Rural Education

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Student Subgroups
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Introduction

Rural education policy plays a crucial role in shaping the future of rural communities, and a nuanced understanding of rural contexts is necessary for it to be effective. Rural schools are deeply embedded in their communities, serving as more than just educational institutions—they are hubs of social, cultural, and economic life[1]. Effective policies must recognize and address the distinct challenges that rural schools face, including geographic isolation, resource limitations, and unique cultural dynamics. These cultural dynamics can include strong ties to the land and agriculture[2]. Additionally, rural culture may be defined by the tight-knit community, and as rural scholar Nelson wrote, "the primary difference between life in a large and in a small community is the relative extent of one's personal acquaintance with other members of the community"[3]. A one-size-fits-all approach risks exacerbating inequities because policies designed for urban or suburban settings often fail to align with the realities of rural schools, which serve one in five students in the United States[4]. Misconceptions about rural spaces, such as the assumption that they are homogeneously White or static, can lead to oversights that fail to account for the increasing diversity and evolving needs of these communities. By centering the voices and needs of rural students, teachers, and families, education policy can better support the vitality and resilience of these communities.

Rurality can be defined through various measures, some of the common quantitative measures include 1) census definitions from the US Census Bureau, 2) Office of Management and Budget Definitions, and 3) National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) Locale Classifications. Other features that are used as an indication of rurality include tight-knit social ties, isolation, connection to land and agriculture, cultural values, food choices, and patriarchal power structures[5]. Some policymakers, practitioners, and researchers prioritize the rejection of deficit-based definitions and perceptions of rural spaces. Failing to define rurality facilitates stereotyping, misconceptions, and confusion that can harm people living in rural spaces, as well as lead to biased research.

Rural communities across the United States have vastly different needs, and understanding individual rural communities is important when shaping state and local education policy. In this chapter, we focus on six key findings about rural education at large—regardless of specific context. We also offer supporting evidence based on our key findings.

Key Finding #1: *Rural schools and communities are becoming increasingly diverse. A common misconception is that rurality is synonymous with whiteness.*

This misunderstanding is becoming less accurate as rural spaces attract more racially diverse populations, particularly Latin(a)/o/x/e students. Due to this misconception, many students of color have been excluded from discussions about rural schools and spaces. When these conversations fail to recognize all students and teachers, policies often neglect the needs of the entire community.

Key Finding #2: *Rural schools are rarely prioritized during education policy formation.*

When policies are applied to rural contexts without considering the unique needs of these communities, they often fail to achieve their intended outcomes. Despite making up 20% of the student population in

the United States, rural students are frequently expected to conform to models designed for urban or suburban settings that do not align with their realities. These one-size-fits-all approaches overlook critical factors such as geographic isolation, limited resources, and distinct cultural dynamics. As a result, policies that might succeed in urban areas can inadvertently worsen existing challenges in rural schools.

Key Finding #3: *Rural school closures and consolidations negatively impact rural communities, disrupting both social cohesion and economic stability.*

Rural schools are often central to community life, serving as hubs for events, activities, and local decision-making. Their closure weakens the social fabric, diminishes a shared sense of identity, and can exacerbate segregation within communities. These closures are also economically devastating, as schools often serve as the largest employers and draw families to local businesses. The loss of a school often signals broader community decline, reducing opportunities for social and economic engagement and threatening the long-term vitality of rural areas.

Key Finding #4: *Rural students have limited school choice options.*

School choice in rural areas often includes virtual charter schools, homeschooling, and interdistrict choice options, rather than brick-and-mortar charter schools. While virtual charter schools may appear to be a promising alternative, rural students face significant barriers, such as limited broadband access and concerns about the quality of virtual instruction. These challenges, combined with the disruption of community cohesion caused by school choice initiatives, mirror some of the negative impacts of school closures.

