

A stylized illustration of a rural landscape. The top half features a light blue sky with abstract, wavy lines. Below the sky, a yellow and blue horizon line separates the sky from the land. The land is depicted with various shapes representing trees, houses, and a utility pole. The bottom of the image is a white curved shape that contains the text.

EXPLORING

# RURAL EDUCATION

IN AMERICA

UWA | ONLINE

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# I N T R O D U C T I O N

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Rural education in America is complex. Those teaching and learning in rural communities face unique challenges compared to their peers in suburban and urban education. These challenges can translate into opportunities for motivated educators, business leaders and policy makers in rural communities. Though the stakes are high, professionals across the country continue to overcome rural education setbacks through persistence, understanding and creativity.

According to The National Center for Education Statistics, a rural school is in a census-defined rural territory that is anywhere from less than five miles to more than 25 miles from an urbanized area. This broad definition means that many students are educated in rural areas. Almost 30% of all American public schools are rural and hold roughly one-fifth of public school students, according to the Education Commission of the States.

Though rural and urban schools often show similar educational outcomes, the trials faced by rural communities are not the same as their urban counterparts. The Center for Public Education stated in a 2018 study *Out of the Loop*, “Rural students face high levels of poverty and are often taught by less academically prepared teachers.”

They also pointed out that the problems facing rural students and schools should be the focus of much policy, but metropolitan areas usually take a front row seat. The specific and diverse needs of rural communities aren't directly addressed in many policy discussions.

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**Almost 30% of all American public schools are rural**

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The lack of attention to the issues haunting rural schools creates opportunity for educators and community leaders to make a serious impact in the years to come. Rural communities are innovative and need education professionals who are ready to move forward in a beneficial direction for both teachers and students.

Here are some of the difficult topics plaguing rural education in America and how those in schools and on the front lines of education policy are working to overcome them.

# OVERCOMING STUDENT POVERTY

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According to the United States Department of Agriculture Economic Research Service, in 2017, 22.8% of rural children in the United States were poor compared to 17.7% of urban children. Overall, the South saw a much higher disparity between metro and non-metro poverty rates. The study stated, “Those with the most severe poverty are found in historically poor areas of the Southeast, including the Mississippi Delta and Appalachia.”

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In 2018, the United States Census Bureau’s poverty threshold for a family of four (two adults and two children) was \$25,465 a year. In 2017, they stated 18% or more of the people living in Mississippi and Louisiana lived in poverty and more than 16% of those in Arkansas and Alabama. Rural areas in the South are hit especially hard.

Much of the poverty is caused by lack of access to well-paying jobs. Pew Research found that 42% of rural residents say that finding a job where they live is a major concern.

How do poverty levels and financial insecurity affect education? Those with fewer monetary resources may lack access to learning materials and opportunities. Families with financial constraints often struggle to provide high-quality preschool to their children, a quiet place for them to work on their homework after school or educational experiences outside of the classroom. Furthermore, in rural communities, poverty translates into another major issue: lack of technology.

## INTERNET AND TECHNOLOGY ACCESS

According to Pew Research, 24% of rural adults said that access to high-speed internet was a pressing problem. In addition, other technology needed to participate in homework or learning activities, such as laptops and tablets, may be out of grasp for a rural family suffering from poverty. This leads to an issue known as the homework gap, when students can't properly complete assignments outside of school because they lack access to technology.

Business and policy leaders have stepped up to help. Google's Rolling Study Halls program offers free Wi-Fi and Chromebooks to some rural school districts. This enables the students to use bus time as study

time. Google stated, "After initial pilots of our Rolling Study Halls in North Carolina and South Carolina, early results indicate promising gains in reading and math proficiency and increased digital fluency."

It's not just Wi-Fi that is spurring education innovation in rural communities. Education technology, also known as edtech, is making education in non-metro communities a hotbed for success. Online learning can bring students without access to advanced placement courses or other specialty programs opportunity. Even if students don't have Wi-Fi at home, they can use school computers to connect with experts who wouldn't otherwise be in their schools.

