

# Vouchers Don't Work in Rural Areas

Vouchers don't provide an actual choice for students living in rural areas who have little, if any, access to private schools. If students are able to use a voucher, they are generally required to endure long, costly commutes. And, vouchers are especially harmful to the public school systems serving large rural areas because the schools are forced to spread the same costs for facilities, transportation, administration, and instruction over a smaller revenue stream.

## RURAL SCHOOLS SERVE A LARGE NUMBER OF STUDENTS

More than one in four schools in America are rural and nearly one in five students attend a rural school, which is approximately 8.9 million students. Of those rural students, nearly half of rural students are from low-income families, more than one in four is a child of color, and one in nine has changed residence in the previous year. In 23 states, a majority of rural students are from low-income families. On average, 3.5% of rural students are considered English language learners, but many districts have much higher percentages.

Roughly half the nation's rural students live in just 10 states and at least half of public schools are rural in 13 states. At least one third of all schools are rural in 12 other states.

Growth in rural school enrollment continues to outpace non-rural enrollment growth in the United States, and rural schools continue to grow more complex<sup>1</sup> with increasing rates of poverty, diversity, and students with special needs. Public schools, which are bound by federal civil rights laws, are the most well-equipped to serve this diversity of students.

## BARRIERS TO VOUCHER PROGRAMS IN RURAL AREAS

Vouchers don't provide an actual choice for students living in rural areas. Unlike the typical suburban middle class or urban family, rural families have few access points to schools other than their in-district local public schools. For example, while 92% of urban families have access to one or more private schools within five miles, only 34% of rural families have access to such a choice.<sup>2</sup>

Transportation is challenging. In order to use a voucher, students would often be required to endure long, costly commutes. Many private schools do not provide transportation to

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<sup>1</sup> Daniel Showalter, et al., Rural Sch. & Cmty. Trust, [Why Rural Matters 2015-2016: Understanding the Changing Landscape](#) (June 2017).

<sup>2</sup> Kristin Blagg & Matthew M. Chingos, Brookings Inst., [Who Could Benefit from School Choice? Mapping Access to Public and Private Schools](#) (Mar. 2017).



The **National Coalition for Public Education** comprises more than 50 education, civic, civil rights, and religious organizations devoted to the support of public schools. Founded in 1978, NCPE opposes the funnelling of public money to private and religious schools through such mechanisms as tuition tax credits and vouchers.

students.<sup>3</sup> Students' access to transportation can impact attendance rates and tardiness, which also have an effect on student achievement.<sup>4</sup> And there are other costs that come with longer commutes: when students spend more time on a bus, that means less time to participate in extracurricular activities or help out at home, as well as increased safety issues for small children leaving for school and arriving home in the dark.

Another reason vouchers would either harm or simply be inapplicable to rural communities is that rural and small-town public schools do more than just educate children. They serve a critical social and economic function as the primary employer in small communities; they may offer health care or medical referrals for children and adults, and they frequently offer food pantries, breakfast and lunch programs—and are the location of many other community activities. A decision by a rural family to withdraw a child from the public school and enroll them elsewhere doesn't mean that the family disconnects from the school system—it simply means that the school has fewer resources to provide the non-instructional benefits required in its community..

And with lower average enrollments, rural schools encounter diseconomies of scale<sup>5</sup> as they attempt to spread the cost of facilities, transportation, administration, and instruction over a smaller revenue stream. If enrollment for rural schools declines further, it will only increase the challenge of providing federally mandated programs for students in special education, English-language instruction, and ensuring students have access to school personnel and curriculum.

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<sup>3</sup> A 2020 survey of parents with school-age children found that “[m]ore than half of private schools...may not have any provided transportation. Andrew D. Catt, EdChoice, [Commuting Concerns: A Survey of U.S. Parents on K–12 Transportation Before and During the COVID-19 Pandemic](#) (Nov. 2020).

<sup>4</sup> *Id.*

<sup>5</sup> Jesse Levin, et al., Nat'l Ctr. for Educ. Evaluation & Reg'l Assistance, [Do Schools in Rural and Nonrural Districts Allocate Resources Differently? An Analysis of Spending and Staffing Patterns in the West Region States](#) (Jan. 2011).