Key Finding #5: *Academic outcomes for rural students are significantly shaped by geography and demography.*

While rural students graduate high school at higher rates than their peers in other areas, they attend college at lower rates. Despite demonstrating academic achievement comparable to non-rural peers, rural students face distinct barriers that lower their college-going rates. A major challenge is the limited availability of nearby 4-year institutions, often meaning that students have to travel long distances, making attendance less practical or appealing. This is compounded by the financial strain of relocation and the social difficulty of leaving tightly knit communities. Moreover, the lack of diverse industry opportunities in rural areas reduces the perceived value of higher education, as students may struggle to connect a degree with meaningful local career prospects. Together, these factors create a complex set of obstacles that deter rural students from pursuing postsecondary education.

Key Finding #6: *Rural communities face challenges in recruiting and retaining a diverse teacher workforce.*

One significant issue is that rural students who earn bachelor's degrees—qualifying them to teach—often must relocate to pursue their education. While some return to their communities after graduating, many seek work in other areas. Additionally, rural schools may struggle to recruit teachers from non-rural backgrounds due to the distance from metropolitan resources and amenities, further complicating efforts to build and maintain a stable teacher workforce.

Evidence

Key Finding #1: *Rural schools and communities are becoming increasingly diverse.*

As rural spaces become increasingly racially diverse, the needs of students shift, and the educational landscape should adjust accordingly. School leaders and policymakers need to consider what policies will meet the needs of all the students in their local rural spaces by understanding what rural communities look like. Rural scholar Jesse Longhurst emphasizes that "underdefined conceptualizations of rurality as a

proxy for race, socioeconomic status, culture, class, or political orientation are problematic and can reinforce harmful misconceptions about rural people and places. One particularly pernicious form this can take is the conflation of rurality with whiteness."[6] When rurality is conflated with whiteness, schools may dismiss the need for staff training on cultural relevance, support for English language learners, and commitment to racial equity.

While inadequate policy may be the primary effect of underdefined ideas of rurality, it is certainly not the only consequence. When policymakers, researchers, teachers, or school leaders equate rurality with whiteness, they assume that all students in a rural space will behave in a way that meets the cultural expectations of White Americans. Ignoring the diverse racial identities of rural students is harmful to all students[7]. Gillon describes this well when stating that "this form of colorblindness…is especially harmful because it frames the analogy of rurality = white as Truth, thus disallowing for the possibility of people of color in rural spaces. For students of color, this harm comes in the form of erasure. For white students, this harm manifests in assumed racial comfort."[8] To avoid the erasure of students of color, it is important that anyone engaging in rural education work seeks to address misconceptions about the presence of students of color in rural schools.

Rural schools have always had students who identify as Black, Indigenous, and people of color (BIPOC), but these demographics continue to grow and change. There has been an overall increase in diversity among rural communities nationwide. In 2010 about **21% of rural residents identified as White and non-Hispanic, which increased to 25% in** 2020. However, the changes vary by region. For example, the rural student population in the Northeast and Midwest doubled between 2000 and 2015, while that in the South and the West increased by around 30% [9]. The most predominantly White rural spaces continue to have disproportionately White population growth, while the most diverse rural communities experience increases in their BIPOC population that are faster than those in less diverse rural spaces[10]. This trend is likely to reproduce segregation and inequities in rural schools and communities, which will be relevant to various education policies such as English language learning programs and school finance structures.

Research and policy have frequently failed to address the circumstances of students of color according to context and region. Different rural demographics have distinct challenges, strengths, and needs. For example, in the rural South, there is a history of enslavement, segregation, structures of desegregation, and discrimination that are all tied to high poverty rates, which are accompanied by various challenges[11]. These challenges include a lack of engaging and challenging coursework due to inadequate funding and the absence of Black teachers in rural schools, which has persisted since the removal of many Black teachers following the Brown v. Board ruling[12]. Across the United States, and particularly in the Southwest, rural Latine[13] experience language surveillance and policing, unwelcoming school climates, and barriers to information about postsecondary pathways[14]. Rural schools are rarely able to provide sufficient resources to students identified as English learners[15]. Indigenous students continue to face government policies that apply pressure for assimilation and may contradict the sovereignty of tribal nations, which must include self-education[16]. Rural students with racial identities mentioned above and those not mentioned have overlapping experiences and needs, but they also navigate unique realities.