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Money for educators to create their own innovative approaches can help as well. Rural grant programs provide funds to teachers looking to design innovative projects that help students become familiar with technology in rural schools. An article in EdSurge stated, "These investments have removed the one-size-fits-all approach that is often found in education and instead have provided the opportunity for schools to innovate."

When it comes to technology in low income, rural communities, a pre-packaged approach won't work. Creativity and understanding goes a long way. Policies and educators must pave the way for both.

## PLACE-BASED LEARNING

Another way to customize learning to fit rural communities suffering with poverty is place-based learning. Place-based learning connects education to the community around the school. This partnership between schools and communities can boost student achievement and improve economic vitality in rural areas.

In poor rural areas, place-based learning is especially important because it helps students make a difference in their communities. It also connects the public to their local schools and gives students the opportunity to interact with people from different walks of life.

**Many universities, including the University of West Alabama, partner with the Rural Schools Collaborative to ensure that teachers have access to rural-centric programs that prepare them to address complex issues.** The Rural Schools Collaborative works with teachers to prepare them for place-based engagement and philanthropy, developing rural teacher leaders.

Through these skills, educators can help students develop a sense of pride in their communities. This can translate into confidence in oneself, which will serve a student well through financial struggles.



The Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development (ASCD) pointed out that many teachers and administrators can address the effects of high poverty rates directly. Some suggestions they provide include:

- **PROVIDING TIME** *in class to work on homework, especially homework that requires computers or other forms of technology.*
- **ADVOCATING FOR** *students to get the same opportunities as their wealthier peers, such as access to advanced placement classes through online means.*
- **CONNECTING** *class projects to community initiatives, like cleaning up playgrounds or writing letters to editors of newspapers.*
- **ARRANGING** *tutoring free of charge to students in low-income communities who are falling behind.*
- **COMMUNICATING** *with parents face-to-face or over the phone instead of using email or online systems.*

Though student poverty is difficult to overcome, addressing issues with imaginative, customized solutions is the way of the future in rural communities.

# IMPROVING VOCABULARY AND LITERACY

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A vocabulary gap exists between children of varying socioeconomic backgrounds. Research shows that by age three, children growing up in poorer areas or from lower-income families may hear as many as 30 million fewer words than children in more affluent communities. Because many rural people are hit hard by poverty, these gaps are especially important for rural educators to understand.

Ann Fernald, a psychologist, studied this issue and discovered [the gap](#) between rich and poor children is evident as early as infancy. In fact, the differences in vocabulary and language processing were seen at 18 months, with some displaying a six-month gap by age two.

Fernald identified a likely cause for this gap. There are differences in how much lower-income parents speak to their children. Exposure to child-directed speech is important to develop language processing skills. Vocabulary development at an early age expands into the rest of a child's education, affecting comprehension for years to come.

Recently, rural students have started to outperform their urban peers when it comes to literacy, but there is still a large gap between rural and suburban students. The Out of the Loop study by CPE stated, “Reading scores may reflect rural poverty due to the influence of home and family life on literacy. Rural students begin school with lower reading achievement than their suburban peers, and about the same as urban kindergartners.”

While K-12 teachers and administrators can’t intervene as early as two years old, they can implement practices in the classroom that help narrow the vocabulary and literacy achievement gap. Some ways educators and administrators can effect change are:

- **USING NEW WORDS** in instruction with context.
- **ENCOURAGING** students to have continual conversations with each other, community members and educators.
- **PROVIDING BOOKS** with pictures that point to word meanings.
- **COMMUNICATING** with parents about the importance of speaking to their children early and continuously.
- **SENDING** home conversation starters and vocabulary-rich books and materials.

Nonprofit organizations such as Too Small to Fail lead public awareness and promote action to increase early language development. The group partners with pediatricians, faith organizations, businesses and more to make sure that parents know the importance of speaking to their children from birth. In rural communities, education professionals can help parents meet the literacy needs of their children by understanding the community, advocating for student needs and developing relationships.

# ADDRESSING STUDENT HEALTH

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Many students suffer from poor nutrition and increased stress due to financial insecurity, especially in remote rural areas. Steps can be taken to ensure these students get the assistance they need.

