

Executive Summary



Why Rural Matters 2025, the 11th in the series, is being released during a period of significant change across the country and the world. Many of these shifts influence rural education in the United States. The 2025 report highlights key trends and conditions as a foundation for discussion and action on issues affecting nearly 10 million students across the United States.

As *Why Rural Matters 2025* is released, the United States federal government and some state governments are engaged in intentional global and domestic disruption on a scale unimaginable to many even a year ago. It is not the place of this report or its authors to engage in partisan or other forms of judgment about the ethics of this direction. The goal of *Why Rural Matters* reports has always been to present publicly available data regarding the condition of rural education in the United States in service to the broader goal of our civic responsibility to engage in informed and civil discussion about a common commitment to the education of all our students.

The questions arising from the extent and speed of changes at the federal level, including the mass dismissal of United States Department of Education staff and the pausing or significant reduction of funding previously designated for research, reporting, infrastructure, and other funding streams have already had significant impacts felt well beyond state and federal capitals, into our classrooms. Some things previously not questioned, like local control or food aid, now seem open to debate even as new policies roll out at a pace that precludes debate. *The Why Rural Matters 2025* report uses data that were downloaded mere weeks before the National Center for Education Statistics dismissed nearly all its staff. The future is also uncertain given that, at the time of this writing, the Institute of Education Sciences has been directed to stop reporting and housing new data in its data repositories.

What has not changed in the two decades of *Why Rural Matters* reporting is our shared belief that rural schools and communities are important to the future of the United States and that we have an ethical and pragmatic collective duty to provide rural students with a quality education without which a democratic society is impossible.

Why Rural Matters 2025 shows that roughly 7.8 million public school students are enrolled in rural school districts—more than one in every six students across the United States.

Challenges experienced by rural students and their communities are persistent and significant: 1 in 7 rural students experiences poverty, 1 in 15 is uninsured, 1 in 10 doesn't graduate from high school, and 1 in 13 has changed residence in the previous 12 months.

Rural communities continue to struggle with challenges related to economic outcomes, unemployment, and access to school-based mental health services. The well-being of families, schools, and communities is deeply interconnected, and supporting one means supporting all. The choice of our 25 indicators and five gauges is far from an exhaustive list of important measures offering insight into rural students' readiness for learning or the school's ability to provide services. But each of these measures has been chosen to reveal spaces for action on the part of policymakers, families, caregivers, and concerned citizens.

Although 7.8 million students attend a rural district, many children attend rural schools in districts that are not designated rural by the United States Census Bureau. A more representative measure is the 9.7 million students who attend rural schools in the United States, which is more than one in five students in the United States. This means that more students in the United States attend rural schools than attend the 100 largest U.S. school districts combined.



When not otherwise specified, “rural student” in this report refers to a student attending a school located in a rural district.

Data used in *Why Rural Matters 2025* come from public sources: the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), the United States Department of Education, the U.S. Health Resources & Services Administration, and the U.S. Census Bureau. For this report, rural is defined using the three rural locale codes as determined by the U.S. Census Bureau. (See the main report for more details and the topical report on changes to this definition in particular.) There remains no single best definition of rural, but the NCES codes are widely used in public data reporting and funding criteria and therefore represent the most practical means of operationalizing “rural.”

New to this report is the inclusion of Bureau of Indian Education (BIE) schools. Alex Red Corn’s topical essay included in *Why Rural Matters 2025* gives an important analysis of why this group of schools is an important part of rural education in the United States, even though BIE schools educate students from multiple

tribes and nations with distinct histories and cultures. The report attempts to distinguish between “states” proper and BIE schools specifically in analyses.

Rural schools and students often seem invisible because many policymakers lack personal experience in rural communities and/or have not yet developed a full understanding of the spatial inequities experienced by rural communities in the United States. The majority of rural students attend a school district in a state where they make up less than 25% of total public-school enrollment. About one in five rural students lives in a state in which rural students constitute less than 15% of overall enrollment.

Roughly half of all rural students in the United States attend school in just 11 states, including some of the most populous, metropolitan states. Texas has the largest number of rural students, followed by North Carolina, Georgia, Ohio, Pennsylvania, New York, Alabama, Indiana, Virginia, and Tennessee. Texas itself has more rural students than the 16 states with the fewest rural students combined and more than its four bordering states combined.



Many rural school districts across the United States are small: median enrollment for U.S. rural districts is 526 students, and at least half of rural districts in 22 states enroll fewer than 526 students. In Montana and BIE schools, at least 90% of rural districts are designated as small. West Virginia, where most public schools are rural, has no small rural school districts because all 55 districts are countywide systems. Florida, Maryland, and Delaware also have no small rural school districts.

Nine out of 10 BIE schools are rural. In Montana, Vermont, and South Dakota, at least 75% of schools are rural. In 11 states, at least half of public schools are rural: Maine, North Dakota, Alaska, Mississippi, Oklahoma, West Virginia, New Hampshire, Nebraska, Iowa, Wyoming, Arkansas, and Kansas. In 13 other states, at least one-third of all schools are rural.