It is important for policymakers and researchers in rural education to be aware of how demographics are shifting regionally and how they will shift over time to address the questions most relevant to rural students[17]. Rural students are deserving of a high-quality education that is relevant to their identities, language, and culture. When rurality is assumed to consist of only White communities, these crucial components of education cannot be sufficiently provided to the racially diverse body of students who attend rural schools. Understanding rural schools and communities can improve access to affirming, inclusive, and relevant education for all students in attendance.

Key Finding #2: *Rural schools are rarely prioritized during education policy formation.*

Education policy is inherently tied to geography because of factors such as property tax-based funding systems, which can create significant disparities between schools in wealthier and poorer areas[18]. Geographic location also shapes access to resources, teacher quality, and educational opportunities, with rural and urban schools often facing distinct challenges from their suburban counterparts[19]. These

structural inequalities highlight the critical role of place in shaping educational outcomes and policy impacts. Williams and Tieken discuss how geography and place impact education in many ways such as school assignments based on student residence, funding systems reliant on property taxes, and "college deserts," which impact student pathways. They emphasize the exclusion of rural communities from policy conversations, stating "Perhaps the most important factor shaping rural schooling that policymakers overlook is the geographic unevenness of resources."[20] When this uneven distribution of resources is ignored, rural schools, students, and communities are left without equitable access to opportunities, perpetuating educational and economic disparities.

Rural districts and schools often struggle to implement federal policy. Rural schools frequently lack the resources, staffing, and infrastructure to meet federal policy requirements, placing them at a disadvantage compared to their urban and suburban counterparts[21]. This can be seen retrospectively through NCLB policy and currently through charter school policies. There aren't enough oversubscribed charter schools in rural communities to measure the impact they have on test scores, and so although some research shows urban settings benefit from charter schools[22] this hasn't necessarily been the case for rural communities. As increasing amounts of resources are invested into school choice programs like charter schools and vouchers, the needs of rural students are likely to be unaddressed. For example, authors of a recent study report that reading and math test scores did not improve in rural Alabama[23]. While language test scores did improve, the authors state that "[the results] suggest that NCLB [No Child Left Behind] failed in its major objective, which was to enhance students' proficiency in math and reading"[24]. Although there is limited research on NCLB outcomes for rural students, teachers and administrators in rural areas of Maine and Missouri reported decreased motivation from students in the wake of its implementation[25]. To address these issues, future policies must consider the unique circumstances of rural schools and ensure they are equipped to meet accountability standards without undue hardship.

For example, the lack of rural perspectives in the development and implementation of NCLB was evident at both the national and state levels. One prominent example is the "highly qualified teacher" requirement, which failed to account for the unique challenges of staffing rural schools and what "highly qualified" might mean in these contexts. The mandates were developed with little to no consideration for the needs of rural schools, and when concerns were raised, the response was a blanket attempt to exempt rural areas from the requirements rather than adapt them to fit rural realities[26]. This approach highlighted a broader disconnect between policymakers and rural educators, as the solutions often ignored the structural inequities facing rural schools. Eppley emphasizes the importance of engaging rural educators in defining what makes teachers effective in their communities and calls on policymakers to incorporate these insights into decision-making. Without such input, policies such as NCLB risk perpetuating systemic inequities rather than addressing them.

Funding structures often leave rural schools with inadequate financing to meet the needs of their students. States in close geographic proximity can exhibit starkly different approaches to funding education. For instance, Rhode Island, Connecticut, and New Hampshire, which follow Nebraska as the states with the lowest state-to-local funding ratios for rural districts, each provide less than 50 cents in state funding to rural districts for every dollar raised locally[27]. In contrast, rural districts in nearby Vermont receive significantly more support, with $15.30 in state funding per local dollar—the highest ratio nationwide. Notably, over the past four years, the reliance on state funding for rural districts has decreased in 27 states, leading to greater dependence on inequitable local funding sources[28].

