

Policy Playbook: Revitalizing America's Rural Education System

Introduction

Across the nation, there are 9.5 million students attending schools in rural districts. More students attend rural schools than in the nation's 100 largest school districts combined (Showalter et al., 2023). Despite the size of the U.S. rural student population, education policies often overlook the unique circumstances and needs of these communities.

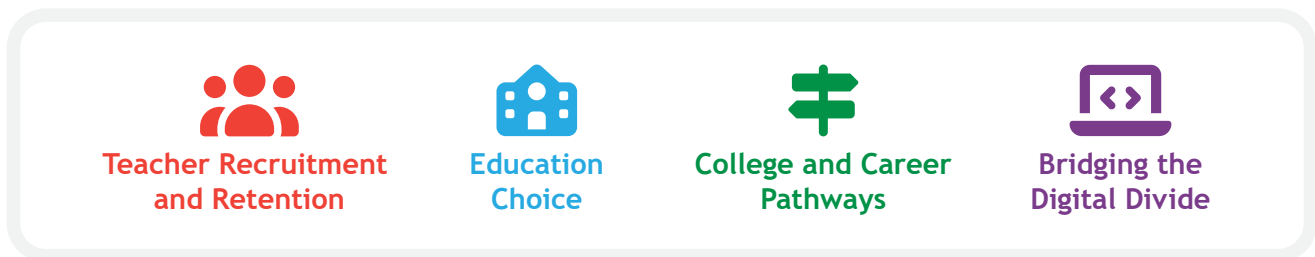
There are significant geographic, economic and demographic differences between rural, suburban and urban areas. Examples include:

- Higher poverty and unemployment rates in rural areas than in urban and suburban places (CPE Rural Report; USDA Economic Research Service).
- Lower access to broadband and digital infrastructure, with the Federal Communications Commission estimating that 28% of rural Americans lack access to this essential service.

These are just a few areas that differentiate rural communities from their non-rural peers. Rural schools face unique challenges, as well. For instance:

- **Rural schools have different resource constraints compared to other schools.** For example, transportation costs take up a larger portion of school budgets in rural communities. On average, rural districts spend 74% more per student on transportation compared to urban districts, which affects the distribution of per pupil instructional funding ([Urban Institute 2023](#); [Why Rural Matters](#)).
- **Teacher turnover is higher.** In high-poverty rural districts teachers leave the profession at higher rates compared to similar urban districts. Teachers in rural areas report higher levels of job dissatisfaction, contributing to a cycle of instability and inconsistency in education delivery ([Ingersoll and Tran 2023](#)).
- **The digital divide exacerbates educational inequalities.** An estimated 4.6 million school-age children in the U.S. lack access to broadband internet ([Center for Rural Innovation](#)). This digital gap not only affects students' ability to complete homework and participate in remote learning, but it also limits their access to online resources and information, further impeding their academic progress.
- **Limited access to higher education.** Only 16% of postsecondary two-year institutions are in rural areas, and only 28% of rural residents over the age of 25 have a postsecondary degree, compared to 41% for urban residents ([CTE on the Frontier](#))

To support rural education, it is imperative that policymakers recognize the need for rural-specific policies, particularly in the following areas: teacher recruitment and retention, education choice, college and career pathways and bridging the digital divide. By addressing policies and policy gaps in each of these categories, policymakers can better support rural districts and alleviate the challenges they face.



Teacher Recruitment and Retention

Rural districts often find it difficult to recruit and retain teachers. Geographic isolation, limited housing options and lower salaries compared to urban and suburban school systems may deter teachers from moving to rural areas. Policies designed to help rural communities recruit and retain teachers can alleviate these challenges.

To address teacher recruitment and retention in rural communities, we offer two main policy solutions:

- **Grow Your Own (GYO) Initiatives:** Rural communities can leverage their communities as a source of teachers through GYO initiatives. Under GYO policies, current talent within the system—whether students, paraprofessionals or others—are provided on-the-job training and support from the school district to become fully licensed teachers.
- **Teacher Incentives and Reallocating Resources:** States can entice individuals to teach in rural communities through a variety of incentive programs. These may include financial incentives, housing assistance, student loan forgiveness or other benefits aimed at making rural teaching positions more appealing. States can also think outside of the box and consider alternative approaches to addressing the challenges of teacher shortages in rural areas, such as expanding housing through underutilized properties.

