ensure that students have the minimum support needed to receive a quality education.

10. Pursue policy coordination

Federal policymakers, the US Department of Education (USDE) have a responsibility to set a national agenda and state policymakers need to leverage their own power to advance equity in rural schools. The National Rural Education Association recommends that the USDE hire a Director of Rural Education, which has not been done. Recent successes at the federal level include White House Initiatives (WHI) for Hispanic Americans, African Americans, Asian Americans, American Indian education, American Black colleges and faith-based partnerships; a WHI for American rural education will help prioritize and support rural schools.

Our Recomendations

1. Develop a clear definition of “rural."
2. Simplify compliance by streamlining accountability calculations.
3. Reduce the cost of “rurality” via agreements and subsidies.
4. Increase rural representation in decision-making bodies and policymakers.
5. Provide dedicated staffing support and tools for rural communities.
6. Develop inclusive criteria for evaluating and prioritizing funds.
7. Incentivize rural staffing.
8. Expand flexibilities for other small LEAs to rural schools.
9. Allow for rurality in existing funding models.
10. Pursue policy coordination.

Conclusion

Every day, rural schools and school districts throughout California face an uphill battle to provide a great education to students in their communities with the resources they possess. At times, their geographic distance from the state's urban centers seems to lead to distance from decision-makers' mindshare, and they remain overlooked and misunderstood. There is little acknowledgment outside their communities of the benefits they bring to regions up and down the state: rural schools are resilient and adaptable community schools that provide a diverse population with innovative, hands-on, personalized education and serve as community hubs.

While they continue to find new ways to serve diverse populations that depend on them, they face considerable challenges they cannot solve on their own. There are issues regarding visibility, accountability, cost, safety, staffing, capacity, health, technology, support, funding, and awareness that, left unalleviated, will further erode our rural schools' ability to bring transformative education to rural youth. These obstacles will not come as much of a surprise to many experienced educators or inhabitants living in rural California. But they will require that state leaders, policymakers, and administrative leaders reflect on and adjust already established methods to take these demographics into account. We believe an inclusive way forward may include a clear definition of rural schools, context-sensitive accountability calculations, a reduction in the cost of "rurality," increased representation in decision-making processes, re-imagined support, inclusive criteria for funding, incentives for rural staffing, additional statutory flexibility for smaller rural schools, and potential adjustments to existing funding models.

Our goal throughout this study was to find practical solutions that can reorient the attention of decision-makers, policymakers, and leaders to rural learning institutions. As such, we understand further conversations must take place with different stakeholders in order to shape a comprehensive approach that addresses the needs of rural populations. We embrace these opportunities and look forward to a day when education in rural communities rises to its true potential. While education leaders around the nation have shown a growing interest in marginalized students and communities, the time has come to examine the one-of-a-kind requirements of this population as we work to guarantee that everyone in our society feels appreciated, is welcomed, and has access to a great public education.

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