## NUTRITION

Pew Research found that in 2018, 12% of rural residents said that access to grocery stores was a major problem in their community compared to just 10% of urban residents and 4% of suburban residents. This lack of availability of affordable fresh food plays a role in the nutrition of students. The Center for Disease Control stated that a poor diet can lead to energy imbalances. Furthermore, it can impair cognitive development and school performance.

According to No Kid Hungry, 12 million children in the United States live in food insecure homes, meaning homes that don't

have enough food for every family member to lead a healthy life. Rural southern states seem to be hit especially hard by food insecurity. **Alabama was above the national average with 24.1% of its children suffering from food insecurity.** Mississippi has a childhood food insecurity rate of 26.3%.

Programs in schools seek to help. No Kid Hungry is one of them. The organization works specifically with federal food benefits programs that help hungry children, like the school breakfast program, the summer meals program and the afterschool meals program. Donations provided help schools provide these programs through grants, supplies and other assistance.

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Twenty-two million children in the United States participate in a free or reduced-price lunch program. Many of the families who participate do not qualify for federal anti-hunger programs such as the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP). Their meals at school are vitally important to their overall health and development.

Unfortunately, a stigma can be applied when students receive food assistance at school. The opportunity to expand federal school breakfast and lunch programs to feed all students free of charge reduces both hunger and stigma while improving health.

A study by the USDA Economic Research Service found that while rural communities have the most to gain by implementing district-wide free school lunch programs, known as the Community Eligibility Provision (CEP), they were less likely to. The study stated, “They may be less likely to participate in the CEP due to a lack of outreach or concerns related to the financial viability of the CEP given their meal costs.”

Thus, better outreach and programs that address the specific concerns of rural communities is needed when it comes to nutritional health in schools. Policy leaders and nonprofit professionals with a background and knowledge of rural food shortages can communicate what programs are available and how school districts and families can make the most of them.

## MENTAL HEALTH

Students’ mental health may suffer in rural communities. Stress of financial insecurity, sometimes caused by hunger or inadequate housing, influences how well students can learn and retain information. It may also have marked effects on behavior in the classroom.

Compounding the issue is a lack of mental health services in rural areas. A study by the American Journal of Preventative Medicine found that 65% of non-metropolitan counties don’t have a single psychiatrist, much less a psychiatrist in schools or specialized child psychologists. Therefore, students dealing with stress or other mental health issues in rural communities are left on their own.

Child psychiatrist and senior advisor at Turnaround for Children Pamela Cantor said, “Stress is not an on or off switch. Stress happens at varying intensities for children, and they experience it in different ways.” She went on to point out that stress in children can lead to lack of focus, concentration or interest. In rural communities hit hard by poverty or job loss, this is an issue that educators and policy makers must address. The stress caused by issues or insecurity at home will follow students into the classroom and can’t be ignored.

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**65% of non-metropolitan counties don't have a single psychiatrist**

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In a panel at the EdSurge Fusion conference, Cantor and students encouraged educators and administrators to provide an open environment to talk about stress and mental health. For some students, school may be their only outlet discuss the issues that are plaguing them at home.

Educational leaders and outreach organizations are not helpless to address mental health problems. Organizations like the one Cantor works with, [Turnaround for Children](#), seek to understand the impact of adversity on learning and development to better equip educators with the tools needed to make an impact.

An understanding of the health problems and barriers rural students may face can make a difference in the physical and mental health of students, leading to much better educational outcomes.

# ENCOURAGING COLLEGE ENROLLMENT & COMPLETION

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Research shows that even high school graduates from rural areas that aren't in poverty are less likely to go to college, suggesting better outreach and support is needed. Rural communities boast higher high school graduation rates than the national average, but fewer students enroll in college and complete their programs.

The National Student Clearinghouse Research Center found in its 2018 report that 67% of students from suburban schools enrolled in college immediately after high school while only 63% of students in rural schools did. Those who enrolled were less likely to complete college. Only 42% had graduated within six years of finishing high school.