Leveraging Local Talent through Grow Your Own Initiatives

Grow Your Own programs began in rural areas, operating on the theory that prospective teachers should not have to leave their communities to find employment. School districts that establish GYO identify community members with the potential to become strong educators and provide them with paid, on-the-job training. These programs benefit rural schools because 1) teachers tend to teach where they are trained; 2) GYO candidates are typically very familiar with the community and students; and 3) locally grown teachers are more likely to stay in the profession and, depending on the structure of the GYO program, are more effective than other teachers ([Clewell & Villegas, 2001](#); [Edwards & Kraft, 2024](#); [Redding, 2022](#)).

The design of GYO policies vary greatly, and all 50 states have some form of GYO programs ([Garcia, 2024](#)). At their core GYO programs are primarily focused on removing barriers to entry into the teaching profession. Most programs identify promising candidates who are already involved in the school. The two most common recruits are paraprofessionals and students who are approaching graduation. Thirty-two states offer pathways for high school students, with 25 states and the District of Columbia providing pathways for paraprofessionals.

Once enrolled in a GYO program, the school district covers part or all the associated training cost and provides paid, on-the-job training. Additionally, many programs provide participants with scholarships for bachelor's degrees and may cover the cost of certification. In exchange, many GYO programs require the teacher to commit to teaching within their district for a certain period of time after becoming certified.

Examples of GYO policies include Registered Teacher Apprenticeships and High School GYO programs.

Registered Teacher Apprenticeships

RTAPs combine paid, on-the-job training with structured academic coursework that leads to full licensure—and often a bachelor's or master's degree. In 2022, the U.S. Department of Labor officially recognized teaching as an occupation that qualifies as apprenticeships. This designation allows RTAPs to be registered either federally or at the state level and creates access to long-term, stable funding streams through the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA). The Department of Labor released National Guidelines for Apprenticeship Standards for K-12 Teachers, which recommend rigorous requirements such as 2,000 hours of supervised classroom experience and progression toward licensure without serving as a teacher of record during the apprenticeship. These standards help ensure program quality and alignment with district and state needs. [Tennessee](#) led the nation as the first to launch a teacher apprenticeship using federal WIOA funding. States looking to establish an apprenticeship can learn more by looking at *ExcelinEd's* [Teacher Apprenticeship Act model policy](#).

[Hamilton County Schools](#) in Tennessee has a GYO program specifically designed for individuals that work within the school or other engaged community members who are interested in becoming certified teachers. The district partners with local colleges and universities to provide the requisite coursework (at a reduced cost or for free) while the GYO candidate is paid to work within the school gaining on-the-job training. After successfully completing the program, the GYO candidate can transition to a full-time teaching position.

High School GYO

[William Carey University's GYO program](#) in Mississippi is slightly different and geared toward high school students. GYO students within districts that partner with William Carey University graduate high school with 12 hours of dual enrollment credit from the university. The students then take coursework at the university while serving as a teacher's assistant within their district, which provides them with income and a 75% tuition waiver. Students graduate with a bachelor's degree as a fully certified teacher after three years of school.

Teacher Incentives and Reallocating Resources

Financial incentives are another strategy to attract teachers to rural areas. Several states have implemented measures to encourage educators to relocate or remain in rural communities.

- **Colorado:** Colorado offers various stipends and scholarships for aspiring teachers. The [Colorado Rural Teaching Fellowship](#) grants \$10,000 to candidates for a year-long clinical teaching experience in rural schools. Additionally, the [Rural Inservice Educator Stipend](#) provides \$6,000 for current educators to gain new endorsements such as a master's degree in education.
- **Texas:** In 2019, Texas established the [Teacher Incentive Allotment](#) (TIA) to reward effective teaching. A central component of this funding stream is a rural multiplier that can increase a teacher's TIA reward anywhere from \$1,500 to \$20,000 per year depending on the teacher's performance and their student demographics.
- **Mississippi:** The [Employer-Assisted Housing Teacher Program](#), managed by the Mississippi Department of Education and backed by the Mississippi Home Corporation, provides up to \$6,000 in home loan assistance to cover closing costs for teachers in critical shortage areas.
- **New Hampshire:** [2024 legislation](#) provides up to \$12,000 in loan forgiveness over four years for teachers serving rural communities either in schools with fewer than 20 students per square mile of the school boundary or that have been designated rural by the Department of Health.