More Key Findings from this Edition of Why Rural Matters



CHANGES IN HOW RURAL IS DEFINED MEAN THAT STATES WILL HAVE TO ADJUST POLICY AND RESOURCES

Of the 13,401 school districts in the United States, 337 districts (roughly 2.5%) previously classified as rural were reclassified as another locale. Similarly, 943 districts (7%) previously not classified as rural are now rural. These reclassifications led to the increase of over half a million students in rural districts. The topical essay on the change to locale code definitions (page 57) analyzes changes in schools' classifications, what we can say about the 1.6 million students newly classified as rural, and how this may connect to shifts seen in the indicators and gauges. It further lists the states seeing the greatest impacts of these changes.



DATA FROM BUREAU OF INDIAN EDUCATION SCHOOLS DEMONSTRATE DIRE NEEDS AND CHALLENGES

BIE funds 183 schools on 64 reservations in 23 states from the Miccosukee Indian School in Miami, Florida to the Quileute Tribal School in Seattle, WA. Of these 183 schools, 156 are rural. BIE schools are ranked as the number 1 or 2 concern in 9 of the 13 indicators (69%) for which data exist. So, while BIE is not given an overall priority ranking, because of data availability, the need for intervention is urgent. Around 90% of its rural districts are small, with two-thirds of its rural students attending remote rural districts. Poverty and educational outcomes are critical, with just under two-thirds of BIE students graduating from high school. Just under 15% of BIE students are unhoused compared to the United States rural average of an already concerning 2.7%. Guest author, Alex Red Corn, provides more in-depth analysis in his topical essay.



THE RURAL POPULATION ACROSS THE UNITED STATES IS RACIALLY, ETHNICALLY, AND LINGUISTICALLY DIVERSE

With a U.S. rural diversity index of 34.3%, there is a better than one-in-three chance that two students randomly chosen from the same rural school have different identified races or ethnicities. Further, one in 20 rural students across the U.S. is a multilingual learner. These figures directly confront the prevailing stereotype of the rural United States as white and English-speaking.



STUDENTS IN RURAL AREAS HAVE FEWER HEALTH CARE SUPPORTS THAN THEIR PEERS ACROSS THE UNITED STATES

Access to health care is strongly linked to improved educational outcomes, yet *Why Rural Matters 2025* highlights persistent challenges in accessing services for rural students. School counselors and school psychologists are an important support for students in any locale, yet the ratio of psychologists/school counselors in rural schools is 297:1 as compared to 277:1 in non-rural districts. Additionally, a greater share of rural students is uninsured (6.4%) compared to the U.S. average (5.7%), and the most recent data (2021) show a ratio of 322 rural students per primary care clinician.



LOWER MOBILITY AND HOUSING INSECURITY REFLECT RURAL COMMUNITY RESILIENCE

A defining characteristic of many rural communities is their strong commitment to supporting children and families, even when resources are limited. This is evidenced in two related indicators in *Why Rural Matters 2025*. First, rural areas show greater residential stability, with 7.8% of rural households moving in the past year compared to 9.7% across the United States. Second, the percentage of unhoused students in rural areas is slightly lower (2.7%) than the U.S. average (3.0%). These patterns suggest that rural communities often rely on strong local networks and wraparound supports to assist families and children experiencing adverse situations. While these lower numbers reflect the strength and resilience of rural communities, they remain a significant concern at any level, as both housing instability and high mobility are strongly correlated with negative outcomes in student health, academic achievement, and long-term well-being.



NAEP SCORES HIGHLIGHT RURAL SUCCESSES AMIDST CONTINUING CHALLENGES

Did the COVID-19 pandemic impact educational outcomes? The 2024 NAEP scores used in *Why Rural Matters 2025* provide data on reading and math learning. In Grade 4, rural students performed 3.4 points lower on reading than they did in 2019 even though there was a 0.3 point increase in math. However, non-rural Grade 4 students fared even worse, with an average decrease of 5.2 points in reading and a decrease of 2.7 points in math. At the Grade 8 level, it is worth noting that rural students outscored their non-rural peers in both reading (0.8 points) and math (1.5 points).

Key Changes in this Edition of Why Rural Matters

In *Why Rural Matters 2025*, we maintain many of our yearly updates from the most recent edition of *Why Rural Matters* (such as the diversity index, adjusting teacher salaries to reflect local wages, and our two-fold method to measure poverty). However, this version also includes some changes in indicators. We added percent rural students in a remote rural district to the *Rural Education Footprint* gauge (formerly the *Rural Education Importance* gauge). In the *Student and Family Characteristics* gauge (formerly the *Student and Family Diversity* gauge), we continue the report's long history of reporting on the percentage of rural multilingual learners. We replaced the previous special education proportional enrollment indicator with the percentage of instructional salary spent on special education teachers. The *Educational Outcomes* gauge has been significantly revised to include a new indicator tracking changes in Grade 4 reading and math

performance before and after the pandemic, as well as separate rural Grade 8 NAEP scores for math and reading. Lastly, the *Access to Supports for Well-Being* gauge updates measures of rural school counselor and school psychologist availability, health insurance coverage, and public preschool enrollment, while introducing two new indicators: the percentage of rural children who are unhoused and the ratio of rural students to primary care clinicians.

