The Lay of the Land: A Closer Look at Rural Schools in Tennessee

Geography plays an essential role in a student’s academic outcomes and is often overlooked in the quest for school reform and improvement. School administrators may experience difficulty in hiring teachers or in obtaining funding for social-emotional learning, but the solutions must be different for a school serving students in Memphis or another in Kingston. If Tennessee is going to ensure all students achieve, we must examine how a school’s urbanicity or rurality affects resources, educators and student success.\(^1\)

When it comes to education, rural matters. About one in three Tennesseans attends a rural school, making up nearly 300,000 students.\(^2\) Rural schools are spread throughout Tennessee’s 95 counties, in areas with varied levels of poverty and economic opportunity. On average, rural schools serve smaller numbers of students, yet these smaller school sizes can create distinct challenges for schools in their efforts to obtain adequate resources or for serving specific student groups.\(^3\) As with urban education, rural school systems are subject to the strengths and challenges of their communities, including issues of public health and geographic isolation. To illustrate, rural communities have seen the second-largest number of hospital closures in the nation.\(^4\) And beyond diminishing access to health care services, almost one-quarter of rural families lack high-speed internet access.\(^5\)

How Does Rural Matter for Education?

1. **RURAL MATTERS FOR ENGLISH LEARNER INSTRUCTION & STUDENT SUPPORT**

Tennessee’s rural demographic shifts increase the need for rural school districts to adequately serve English Learner and migrant students. Even as these communities experience dire economic circumstances, they provide meaningful employment to migrant families and other non-English-language speakers. Often, these population shifts bring new English Learners to rural schools, but their numbers remain small. As a result, they do not bring additional state funding or resources to the schools, and districts struggle to provide social-emotional supports or translated information for parents.

2. **RURAL MATTERS FOR EARLY POSTSECONDARY OPPORTUNITIES IN HIGH SCHOOL**

Access to early postsecondary opportunities like AP or dual enrollment courses is complicated, with many factors playing into adding new courses. Experienced and trained instructors must be hired, and often must receive additional certification. If schools are short-staffed, an EPSO addition may mean an instructor has to teach both regular content and EPSO coursework. This is particularly true with AP courses, which require fees and unique teacher training. Dual enrollment courses are also difficult to offer if a postsecondary institution is far from the school’s community.

3. **RURAL MATTERS FOR GREAT EDUCATORS**

Finally, rural matters when it comes to recruiting and support strong educators. In our analysis, we find that rural schools often face specific barriers to recruiting and supporting great educators to fill needed staff positions. Important factors, such as pay or geographic isolation, serve to disadvantage rural schools in staffing, and also school climate and adequate school capacity in best serving students.


PAVING THE ROAD TO EQUITY IN RURAL TENNESSEE

Countless rural schools in Tennessee are defying the odds, and many of these school districts provide hope and pathways for students, countering the narrative of limited prosperity and opportunity in their communities. But there is work still to do, and the road between rural, suburban and urban schooling is not yet fully paved. Every data point in our Lay of the Land report represents actual students and teachers with their own stories, struggles and dreams. Tennessee has demonstrated the collective will and ability to take on ambitious reforms that have redefined who we are as a state. We must do so again on behalf of the rural students across our state.

RECOMMENDATIONS

SCHOOL FUNDING

• Revise the Basic Education Program to address specific student and school need.
• Consider Student-Based Budgeting at the district level.

ENGLISH LEARNERS

• Consider requiring Educator Preparation Programs that receive public dollars to mandate coursework that focuses on English Learners.
• Provide an English Learner instructional specialist in each of the regional CORE offices of the Tennessee Department of Education.

EARLY POSTSECONDARY OPPORTUNITIES

• Invest in (1) focused regionalized councils and (2) local higher education centers to promote postsecondary pathways.
• Set districtwide goals for enrolling students in a variety Early Postsecondary Opportunities courses.

STRONG EDUCATORS

• Provide financial incentives to teacher candidates to teach in schools experiencing geographic and/or content-specific teacher shortages.
• Develop partnerships with state leaders, foundations, local educator preparation programs and other stakeholders to provide additional incentives and adequate preparation for teacher candidates needed in rural districts.

About the Tennessee Educational Equity Coalition

The Tennessee Educational Equity Coalition is a group of diverse civil rights and education advocacy organizations that have built a shared policy agenda to address chronic disparities in achievement and opportunities for students of color in the state of Tennessee.

The Coalition was formed in the spring of 2016 and is convened by Conexión Américas, a long-standing Nashville-based nonprofit serving the Latino community.