Low-Cost Housing for Educators

Additionally, states can boost teacher recruitment and retention in rural areas by leveraging underutilized resources and offering financial and housing incentives. In areas with declining student populations and unused school buildings, districts can transform these spaces into affordable housing for teachers and staff. For instance, California's state superintendent supports converting unused school properties into affordable housing backed by tax credit funding. Initially focused on urban areas, this strategy could also benefit rural communities, making rural teaching roles more appealing and fostering community ties by encouraging teachers to live and work locally.

While recruiting and retaining talented educators to serve in rural schools is critical to improving student outcomes, there are additional policy mechanisms that policymakers can consider when seeking to enhance rural education. We focus on four: education choice, college and career pathways, digital infrastructure, and improved data systems.

Education Choice

Expanding educational opportunity is a key component of improving student outcomes. Since each student is unique, families should have access to a variety of educational options to find the best learning environment for their child. However, the idea of expanding school choice in rural communities is often contentious. Policymakers may fear low population density will make it difficult to sustain options or that choice will threaten traditional public school finances. Yet policymakers needn't be worried: Providing rural communities with school choice is both sustainable and empowering to families and students. And more importantly, rural families want options.

More than 250,000 rural students across the nation are enrolled in brick-and-mortar charter schools with thousands more choosing an online charter school ([Marshall et al, 2022](#)). A recent study of Florida's Education Savings Account (ESA) program found that rural families took advantage of the program at a higher rate than their urban and suburban counterparts ([Lofton & Lueken, 2021](#)). Contrary to some policymakers' fears, demand for ESA programs did not erode the public school system—in fact, 83% of rural families still choose their traditional public school ([Matus & Hankerson](#)).

Additionally, the expansion of school choice policy promotes the expansion of schools of choice. In choice-friendly states such as Arizona and Florida, access to school choice for rural students has expanded. In Florida, the number of private schools in rural communities has nearly doubled. In Arizona, over 80% of students live in a ZIP code with at least one charter school ([Bedrick & Ladner, 2023](#)).

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, policymakers should not limit the options available to students and families simply based on their ZIP code. If providing families with options is valuable to students in urban centers, then it is equally valuable to families who live in rural communities. Below are specific school choice policies that can support student success in rural areas.

Education Savings Accounts

[ESAs](#) give rural families financial flexibility to customize education. Florida leads in this area, allowing funds for private tuition, online programs and specialized services. In rural areas with limited options, ESAs enable tailored educational experiences, including virtual programs and extracurricular learning.

Microschools

Microschools provide scalable solutions for rural communities, overcoming barriers like geography and population density. Eastern Hancock Schools in Indiana exemplifies innovative rural microschool leadership under Superintendent George Philhower. Recognizing that his district was already 40% transfer students, Philhower launched the [Indiana Microschool Collaborative](#), the nation's first publicly funded microschool network. Starting in fall 2025, these charter microschools will serve 30-75 students per site using state funding. The collaborative offers a shared services model where the district provides administrative support to multiple microschool sites, reducing costs while expanding options for rural families.

Other successful rural micro school models include [Holler Creek School](#) in Virginia with its 16-student, outdoor-focused model. Students engage in community-based projects with small class sizes, minimizing facility costs and making it an adaptable rural approach. Other options include [Prenda Schools](#), a learner-centered, highly scalable franchise model that works in various communities, including rural Eagar, Arizona, which now has five Prenda Microschools. And [Eyes and Brains STEM Center](#) in rural Elkins, West Virginia, which provides a STEM-focused education emphasizing science, technology, engineering and math for students in a rural setting.

Open Enrollment

Open enrollment allows rural students to attend schools beyond their district, increasing access to specialized programs. In Wisconsin, more than 52% of students who take advantage of interdistrict open enrollment are enrolling in rural schools. Open enrollment leaders like Wisconsin and Florida have transparent open enrollment policies, allowing families to make informed educational choices and expanding their educational opportunities.