Why Rural Matters 2025 also includes standalone pieces investigating the changes due to the revised definition of rural, the status of Indigenous rural education, the impact of charter schools on rural students and communities, and changes in teacher preparation policies that have the potential to impact teacher quality in rural schools.



Top 10 Highest-Priority States in Rural Education



1. Oklahoma

Oklahoma's rural districts are ranked as our highest overall priority in the United States—up from 8 in *Why Rural Matters 2023*. Since we began ranking states in 2005, Oklahoma has ranked between 4 and 9. Almost 60% of all public schools serve rural communities, and its students are among the most racially diverse in the United States. Students have high rates of household mobility, with nearly 1 in 10 students changing primary residence in the past 12 months. Only three states rank below Oklahoma's \$6,262 instructional expenditure per rural pupil, and adjusted teacher salaries are more than \$13,000 below the U.S. average. Academic performance is lower than average on all indicators, with substantial decreases in rural NAEP Grade 4 Reading and Math scores and Grade 8 Reading and Math rural scores in or near the lowest-performing quartile among states. Access to supports for well-being is a critical concern, with among the highest state rates of uninsured rural children (6th highest), and unhoused rural children (9th highest). Overloaded ratios of students per psychologist/guidance counselor and students per primary care clinician suggest that access to key supports is critical.



2. Arizona

Only once has Arizona not been in the top 10 of our overall rankings (it ranked 11 in *Why Rural Matters 2018-19*). Twenty-two percent of Arizona's schools are rural, and 70.6% of those schools are classified as small rural schools. Arizona's students are racially and linguistically diverse. Rural communities exhibit high levels of poverty, ranking 11 overall. Moreover, one in five students experiences poverty. Only four states had higher rates of mobility. Per pupil instructional expenditures are lower than all but six states even though adjusted instructional salaries are slightly above the U.S. rural

average. While changes in rural Grade 4 NAEP scores are around the middle of all states, rural Grade 8 NAEP Reading and Math Scores rank 12 and 11 respectively. At the same time, 15% of rural high school students don't graduate (rank 11). Access to supports for well-being is critical, with extremely high rates of children without health insurance (12.2%, rank 2), and high ratios of students per psychologist/school counselor (374:1, rank 10). Only six states spend proportionally more on transportation relative to instructional costs.



3. Mississippi

The 2025 report marks only the second time that Mississippi was not ranked as the highest-priority state for rural education (in the 2009 report it ranked 3rd). This kind of consistency, even while indicators and gauges are changed from report to report, suggests that the issues for Mississippi's rural schools and communities are both persistent and pervasive. Nearly one quarter million students in Mississippi attend rural school districts, representing about 40% of the state's students and 60% of the state's schools overall. Almost one quarter of the state's rural students experience poverty and only six states and BIE schools had greater levels of rural community poverty. Equity is a serious issue, with the per pupil instructional spending at \$2,200 less than the U.S. rural average and adjusted teacher salaries \$13,000 below the U.S. rural average. Educational outcomes were mostly in the middle of other states, with the exception of rural Grade 8 NAEP Reading scores (only nine states and BIE schools had lower averages). Greater access to supports for well-being is needed for Mississippi's rural children, with only one psychologist or school counselor for every 395 children (rank 7) and just one in three rural children enrolling in public preschool (rank 10). Mississippi's rural education remains an urgent and persistent concern.



4. Florida

As a percentage of the state overall, Florida has among the lowest percent rural schools (rank 49) and percent rural students (rank 48). Nevertheless, Florida's 124,389 rural students rank among the very highest priority in this report. Only four states had more racial and ethnic diversity among rural students and Florida was in the top third of states for percentage of multilingual learners. One in nine rural students in Florida has changed primary residences in the past 12 months (rank 3) and community poverty levels are topped only by BIE and New Mexico. Compounding this problem, nearly 1 in 10 rural students lacks health insurance (rank 4) at the same time 4% of Florida's rural students are unhoused. Additionally, just three states have higher ratios of students per psychologist/school counselor, with 432 students for every psychologist. At \$2,200 less than the U.S. rural average, Florida spends less on per pupil instruction than all states except Idaho and Mississippi. While rural Grade 4 NAEP Reading and Math scores fared better than most states compared to 2019 scores, Grade 8 Reading scores were the 9th lowest and Grade 8 Math scores were the 14th lowest. Only eight states and BIE schools graduate students from high school at lower percentage rates.