Urban and rural schools have similar college enrollment rates but different barriers standing between students and higher education.

Many well-paying jobs that didn't require a college degree have been automated or moved to locations outside of the United States in recent years. Since manufacturing made up a huge portion of the rural economy and paid well, college enrollment wasn't incredibly important for those looking to stay in rural areas. That



has now changed. According to the USDA, between 2001 and 2015, manufacturing employment fell almost 30%.

To earn a good living, college is no longer optional for most students, and pupils from rural impoverished communities must learn the skills that employers need today. In families where no one has attended college, students may find themselves with both a lack of resources and understanding at home.

**“ Just 39% of adults under 30 in rural communities would like to move ”**

Complicating matters further, residents of rural communities often must leave their homes to gain education and a good job, and some simply don't want to move. According to Pew Research, just 39% of adults under 30 in rural communities would like to move, and 40% of those who do say they'd like to stay in the same type of community. This hinders their access to higher education and stable employment.

At the K-12 level, coursework can be adjusted to ensure that students are ready for the next step in a rapidly changing world. The Center for American Progress stated, “Many schools are redesigning the high school experience by implementing various models, such as career and technical education (CTE); personalized learning, apprenticeships; early college and dual enrollment; and language immersion programs.”

Higher education institutions must also adapt. Few universities are addressing the financial and academic support needed by the students the same way they are for their urban peers. Targeted and regional scholarships have not been as available for those in rural areas compared to urban areas. Today, some colleges extend more financial support to rural students to address monetary setbacks, but more resources are needed.

It goes deeper than scholarships, though. Many rural students don't have the money to spend on college applications or entrance exams, meaning they can't apply to as many schools or take tests multiple times to get better scores. Many might not understand their options for financial aid or the differences between private universities and community colleges. Educators and administrators must inform students of their options for both financial assistance and higher education.

Once rural students overcome obstacles when enrolling in college, they often face more on campus. The Hechinger Report, a publication covering inequality and innovation in education, stated, **"There are genuine differences that make life hard on campus for rural students in ways many other people may not consider."** The publication mentioned everything from political and socioeconomic status to everyday differences, such as how to use crosswalks. These differences can cause rural students to fall behind or feel isolated when they arrive at a university.

Because of these issues, college recruitment professionals must understand that there's a long process involved in encouraging rural students to stay in college. At the National Association for College

Admission Counseling’s annual meeting in 2018, Rachel Fried, program coordinator at GEAR UP, a federally-funded college access program, said, “When universities really decide to commit to developing rural pipelines, they are committing to a multiyear engagement process that will not yield results for the first three to five years.”

Professionals at the 2018 annual meeting suggested tactics like going into communities instead of reaching out through virtual means, encouraging college graduates from rural communities to return to their hometowns to speak about their experiences and not only thinking of connecting with students as a recruitment opportunity. It’s up to educational leaders to change the perception of college for rural students, make it attainable and guide students in smart choices before and after enrolling in universities.

# REFINING TEACHER RECRUITMENT & RETENTION

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Rural schools face unique challenges when it comes to recruiting and retaining teachers in their schools. As we mentioned before, young people often must move away from rural communities to obtain a college degree and many don't return to their hometown. Because of that, rural communities don't have many qualified individuals nearby to pull from when recruiting.

It's also not easy to encourage teachers to move from other areas. Financial resources play a big role. Poor rural school districts don't have the tax dollars needed to pay competitively. What's more is the job itself is often harder.

In rural districts, fewer resources are available but the workload remains the same, leaving many educators overworked. "One of the most frustrating parts of being a teacher in rural schools is you're expected to do so much more," said Mollie Dreitz, an agricultural education teacher in Otis, Colorado, a rural and remote district. "My plate is 100 percent full — there is literally almost a meeting or somewhere you have to be every evening, and it's exhausting."

In addition to being difficult, rural teaching can be isolating. If an educator didn't grow up in the area where they teach, it may be hard to assimilate and understand small, close-knit communities.