One of the unique challenges that rural districts face is the high cost of student transportation. According to the Why Rural Matters report, rural districts spend an average of $11.09 on instruction for every dollar spent on transportation, compared to $14.93 in non-rural districts[29]. This disparity reflects the additional expenses of transporting students across large, sparsely populated areas, which imposes significant financial burdens on rural schools. As a result, funds that could otherwise support instructional programs, extracurricular activities, or updated resources are diverted to cover transportation needs. This strain not only limits educational opportunities for rural students but also exacerbates the inequities between rural and non-rural school districts. Addressing these challenges requires policymakers to consider more

equitable funding formulas that account for the geographic and logistical hurdles unique to rural education.

Key Finding #3: *Rural school closures and consolidations negatively impact rural communities, disrupting both social cohesion and economic stability.*

The number of K-12 schools in the United States has significantly decreased over time, with there being less than half the number of operating schools than in 1930[30]. School closures are often preceded by either a call for greater efficiency, concerns about low academic performance, or an aspiration for more equitable access for students. The efficiency concerns often lead to state policies that incentivize larger schools, placing pressure on local school leaders to close schools to receive financial incentives such as bonuses. When parents and community members oppose school closure, this choice can divide communities as parents develop frustration or animosity toward school leaders[31].

In rural contexts, closure frequently results from low student enrollment. District leaders often close schools and consolidate them to preserve resources and lower costs. Closures offer promises of reduced costs through economies of scale, namely, the larger the school, the less it will cost to educate each student. However, these district consolidations do not always save costs as intended. Furthermore, there are cases in which these districts face added costs and insufficient funds to effectively educate the increased population of students they now serve[32]. Closures may also offer promises of integrated schools where Black and White students have equal access to resources[33]. This certainly needs to be a crucial focal point for everyone doing work in or near the education sector, and school closures can certainly in some cases move Black and White students into the same buildings. With many schools continuing to have segregated populations of Black and White students, this may seem like reason enough, especially because school desegregation after Brown v. Board led to improvements in a variety of measurable outcomes. However, even efforts to integrate Black students and White students have produced a system where predominantly Black schools have fewer resources than predominantly White schools[34]. Racial desegregation is not synonymous with racial equity, and these transitions also placed a burden of segregation on Black families and resulted in the loss of many Black teachers[35]. These unanticipated consequences that have arisen in the past must be considered whenever school closure or district consolidation is explored.

Aside from the risk of benefits being overpromised, school leaders and policymakers commonly overlook what is lost when a school closes. Schools in rural spaces are often central to the community in a way that may be difficult to grasp for those who have not seen it firsthand. The school building itself serves as a space for school events as well as benefit dinners and family reunions[36]. Entire towns rally around high school sports teams, students ask about the health of their classmates' grandparents whom they attend church with, and teachers have dinner with the families of their students[37]. These connections in rural communities produce what Tara Yosso describes as “community cultural wealth”[38]. Community cultural wealth consists of skills that are not measured by test scores but still play an integral role in the success of students from many communities. When communities experience disruption from a school closure, relationships change, and the wealth created by those relationships is at risk of being lost.

In addition to the loss of community closeness, school closure can negatively impact rural economies. Schools are often the largest employer in a rural community[39]. School closures frequently result in longer bus rides, which limit student after-school activities[40]. Additionally, they create businesses for the providers of school lunches, the mechanics who work on school buses, and many other businesses near the school. In small towns, local businesses will fail following the loss of a school[41]. When the economy of a rural community is already in a fragile state, a school closure can shift the landscape so much that the existing community becomes obsolete[42].

In addition to some rural school closures, many rural schools in county districts consolidate to make one larger school. School consolidations are often driven by a loss in population, which equates to a loss in businesses. Moreover, consolidated schools are often a result of diminished fiscal resources. Regardless, when school districts consolidate, a community loses its hub. As rural schools are often the center of rural communities, rural school consolidation, similar to rural school closures, negatively impacts rural

communities. However, some research suggests that larger, comprehensive schools can offer a more diverse and rigorous curriculum for students. This, in the end, is a benefit that district leaders consider heavily as they weigh the gains and losses of consolidated schools.