Transportation

Transportation remains a challenge in rural school choice. Innovative policies like Arizona's transportation grant have allowed schools to develop new, cost-effective transportation initiatives, such as using passenger vans when school buses are impractical. Creating novel and manageable travel solutions broadens access to distant schools and reduces barriers for rural families. [Wisconsin's](#) open enrollment policy offers low-income families transportation reimbursements so more students can benefit from public school choice. However, limited program funding leaves families with small stipends. [Florida](#), meanwhile, offers \$750 transportation scholarships for interdistrict choice.

Part-Time Enrollment

Part-time enrollment allows rural students to combine public school courses with homeschooling, nonpublic schooling or online education, expanding their learning options without requiring full-time attendance. Some states with significant rural populations provide robust incentives for public schools to provide these offerings.

- [Minnesota](#) and [Kansas](#) fund part-time students proportionally, allocating resources to public schools based on the student's level of participation.
- [Alaska](#) and [Colorado](#) offer partial funding for students enrolled on a part-time basis.
- [West Virginia](#) allows part-time virtual enrollment through the West Virginia Virtual School.
- [Iowa](#) provides 0.10 full-time equivalent (FTE) funding for homeschooled students who participate in extracurricular activities.

College and Career Pathways

Postsecondary enrollment rates in rural areas are 10 percentage points lower than suburban and urban areas. How can states close this gap and improve access to college and career pathways for rural residents? Tennessee and Texas have made strides to address this challenge and put students on the path towards productive careers.

Tennessee Ayers Scholars Program

The Ayers Scholars Program provides comprehensive support to high school students in rural Tennessee to help them pursue postsecondary education. The program features college access counselors embedded in partner high schools who assist students with college admissions and financial aid applications. Beginning in eighth grade and continuing through college, it offers career exposure, individualized postsecondary planning and ongoing support.

College-going rates in Ayers program partner schools are five times higher than the state average and have resulted in a sharp uptick in FASFA completion rates. Since its launch, the program has partnered with the Governor's Rural Education Foundation to expand access to scholarships. Currently, 21 counties and 33 high schools participate in the scholarship program.

Texas Rural Schools Innovation Zone (RSIZ)

The Rural Schools Innovation Zone or RSIZ in South Texas is a model collaboration among five school districts, higher education institutions and industry partners, aiming to provide high-quality college and career pathways for rural students. It serves 950 rural high school students—primarily economically disadvantaged and Hispanic—and has achieved notable success in its initial years. From 2019 to 2023, the percentage of students completing dual credit courses rocketed from 15% to 61%, and those earning industry certifications soared from 7% to 54%, exceeding the state average by 2.5 times.

RSIZ incorporates pathways through specialized academies such as the Ignite Technical Institute, Next Generation Medical Academy and the Grow Your Own Educator Academy. These academies focus on enhancing postsecondary outcomes through certifications, career exploration and practical learning experiences. Beyond academic offerings, RSIZ enhances rural district capabilities by providing advisory services, coordinating schedules and transportation and assisting with the implementation of shared performance agreements among districts, higher education and industry partners.

Rural Pathways Excellence Partnerships

Building on the success of RSIZ, Texas introduced the Rural Pathways Excellence Partnerships or R-PEP program through [House Bill 2209](#). R-PEP aims to incentivize and support multi-district, cross-sector rural college and career pathway partnerships, expanding opportunities for underserved students. This initiative promotes collaboration among rural districts to pool resources, align educational pathways with high-demand careers and boost economic development in these areas. By leveraging additional per pupil funding and outcome bonuses, R-PEP encourages districts to develop sustainable, high-quality pathways that align with regional workforce needs.

Both RSIZ and R-PEP exemplify Texas's commitment to increasing postsecondary access and success for rural students, offering replicable models for other states aiming to overcome similar challenges in rural education.

Digital Divide and Broadband Access

The digital divide poses a significant challenge for rural communities. Research shows that expanding broadband access to rural communities leads to greater employment, business growth and income within the community ([Weinstein, Erouart & Dewbury, 2024](#)). Broadband also plays a critical role in the delivery of education, affecting students' access to online learning, research and virtual collaboration. Reliable broadband is essential, yet nearly a quarter of students in rural areas lack sufficient connectivity, which impacts educational outcomes and limits future opportunities. To address this issue, efforts should focus on expanding broadband infrastructure, increasing affordability and providing devices to ensure equitable access to digital learning tools.