5. Idaho

In the previous two decades of *Why Rural Matters* rankings, Idaho has never risen above 13 in concern, most recently ranking 23rd in the 2023 report. Idaho educates fewer rural students than all but 12 states and BIE, though almost half of rural students attend school in a *remote* rural district. That remoteness may explain ranking 5th for poverty levels in rural school communities and 42nd for the percent of students experiencing poverty—dwellings closest to schools are not where the students live. No state spends less per pupil on instruction: \$2,400 less than the U.S. rural

average. Adjusted teacher salaries are just outside of the lowest 10, at almost \$10,000 less than the U.S. rural average. Graduation rates are lower than all but four states and BIE schools. Only Nevada ranked higher in concern for *Access to Supports for Well-Being*, with Idaho having high caseloads for psychologists, school counselors, and primary care clinicians. Percent rural enrollment in public preschool is lower than all but two states, and 1 in 11 rural students lacks health insurance.



6. New Mexico

New Mexico ranks 6th on the *Why Rural Matters 2025* priority list, marking its first return to the top 10 since it ranked 5th in 2009. In the years since, the state consistently fell just outside the highest-priority tier, ranking 14th in 2011, 2013, 2015, and 2023. Several critical factors contribute to New Mexico's elevated priority in 2025. Nearly half (48.5%) of the state's rural students attend schools in remote rural districts, making access to resources and services especially challenging. The state's students also experience some of the highest child poverty rates in the country, and its rural high school graduation rate remains troublingly low, with one in five students not completing high school. Additionally, New Mexico has the highest percentage of rural multilingual learners in the United States, with over 30% of rural students classified as MLs. These overlapping challenges underscore the urgency of targeted support for rural education in New Mexico.



7. Missouri

Missouri makes its second appearance in the top 10 of the *Why Rural Matters 2025* priority list, ranking 7th overall. A convergence of urgent rural education challenges contributes to this ranking. Nearly one quarter (23.3%) of the state's students attend school in a rural district, underscoring the broad impact of these issues. Missouri provides just 71 cents in state revenue for every local

dollar invested in education, among the lowest in the United States, leaving rural districts heavily dependent on local funding. Rural teacher salaries are also among the lowest in the country. Student well-being indicators paint an even more serious picture—Missouri has the worst ratio in the United States of students to primary care clinicians, and one in every 25 rural students is unhoused. These conditions highlight the pressing need for state and federal attention to support Missouri’s rural students and communities.



8. South Carolina

South Carolina continues its long-standing presence on the *Why Rural Matters* priority list, remaining in the top 8 for two decades, indicating persistent and urgent rural education needs. With a high level of diversity among rural students, the state ranks 5th on the *Student and Family Characteristics* gauge. Rural South Carolina schools face significant funding and performance challenges. Adjusted for cost of living, South Carolina’s rural teacher salaries fall \$11,000 below the U.S. average. Student outcomes also raise concern, with particularly low performance on 8th Grade NAEP reading and math assessments and a high school non-graduation rate of 15%. These longstanding challenges underscore the need for sustained attention and investment in South Carolina’s rural education systems.



9. South Dakota

South Dakota ranks 9th on the *Why Rural Matters 2025* priority list, returning to a position in the top 10 that it last held in the 2018–2019 and 2015–2016 editions. The last time the state scored above the top 20 highest priority states was in 2009. This year’s placement reflects persistent and pressing challenges in the state’s rural education landscape. More than 75% of South Dakota’s schools are rural, and over 77% of its school districts are classified as small. The state provides just 58 cents

in funding for every local dollar raised, placing an outsized burden on rural communities to fund their schools. Educational and health outcomes are also areas of concern—17% of rural students do not graduate from high school, and 9% of children are uninsured, placing the state among the highest in the country on that indicator. These data point to ongoing needs for greater support and investment in South Dakota’s rural schools and communities.



10. Montana

Montana appears in the top 10 highest-priority states for rural education in *Why Rural Matters 2025* for the first time in the report’s history, marking a notable shift from previous rankings. Its highest ranking was 17th in the 2009 report. The state’s rural landscape is distinct with more than 93% of Montana’s school districts classified as small, the highest percentage in the U.S., and nearly 60% of its rural districts are located in remote areas. Nearly 10% of Montana’s rural students are multilingual learners, the 7th largest in the United States. Montana’s rural student population faces multiple challenges, including one of the highest rates of unhoused students (over 6%), and the country’s lowest enrollment of children in public preschool (just 20.1%). Additionally, nearly 15% of rural students in Montana do not graduate from high school. These data reflect both the unique context of rural education in Montana and the urgent need for targeted support.

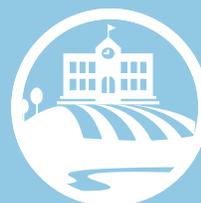
Additional State Highlights

- Our “Leading” category and the top 10 priority states have been relatively stable across reports despite changes in more than half of the indicators over the two decades of publication. *Why Rural Matters 2025*’s top 10 states of concern include two states new to the top 10: Idaho (rank 5) and Montana (rank 10). Both Idaho and Florida (rank 4) are new to the top 5. Only Oklahoma (rank 1) and Mississippi (rank 3) have been in the top 10 across every *Why Rural Matters* report.
- While no state ranks among the highest-priority states on all five of our gauges, Arizona and Oklahoma are among the highest-priority states on four of the five gauges. Five states—California, Florida, Missouri, Mississippi, New Mexico—are ranked among the highest priority on three gauges.
- Importantly, 36 states and BIE schools are among the highest priority on at least one gauge, showing that nearly every state has rural education issues that need to be addressed.
- California, Idaho, and Montana saw their priority rankings rise substantially for this report, showing new urgency for attention to rural education issues. Alabama saw the biggest drop in priority rankings, moving from 2 to 29. Louisiana dropped 19 positions to 25, but still ranks in the second-highest overall priority category, highlighting the ongoing need for increased support of its rural students.