Key Finding #4: *Rural students have limited school choice options.*

Although school choice is often considered an urban reform, there are types of school choice and school privatization that look different in rural than in urban or suburban contexts. While families in cities may have access to brick-and-mortar charter schools or private school voucher programs, rural families typically choose from options such as virtual charter schools, homeschooling, or interdistrict choice programs[43]. These alternatives are often seen as ways to expand educational opportunities in geographically isolated regions, yet they come with unique challenges. To fully understand the implications of school choice for rural communities, it is essential to examine these options through the lens of rural-specific barriers and community dynamics.

Virtual charter schools have emerged as a potentially transformative option for rural students. They offer flexibility, the ability to attend school from home, and access to courses that might not otherwise be available locally. For families in isolated areas, virtual charter schools can appear to be an attractive alternative to long bus rides or under-resourced local schools. However, rural students often face significant barriers to benefiting from virtual charter schools. A lack of reliable broadband internet is one of the most pressing challenges, especially in remote areas where high-speed internet remains inaccessible or unaffordable[44]. Even when technology is available, concerns about the quality of virtual instruction persist[45]. Research has shown that virtual charter schools often lag traditional schools in key academic metrics, raising questions about whether they are an equitable solution for rural students[46].

Homeschooling is another popular option for rural families seeking alternatives to traditional public schools. Many parents turn to homeschooling to address dissatisfaction with local schools or to create a more tailored educational experience for their children. Families choose to homeschool for a variety of reasons including religious motives or to avoid marginalization in school systems. Some Black families have turned to homeschooling to teach Black history that is lacking in local schools[47]. While homeschooling offers flexibility, it also presents challenges, and the unusually high poverty rates in rural areas may make a comprehensive curriculum or extracurricular opportunities accessible only to more affluent families.

Interdistrict choice allows students to attend schools outside of their home district, which can be particularly appealing for rural families living near better-resourced districts. However, this option comes with its own set of hurdles. Transportation is often a major barrier, as long commutes can be impractical or prohibitively expensive. Additionally, funding structures for interdistrict choice can create tension between neighboring districts, with rural communities sometimes losing resources to larger, better-funded districts. Students in Michigan were found to be more likely to use interdistrict choice if their assigned school has been closed and their new school is a greater distance from their home[48]. In Michigan, rural students are more likely to attend nonresident schools than their urban or suburban peers, with 15% of Michigan rural students utilizing interdistrict choice [49].

Although brick-and-mortar charter schools are less prevalent in rural districts than in urban areas, they do exist and warrant careful consideration from policymakers. In some cases, rural charter schools emerge because of corporate influence, with businesses establishing schools to align with their workforce development needs[50]. In other instances, rural charter schools are created by communities attempting to replace public schools that were closed due to consolidation or declining enrollment and, unlike urban areas where large charter management organizations often dominate, most rural charter schools are operated by independent, locally governed groups[51]. Some charter schools have been used in rural areas to preserve Native language and culture[52]. While the establishment of charter schools in rural areas can be seen as a form of resistance to school closures, existing charter school laws are not typically designed to fully replicate the community-oriented role of traditional public schools. Policymakers should recognize

and support the efforts of rural communities to sustain and rebuild local schools, given their significant cultural, educational, and social value for rural families. Prioritizing policies that empower rural communities to preserve and enhance local education systems is critical to addressing the unique needs of these areas.

The expansion of school choice in rural areas has ripple effects that extend beyond individual families. One of the most significant impacts is the disruption of community cohesion[53]. In rural areas, schools are often more than just educational institutions—they serve as social and cultural hubs for the entire community. When students leave local schools for virtual charter programs, homeschooling, or other districts, this weakens the role of the school as a central gathering place. This disruption mirrors some of the negative consequences of school closures, which many rural communities have already experienced due to consolidation efforts. Losing students to school choice options can erode community identity, reduce local investment in education, and make it harder for rural schools to maintain programs and staff. Over time, these changes can destabilize rural communities and make them less attractive places to live and work.

