

Revitalizing Rural Education: A Policy Roadmap for States

More than 9.5 million students attend rural schools – more than the nation’s 100 largest districts combined. Yet these communities face persistent barriers: teacher shortages, declining enrollment, limited broadband, and fewer postsecondary opportunities. State policies tailored to rural schools can expand opportunities for students and strengthen rural communities.

Key Challenges

Rural schools face unique challenges, including:

- **Teacher Shortages:** Rural districts face higher teacher turnover rates due to smaller labor markets and challenges with recruiting and retaining teachers.
- **Limited Educational Options:** Rural families often lack access to diverse school models or specialized programs, limiting their ability to find the right fit for students’ needs.
- **Limited College and Career Access:** Only 28% of rural adults hold a postsecondary credential versus 41% in urban areas.
- **Digital Divide:** Nearly one in four rural students lack reliable broadband, restricting learning and career readiness.

Policy Solutions

The following policy solutions provide states with the opportunity to better support rural districts and schools and help alleviate the challenges they face:

1. Strengthen the Rural Teacher Pipeline

- **Grow Your Own (GYO) Programs:** Train local paraprofessionals and students to become certified teachers through paid, on-the-job pathways.
- **Teacher Incentives:** Offer rural bonuses, housing assistance, or student loan forgiveness (e.g., Colorado’s \$10,000 rural fellowships; Texas’s rural pay multipliers).
- **Creative Housing Models:** Convert unused school buildings into affordable teacher housing to improve recruitment and retention.

2. Expand Educational Opportunity

- **Education Savings Accounts & Microschools:** Give families access to flexible, small-scale learning models tailored to rural communities.
- **Open Enrollment:** Let students cross district lines to attend programs that align with their needs. 52% of Wisconsin’s open enrollment transfers go into rural schools.
- **Transportation Flexibility:** Grants for shared vans or stipends make school choice feasible in remote areas.

3. Build College and Career Pathways

- Tennessee’s Ayers Scholars Program: Embeds college counselors in rural high schools to raise FAFSA and college-going rates.
- Texas’s Rural Schools Innovation Zone: Pairs districts with local industries and colleges—students earning dual credits rose from 15% to 61% in four years.

4. Bridge the Digital Divide

- Expand broadband through BEAD and Digital Equity Act funds.
- Prioritize K–12 access in state broadband mapping and grants.
- Support satellite and 5G pilots to reach remote students.

State Spotlights

Tennessee - Building the Teacher Pipeline and College Access

Tennessee pioneered the first federally recognized [Teacher Apprenticeship Program](#), combining paid, on-the-job training with college coursework to help residents earn full teaching credentials. This helps professional advance within their communities.

Texas - Innovating Rural Career Pathways

Through the [Rural Schools Innovation Zone](#) (RSIZ), five South Texas districts collaborate with higher education and industry partners to align programs with workforce needs. Small districts often don’t have the time or capacity to undertake these opportunities alone, so by pooling resources across the districts, schools could expand high-quality pathways training programs and offer students opportunities that would be impossible for any one small district to provide on its own. Dual-credit completion jumped from 15% to 61% in four years. The [Rural Pathways Excellence Partnerships](#) (R-PEP) scales this approach statewide.

Learn More:

[Policy Playbook: Revitalizing America’s Rural Education System](#)

