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NEW NATIONAL REPORT HIGHLIGHTS URGENT NEEDS AND UNIQUE STRENGTHS OF RURAL SCHOOLS

*Why Rural Matters 2025 highlights challenges and opportunities
affecting nearly 10 million rural students across the U.S.*

CITY, STATE – The National Rural Education Association (NREA) today released *Why Rural Matters 2025: People, Place, and Possibility*, the 11th edition of its landmark report analyzing the conditions of rural education in all 50 states.

The findings reveal that nearly 9.7 million students—more than one in five nationwide—attend rural schools, a population larger than the enrollment of the 100 largest U.S. school districts combined.

“Rural schools educate nearly one in five students in the United States,” said Jerry Johnson, EdD, researcher and co-author of *Why Rural Matters 2025*. “Our findings show both extraordinary strengths and persistent inequities that demand immediate policy attention.”

Despite their critical role in the nation’s educational landscape, rural schools continue to face significant challenges in funding, healthcare access, housing stability, and teacher recruitment—while also demonstrating remarkable resilience and community strength.

Key National Findings

The 2025 report presents a detailed, data-driven portrait of rural education and its evolving needs:

- **Scope & Reach:** Roughly 7.8 million students are enrolled in rural districts, while 9.7 million attend rural schools, highlighting that many rural-serving schools fall outside traditional district definitions.
- **Persistent Poverty & Health Gaps:** One in seven rural students lives in poverty, 1 in 15 lacks health insurance, and the average rural ratio of students per school counselor or psychologist is 297:1—with states like Michigan (548:1) and Florida (432:1) facing extreme shortages.
- **Housing Instability:** A new indicator shows 2.7% of rural students—more than 250,000 children—are unhoused, with the Bureau of Indian Education (BIE) reporting a staggering 14.7%.

- **Academic Performance:** Rural students graduate at slightly higher rates than their non-rural peers (89.4% vs. 87.6%), yet disparities remain across states, and post-pandemic NAEP scores show uneven recovery in reading and math.
- **Changing Demographics:** Rural America is far from homogenous. The rural diversity index stands at 34.3%, meaning there is more than a one-in-three chance that two students from the same rural school come from different racial or ethnic backgrounds.

“These findings can equip policymakers and communities with the data to act,” said Dr. Melissa Sadorf, executive director of the NREA. “Rural students deserve equitable funding, access to health care, and opportunities that match their urban and suburban peers.”

State-Level Priorities

The report identifies states where rural education needs are most urgent. The Top 10 Highest-Priority States for 2025 are **Oklahoma, Arizona, Mississippi, Florida, Idaho, New Mexico, Missouri, South Carolina, South Dakota, and Montana.**

- **Oklahoma** tops the list for the first time, with nearly 60% of public schools serving rural communities and among the lowest instructional expenditures per pupil.
- **New Mexico** faces high child poverty rates and the nation’s highest percentage of rural multilingual learners—over 30%.
- **Montana**, appearing in the top 10 for the first time, has the nation’s highest proportion of small districts and one of the lowest preschool enrollment rates. Diverse identities and social circumstances present within the rural school and community.

ADD DATA BULLETS FROM YOUR STATE-LEVEL RANKING SHEET

ADD CUSTOMIZED QUOTE ABOUT YOUR STATE DATA.

A Call to Action

The *Why Rural Matters 2025* report makes one thing unmistakably clear: policymakers can no longer overlook the realities facing rural schools and the students they serve. These challenges—and the opportunities they present—carry profound implications for state and national goals to improve achievement and expand access to supports, especially for students affected by educational and geographic inequities.

“Rural education is essential to the nation’s future,” Sadorf emphasized. “This report shows that when policymakers invest in rural communities, they invest in the success of every student and every state.”

Access the Full Report

For the complete *Why Rural Matters 2025* report, including state-by-state data and policy recommendations, visit nrea.net/research/why-rural-matters/

About the National Rural Education Association (NREA)

Founded in 1907, NREA is the nation’s oldest and most respected organization dedicated to advancing the vitality of rural schools and communities. Learn more at www.nrea.net.