Some ideas that universities and organizations are using to address teacher shortages in rural communities include:

- **PLACING STUDENT TEACHERS** *in rural districts and offering them a stipend, allowing them time to familiarize themselves with the community.*
- **CREATING OR MAINTAINING** *rural teacher initiatives that prepare educators and administrators for challenges.*
- **MAINTAINING** *opportunities for teacher collaboration, through virtual means or otherwise.*
- **ENCOURAGING RESIDENTS** *who have earned their teaching degree to teach in their hometowns, strengthening roots and encouraging future generations.*

It's imperative those responsible for recruiting educators and administrators know how to highlight the benefits of teaching in rural districts. One positive aspect of working in rural communities is the ability to work autonomously and fully own the process. Since there are likely only a few teachers working within each subject, this gives each educator, no matter how new, the ability to lead and make impactful contributions.

That doesn't mean teachers are on their own in remote areas. Effective collaboration in education is now easier to come by in rural districts.

In today's technological age, teachers can lead in their remote communities while still collaborating with other educators in their

specialty virtually. For example, the Rural Schools Collaborative lists a Facebook group on their website specifically for rural teachers and features stories from educators in rural communities around the country.

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**The University of West Alabama offers Alabama’s Black Belt Teacher Corps, which is a classroom-to-career placement program**

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For teachers who wish to return to their hometown after graduating from college, rural schools offer them steady employment in a place they love. While recruiting former residents is not enough to stop the rural teacher shortage, those teachers can lead the charge in helping educators new to the community integrate and understand the district.

Colleges are stepping up throughout the education process to make sure rural schools are staffed. The University of West Alabama offers [Alabama’s Black Belt Teacher Corps](#), which is a classroom-to-career placement program. Education majors receive funding for their own education and initiatives in the schools where they will teach. Teachers commit to working in a Black Belt community, currently defined as areas in a rural region of Alabama that are experiencing economic decline, for at least three years to participate in the program.

The rural teacher shortage will not be addressed overnight, but assuring that teachers and administrators in these communities feel both empowered and supported can help. Understanding the needs of rural communities will encourage more top-tier teachers to consider rural schools when propelling their career forward.

# CAREERS ADDRESSING RURAL EDUCATION ISSUES

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Many professionals are working in rural communities to address the problems faced. Inside school districts, here are a few of the professionals tackling rural education issues head on:

- **SCHOOL ADMINISTRATORS**
- **CURRICULUM COORDINATORS**
  - **SUPERINTENDENTS**
    - **PRINCIPALS**
    - **TEACHERS**

In the realm of organizational change and leadership, many professionals must understand the unique requirements of students and educators in rural communities. They include:

- **COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT LEADERS**
  - **ELECTED OFFICIALS**
  - **POLICY LEADERS**
- **EDUCATION RESEARCHERS**
- **CHARITABLE ORGANIZATION EXECUTIVES**
  - **HIGHER EDUCATION PROFESSIONALS**

When it comes to rural education in America, there is a world of opportunity to change lives for the better in all these careers. With the right background and education, people in these roles can impact the millions of students living in rural communities for years to come.

Are you interested in making a concrete difference in rural students' lives through action, advocacy and collaboration? **Consider a doctorate in education online**. The University of West Alabama offers a one-of-a-kind program that examines rural topics specifically.

The Ed.D. Rural Education from UWA Online helps candidates gain a deeper understanding of the challenges and issues in rural education.

This forward-thinking degree helps students become leaders addressing the needs of rural students and school districts.

Designed for anyone with a master's degree, not just teachers, the program offers two tracks:





**The first of its kind in the nation,** our online Doctor of Education in rural education focuses on the critical problems mentioned in this guide, as well as the important strategies and solutions needed to overcome them.

UWA uses open educational resources (OER), meaning that many instructors in this program offer textbook-free education taught through digital, openly licensed content. This helps students save a significant amount on textbook costs. Plus, students can access course materials they need anytime from anywhere.

The Ed.D Rural Education is great for education specialists looking to make a difference through career advancement, teachers looking to advance into strategic leadership roles and anyone passionate about the matters facing rural school districts and students. Those graduating from this program will be prepared to tackle the tough questions surrounding rural education in America.