Measure and Expand Broadband through State Initiatives

While federal programs like the Affordable Connectivity Program (ACP) and Lifeline offer critical subsidies, state-level initiatives can further enhance access by targeting underserved areas. States should establish mechanisms to collect and analyze broadband access data, especially for K-12 students. For example, North Carolina and Nevada have implemented surveys to identify connectivity gaps, while Georgia's data-sharing initiatives between broadband and education agencies have led to better-targeted interventions, benefiting more than 135,000 students.

States can also enhance broadband access by prioritizing K-12 connectivity in grant programs. Indiana has actively focused on expanding broadband access to K-12 students, both at schools and at home. This effort is part of a broader, sustainable strategy that includes leveraging federal emergency funds, implementing a broadband connectivity program and creating a broadband portal that allows households to report unserved areas.

Innovative Approaches to Improve Connectivity

Innovative solutions such as satellite broadband pilots can help connect remote areas, as seen in [North Carolina's](#) recent initiatives. These efforts are supported by federal funding through the [Digital Equity Act](#) and the [Broadband Equity, Access, and Deployment \(BEAD\) Act](#), which aim to close the digital divide.

The Digital Equity Act provides grants for states to promote digital inclusion, addressing disparities in access, affordability, and adoption. The BEAD Act focuses on expanding infrastructure in underserved areas, emphasizing sustainable solutions like satellite and 5G technology. Both acts require states to set clear goals for improving connectivity and to track progress and provide avenues for states to expand broadband access.

Improving Data Systems

The success of rural education initiatives depends not only on the strength of individual programs, but also on the systems in place to measure their impact. Whether states are investing in teacher GYO policies, expanding college and career access programs or scaling career and technical education initiatives, the ability to track outcomes over time is essential for identifying what works, reallocating resources and ensuring return on investment.

For instance, teacher GYO programs have exploded in recent years, with all 50 states claiming to have some version of the policy. Yet the breadth and scale of these programs, each with their own funding stream, application requirements, training programs and work requirements means there is no standard GYO program. Once a state decides to invest in a GYO program, a crucial first step is effective data tracking. Only then will policymakers be able to understand whether their investment is paying dividends. For instance, Michigan has awarded \$128 million to fund 139 different school district GYO programs. Yet the outcomes of this investment are unclear. Are these programs seeing declines in teacher shortages? Are these teachers staying in the rural communities to teach? Imagine the knowledge that would be gained from being able to see how each of the different school districts GYO program was performing.

Additionally, improved data systems not only allow policymakers to evaluate the effectiveness of programs, but also to understand how policies are being implemented across the state. For instance, as more states adopt Return on Investment (ROI) policies to evaluate college and career pathway initiatives, regional and local variation becomes especially important. Mississippi's ROI analysis examines outcomes at the state, workforce development region and smaller ecosystem levels—some of which are predominantly rural. Arkansas, following a recent [executive order](#) establishing a Chief Workforce Cabinet, has begun mapping outcomes by region, though full transparency and rural-specific reporting remain limited. Meanwhile, Tennessee's research into high-value credentials revealed clear regional disparities in credential attainment and labor market alignment. With improved and publicly accessible data systems, states can better identify where programs are thriving, where implementation is lagging and how to tailor resources to meet the needs of rural students and communities.

States should invest in systems to evaluate not only GYO program outcomes, such as teacher retention and student academic progress, but also other teacher incentive programs, school choice policies and college and career pathways programs. By collecting data on the programs designed to improve rural communities, policymakers will be able to effectively allocate resources to expand these models into other rural areas.

Conclusion

Revitalizing America's rural education system is a crucial investment in the nation's future. Rural students should have the same opportunities and support as their urban and suburban peers. Addressing challenges like teacher recruitment, college and career pathways, school choice and broadband access requires tailored, innovative policies that reflect the distinct needs of rural communities.

This policy playbook emphasizes the importance of sustainable, locally driven solutions, such as "Grow Your Own" teacher initiatives, college access programs, expanded education options and strategic broadband investments. While existing programs show promise, scaling these initiatives and introducing new strategies will be essential for lasting improvements. Policymakers must collaborate across sectors, engage local communities and allocate resources effectively to ensure that these solutions reach rural areas nationwide.

A robust approach to rural education policy will empower students, strengthen communities and enhance the broader American education system. As rural schools improve, they will drive economic and social progress, contributing to a stronger, more competitive and prosperous future for all.

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