The Five Gauges

1. Rural Education
Footprint Gauge



2. Student and Family
Characteristics Gauge



3. Educational Policy
Context Gauge



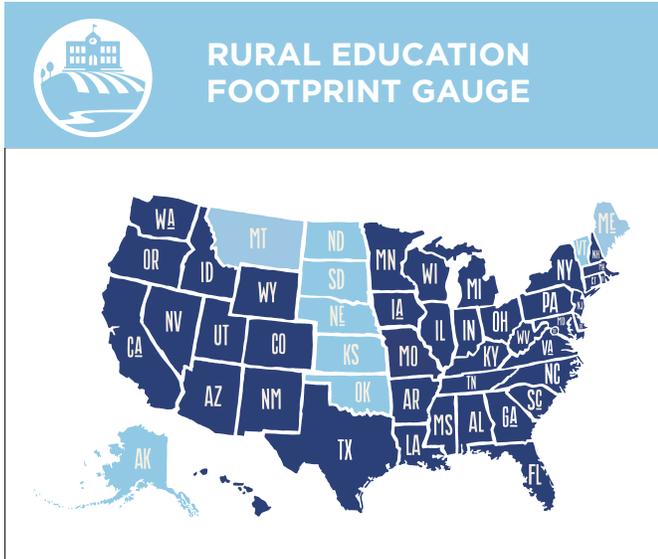
4. Educational
Outcomes Gauge



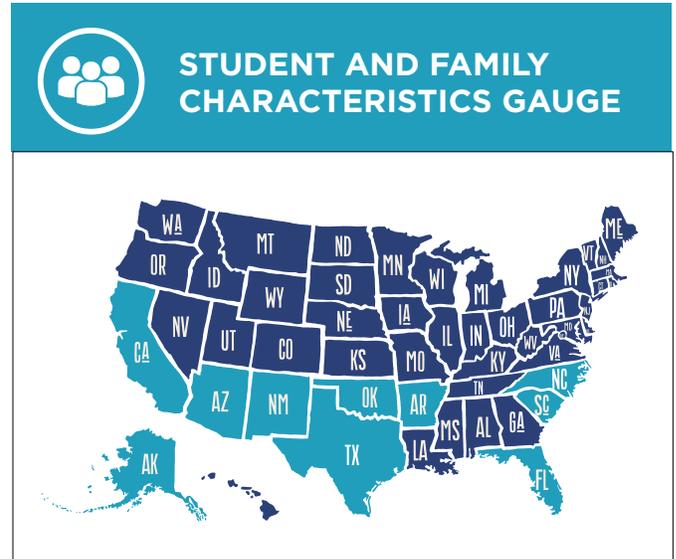
5. Access to Supports for
Well-Being Gauge



Highlights from the Five Gauges



The 10 highest-priority states and BIE schools on this gauge that examines the prevalence of rural schools and districts in a state and related measures are **Montana, Bureau of Indian Education, South Dakota, Oklahoma, North Dakota, Maine, Nebraska, Vermont, Alaska, Kansas**. Three of these states were not in the top 10 in the last report, although the two states that moved into the top 10 for the first time each only moved five or fewer spots (i.e., Nebraska from 11th to 7th and Kansas from 15th to 10th). The biggest increase in priority was Alaska (from 20th to 9th). Over half of all rural students (about 4.4 million) are in states in the most pressing quartile for rural student numbers, but many of these states rank lower on the overall gauge. In fact, eight of the 12 states with the largest rural student populations (Georgia, Ohio, and Pennsylvania, New York, Indiana, Virginia, Tennessee, and Michigan) rank below the median in overall *Rural Education Footprint* due to low rankings on other indicators, including the percent of rural schools.