Key Finding #5: *Academic outcomes for rural students are significantly shaped by geography and demography.*

Educational outcomes for rural students have patterns distinct from those in non-rural settings. An important contextual detail is that rural students experience higher poverty rates than urban or suburban students, and rural students are also more likely to experience poverty that spans generations.[54] Students whose families are living on incomes under federal or state poverty lines have lower academic outcomes on average[55]. Alongside all efforts to improve education, it is necessary to consider how to support students and families who face unique challenges because of socioeconomic status.

Despite the higher prevalence of poverty in rural areas and under-resourced schools, rural students attain higher average achievement, as measured by the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), than both town and city students, although rural student scores are lower than suburban student scores[56]. The graduation rate for rural students is higher than any other subset of students at 89%. Urban students graduate at a rate of 79.5%, and suburban students graduate at a rate of 87%[57]. All these results are remarkable when considering that rural schools usually have less access to resources because of low school funding. Williams and Tieken note that this includes "less access to vast curricula, specialized instructional spaces like science labs, the Internet, or local museums and libraries."[58] While the causal relationships at work in these results are complex, we suggest that the strong communities found in and built by rural schools are critical to these successes in student achievement despite poverty prevalence.

Unfortunately, gaps in achievement within rural spaces are more significant than those between rural and non-rural students. Rural students of color graduate at rates around 77%, and rural students in poverty graduate at rates near 80%, both of which are much lower than graduation rates for other rural students[59]. This means that rural students of color are graduating at lower rates than that of the average urban student, which as mentioned above is 79.5%. It also means that the high graduation rates in rural areas listed in the previous paragraph are primarily driven by White students. This is also evident in student achievement gaps between rural regions. Achievement in rural schools in the Midwest and Northeast is significantly higher than in the South or the West[60]. Communities in the Midwest and Northeast have significantly higher proportions of White individuals than the rest of the nation.[61] Communities of color in the South and West have a long history with systems of oppression such as Jim Crow laws targeting Black individuals in the South and forced relocation of Native and Indigenous people in the West. These histories continue to shape the institutions that Black and Indigenous students attend in rural spaces, and in many cases these students continue to be denied resources.

Rural students are significantly less likely to attend and graduate from college with a bachelor's or graduate degree than their urban and suburban peers[62]. While much of the literature on education

emphasizes college readiness as a critical pathway, it should not be considered the superior or sole pathway for all students[63]. Many rural students face unique barriers to college attendance, including feeling academically unprepared, financial concerns, and challenges navigating the application and admissions process[64]. These factors collectively shape their postsecondary decisions and contribute to lower enrollment and completion rates. Addressing these obstacles requires a broader understanding of rural students' aspirations and the structural barriers that influence their educational trajectories[65].

While geographic isolation and distance from 4-year institutions are often cited as challenges for rural students, some research suggests that these issues may not be the primary concern for high-school or community-college students[66]. Students cite affordability and readiness as their primary concerns. A large study of Texas found that, on average, students who lived 30 minutes or more away from a public 2-year community college were less likely to attend a community college. However, students who were not classified as economically disadvantaged were more likely to attend a 4-year college in place of a 2-year college. This varied by race as well, with White and Asian students being more likely to attend a 4-year college than those who lived near a 2-year community college. Latine students who didn't live near a 2-year community college were less likely to attend either 4- or 2-year institutions than those who lived near a 2-year community college, and Black students who did not live near a 2-year college were somewhat more likely to attend a 4-year college than those who did live near a 2-year college. .

Williams writes that additional challenges for rural students as they navigate the transition to postsecondary education "include under resourced school offerings (such as higher-level and AP courses or world language classes), lack of access to public resources (e.g., museums, libraries, transportation), and limited exposure to career options beyond those locally evident.[67]" This highlights the need for policies and programs that not only support academic preparation but also reduce financial barriers and provide guidance for navigating college admissions. Furthermore, it is important to expand postsecondary opportunities that align with the needs and aspirations of rural students, whether through community colleges, vocational training, or local career pathways[68]. Recognizing and addressing these multifaceted challenges can help ensure that rural students have equitable access to meaningful educational and career opportunities.

Key Finding #6: *Rural communities face challenges in recruiting and retaining a diverse teacher workforce.*

A large body of research demonstrates the importance of teachers for student well-being, academic achievement, college enrollment, lifetime earnings, and other important factors rural schools, like all schools, are dependent on strong teachers to provide high-quality education to their students. There are unique challenges for teacher labor markets in rural spaces because of high poverty rates, which lead to lower fiscal capacity[69]. These challenges vary across rural contexts, making the challenges to rural teacher recruitment and retention unique to each rural community.

Most schools rely on local property taxes for funding, placing rural schools at a financial disadvantage. This makes it challenging for rural schools to offer suitable salaries, buildings, or working conditions. Additionally, the remote areas where many rural schools are built offer fewer amenities that might attract teachers to an area.

A particularly poignant challenge for rural school leaders is hiring teachers that are similarly diverse to the students who attend the school. As student bodies in rural communities continue to diversify, the teacher labor force in rural spaces has remained predominantly white. Scholars have found that 18–37% of rural schools are "majority-minority" schools, meaning that the majority of students are Black, Latine, Indigenous, or Asian[70]. Students benefit from having teachers of their own race or ethnicity. When we discuss the teacher workforce, it is important to consider not only how many teachers are in a school but who those teachers are.

As noted above, the teacher labor market varies across different rural spaces. Teachers in rural schools generally have lower turnover than teachers in urban or suburban areas[71]. However, turnover varies

across subgroups. For example, Black teachers were found to be less likely to turn over than White teachers in all areas except rural schools. Teachers who feel connected to their schools and communities are those who stay in rural schools. This aligns with the work of many authors that describes a unique closeness in rural communities[72]. Rural school leaders can seek to foster these relationships between staff and within the community to support teacher retention[73].

Building strong relationships among staff is one of several strategies that can help reduce teacher attrition in rural schools[74]. Teachers also value instructional support from administrators, which can play a key role in retention.[75]. A study in Georgia found that higher salaries and a more positive school climate were associated with lower teacher turnover across various subgroups[76]. Research in other states also points to low salaries as a factor contributing to teacher turnover in rural schools[77]. Additional factors influencing retention include school and community relationships, union membership, and administrative support.

Conclusion

Rural schools and communities are vibrant and resilient, fostering close, meaningful relationships among their members. However, policies and curricula often fail to reflect the diversity of rural populations, particularly students of color, operating under the misconception that rural spaces are exclusively White. These schools face significant challenges, from the devastating impacts of school closures and consolidations on community cohesion to the struggle to recruit and retain teachers due to low local college completion rates and difficulties attracting educators from outside the area. Despite these obstacles, rural schools boast uniquely high graduation rates, although their college attendance remains notably low, warranting further research and targeted interventions. This chapter has emphasized the importance of recognizing and addressing the distinct needs of rural schools and calls for greater attention, support, and respect for rural education.

As we consider how best to support rural schools, several critical policy questions emerge. These questions invite researchers, policymakers, and practitioners to reflect deeply on the specific needs of rural communities and the opportunities to create equitable educational policies. For example:

- How does the rural context I am working in differ from other rural spaces in the United States?
- What makes this rural space different from urban and suburban areas nearby?
- How have the needs of these rural schools been neglected? Knowing this, what resources or policies can better support the students, staff, and community?
- Has this area been impacted by school closure or consolidation? If so, how did this change the community? If not, how can we support the existing community schools?
- What opportunities are students being prepared for and exposed to? Are students in agreement with these educational opportunities?
- What do we know about the population and needs of diverse students in this rural community?

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