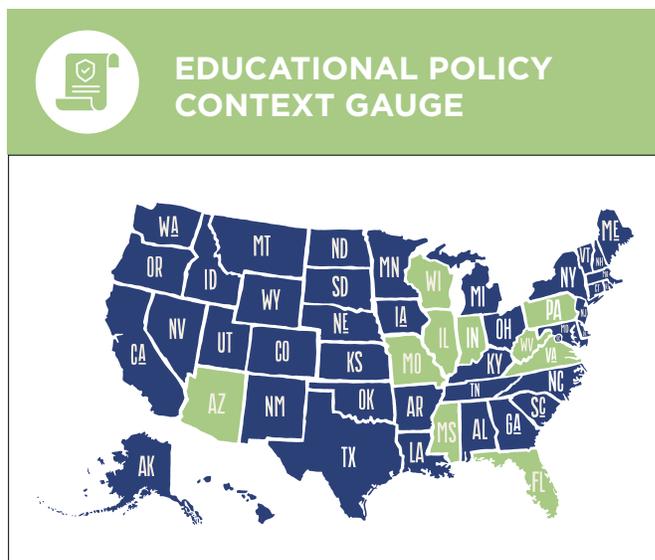
The *Student and Family Characteristics* gauge compares key sociodemographic characteristics across states. The highest-priority states on this gauge are **New Mexico, Florida, Arizona, Oklahoma, South Carolina, North Carolina, Texas, Arkansas, Alaska, and California**. This list of highest-priority states looks similar to the last report, except that three states moved into the top 10 highest priority list (Texas, Alaska, and California) while three states moved out of the highest priority list (Delaware, Kentucky, and Louisiana). The most notable departures from the highest priority list include Delaware (moving 19 spots from 4th to 23rd) and Kentucky (moving 14 spots from 7th to 21st).

Rural school districts in the U.S. are increasingly racially and ethnically diverse, with a rural diversity index of 34.3%, meaning there's a one-in-three chance that two randomly selected students from the same rural school identify as different races or ethnicities—up slightly from 33.4% in the previous *Why Rural Matters* report. State-level racial and ethnic diversity varies widely, from 12.8% in West Virginia to 62.7% in Delaware. Other states with diversity indexes above 50% include Oklahoma, North Carolina, Nevada, and Florida. Higher levels of poverty within a state's school

communities correspond to a higher ranking on the poverty level in rural school communities indicator, one of the five indicators in the *Student and Family Characteristics* gauge. Across the United States, 1 in 10 rural school communities has an average income at or below 185% of the poverty line, with BIE schools and New Mexico being of most concern.

States with the highest levels of rural children experiencing poverty include New Mexico (30.2%), Mississippi (23.0%), South Carolina (21.9%), Louisiana (21.0%), Kentucky (20.5%), Arizona (20.2%), Arkansas (19.0%), Georgia (18.0%), Tennessee (17.8%), Oklahoma (17.7%), Alabama (17.4%), and West Virginia and North Carolina (both 17.0%). Conversely, the six lowest-ranking states are Connecticut (3.4%), Massachusetts (4.5%), Rhode Island (5.1%), Maryland (5.8%), New Jersey (6.1%), and New Hampshire (6.7%).

The number of multilingual learners (MLs) in rural districts shows a 42% increase over the past decade. Texas has the highest number at just under 90,000 while New Mexico had the highest percent with over 30% of rural students identified as MLs. Five other states (California, Alaska, Washington, Texas, and Delaware) also report high rates above 10%. Residential moves can create stressful and disruptive transitions for students, often affecting students' physical and mental health. Of the 10 states with the highest rates of rural student mobility, five also rank among the most urgent on the *Access to Supports for Well-Being* gauge (Florida, Texas, Arizona, Oklahoma, and New Mexico). Six states had mobility rates over 10%, with Hawaii having the highest rate at 15.3%. Only Massachusetts had a mobility rate lower than 5%.



The *Educational Policy Context* gauge in *Why Rural Matters 2025* reflects how federal and state policies are shaping educational opportunities in rural communities. Together, this gauge's indicators paint a complex picture of how policy decisions shape the realities of rural education, from classroom funding and transportation costs, to teacher pay and special education services. The ten states identified as highest priority on this gauge are **Illinois, Missouri, Florida, West Virginia, Mississippi, Virginia, Indiana, Wisconsin, Arizona, and Pennsylvania.**

The rural instructional expenditures per pupil indicator enables state-to-state comparisons on the amount of funding allocated directly to teaching and learning in rural schools. The average rural instructional expenditure across the U.S. is \$8,417 per student, which is about \$600 less than the average in non-rural districts. Ten states spend less than \$7,000 per rural pupil, including Idaho, Mississippi, Florida, Oklahoma, Indiana, Tennessee, Arizona, Missouri, Alabama, and Arkansas (listed from lowest to highest). In contrast, the states with the highest per-pupil instructional spending in rural areas are New York, New Jersey, New Hampshire, Connecticut, Alaska, Maryland, Massachusetts, Rhode Island, and Wyoming.



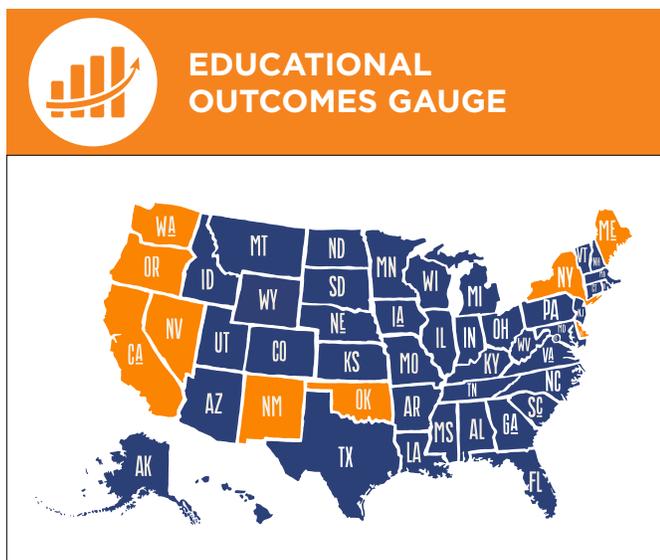
Transportation remains a major cost in rural education and can divert resources from educational programming. On average, rural districts spend \$11.54 on instruction for every dollar spent on transportation. However, there is considerable variation. Alaska and Vermont have the highest ratios, spending \$24.89 and \$22.03, respectively, on instruction for every transportation dollar. In contrast, 29 states spend less than half that ratio. These include West Virginia (\$6.78), Indiana (\$8.40), Louisiana (\$8.68), New York (\$8.92), Virginia (\$9.07), Illinois (\$9.20), Arizona (\$9.25), Pennsylvania (\$9.25), Rhode Island (\$9.37), Kentucky (\$9.63), Alabama (\$9.77), Delaware (\$9.79), Maine (\$9.85), and Nevada (\$9.85).

The report also examines the percentage of instructional salaries allocated to special education teachers. Data for this indicator were unavailable for five states (Hawaii, Alaska, Utah, Delaware, and Illinois) and for Bureau of Indian Education schools. It is important to interpret this indicator carefully: a high percentage of instructional salary spent on special education may reflect appropriate investment aligned with student need, while a low percentage could signal underinvestment in services for students with disabilities. However, there are also data quality issues such as in states where a large percentage of rural districts did not report data on special education instructional salaries. For example, nearly 70% of the rural districts in Kansas did not report their spending on the instructional salaries of special education teachers, and Vermont, Oregon, North Dakota, Montana, and California all had at least 20% of their rural districts with no data on this indicator.

Another significant policy measure is the ratio of state to local funding for rural schools. This indicator highlights the balance—or imbalance—of financial responsibility between state governments and local communities. States with lower ratios rely more heavily on local tax revenue, which can exacerbate funding

inequities. Nebraska reports the lowest ratio for the second consecutive edition of the report, providing just \$0.30 in state funds for every \$1 raised locally. Rhode Island (\$0.33), Connecticut (\$0.44), and New Hampshire (\$0.44) also fall on the low end. On the other end of the spectrum, Vermont and Nevada provide nearly \$19 in state funds for every local dollar. Nevada is an interesting case as its ratio was only \$0.98 in the 2023 report. Beginning in the 2021-22 school year, Nevada began implementing the Pupil-Centered Funding Plan where state and local revenues are combined at the state level before being distributed to districtsⁱ.

Adjusted salary expenditures per instructional full-time equivalent (FTE) continues to offer insight into rural teacher compensation, which is strongly linked to recruitment and retention. In *Why Rural Matters 2025*, adjusted rural salary expenditures range from \$54,242 in Arkansas to \$116,959 in New York, with a U.S. average of \$83,256. The states with the lowest adjusted salaries are Arkansas, Missouri, Oklahoma, Mississippi, Illinois, Indiana, North Dakota, Colorado, South Dakota, South Carolina, Idaho, West Virginia, and Kansas (listed from lowest to highest). The highest adjusted rural salaries are reported in New York, Alaska, California, Connecticut, Washington, Wyoming, Ohio, Massachusetts, Maryland, and Rhode Island (listed from highest to lowest).



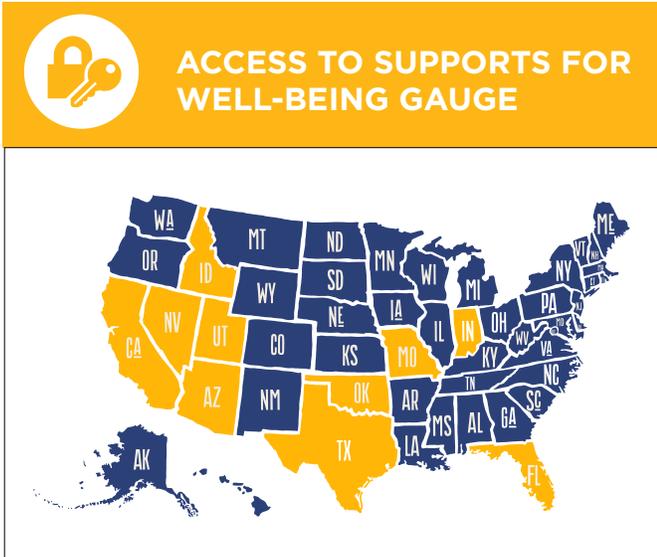
The *Educational Outcomes* gauge has long been a central component of the *Why Rural Matters* reports. In the 2025 edition, this gauge includes indicators of academic performance in reading and math, as measured by the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), along with rural high school graduation rates. The ten entities with the most concerning results on this gauge are the **Bureau of Indian Education (BIE), New Mexico, Nevada, Washington, Oregon, Delaware, California, Oklahoma, New York, and Maine**. In contrast, the states with the least concerning results for educational outcomes include Louisiana, Ohio, New Hampshire, Wisconsin, Massachusetts, Illinois, Connecticut, Maryland, Rhode Island, and New Jersey.

This report reveals a troubling pattern: states with high concern in *Educational Outcomes* often appear among those with the most serious concerns in *Access to Supports for Well-Being*. Similarly, states with fewer challenges in academic outcomes tend to be those where access to physical and mental health supports is more robust. These findings reinforce the close connection between student well-being and academic success.

Grade 4 reading and math performance show significant declines following the emergence of COVID-19. In reading, eight states experienced declines of more than 10 percentage points: Pennsylvania, Washington, Delaware, New York, Nebraska, Colorado, Oklahoma, and Maine. In Grade 4 math, nearly all the states with the largest reading declines also show significant losses, with Minnesota, Kansas, Connecticut, and North Carolina joining the list.

Challenges persist in Grade 8 as well. The states and school systems with the lowest average scores in Grade 8 reading include the Bureau of Indian Education (BIE), New Mexico, New York, West Virginia, South Carolina, Alabama, Nevada, Texas, Florida, and Delaware. For Grade 8 math, BIE, New Mexico, West Virginia, South Carolina, and Texas remain at the top of the priority list, along with Hawaii, California, Alabama, Washington, and Oklahoma.

While rural students continue to graduate from high school at higher rates than their non-rural peers (89.4% compared to 87.6%), disparities remain. Some states and school systems report troublingly low rural graduation rates, including Nevada (76.8%), Alaska (71.2%), and BIE schools (63.9%). Conversely, the highest rural graduation rates are found in Connecticut (94.5%), Texas (93.8%), and Massachusetts (93.6%).



First introduced in the 2023 *Why Rural Matters* report, the *Access to Supports for Well-Being* gauge reports on indicators related to students' mental and physical health and overall well-being. This gauge highlights ongoing disparities in rural students' access to mental and physical health services, revealing significant concerns in areas such as counselor availability, housing stability, health insurance coverage, preschool access, and primary care. In the 2025 *Why Rural Matters* report, the states identified as highest priority on this gauge include **Nevada, Idaho, Florida, Texas, Indiana, Missouri, California, Arizona, Oklahoma, and Utah**. Due to incomplete data, the Bureau of Indian Education (BIE) and the state of Hawaii were not assigned rankings. The states identified as least concerning include Rhode Island, Connecticut, and Massachusetts. However, it is important to emphasize that all states and school systems have areas of both strength and challenge when it comes to supporting student well-being.

The first indicator in this gauge measures the ratio of school psychologists and counselors to rural students. On average, rural schools report

a higher ratio than non-rural schools (297:1 versus 273:1). Several states show significantly higher student-to-provider ratios, including Michigan (548:1), Nevada (468:1), Louisiana (452:1), Florida (432:1), and Minnesota (427:1). In contrast, other states demonstrate better access, such as Maine (133:1), New Hampshire (137:1), Connecticut (159:1), Vermont (169:1), New York (177:1), Rhode Island (191:1), and New Jersey (194:1).

New to the 2025 *Why Rural Matters* report is an indicator measuring the percentage of rural students who are unhoused. The status of "unhoused" refers to students who have no predictable, stable, and adequate place to stay at night and is regulated by the McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act. The Bureau of Indian Education shows the most severe concern, with 14.7% of students identified as unhoused. High rates are also reported in West Virginia (7.3%), Nevada (7.0%), Montana (6.1%), Washington (5.4%), and California (5.3%).

The percentage of rural children who lack health insurance remains a critical concern. Across the United States, 6.4% of rural children are uninsured, compared to 5.7% overall. States with the highest percentages of uninsured children include Texas (13.8%), Arizona (12.2%), Nevada (10.2%), Utah (9.8%), Florida (9.8%), Oklahoma (9.7%), Pennsylvania (9.7%), Indiana (9.4%), Idaho (9.2%), Alaska (8.7%), South Dakota (8.6%), and Delaware (8.3%).

Enrollment in public preschool plays a significant role in supporting long-term academic outcomes and identification of needs for early intervention. Public preschool enrollment varies widely across the United States. Some states report relatively high rural enrollment (e.g. Rhode Island at 92%, Nebraska at 61%, and Connecticut at 57.8%), while others serve far fewer rural children, including Montana at 20.1%, Nevada at 23.9%, and Idaho at 26.1%.

Why Rural Matters 2025 also includes a new indicator approximating the number of rural students per primary care clinicianⁱⁱ. On this new indicator, states with the highest ratios (indicating the least access) include Missouri (457:1), Texas (435:1), Georgia (416:1),

and Louisiana (401:1). States with the lowest ratios and therefore better access include Maine (136:1), New Hampshire (138:1), and Vermont (163:1).

