

NREA Writing Contest 2026

Sponsored by Edmentum. Flexible Learning Paths. Proven Outcomes. Future-Ready Students.

Contest Overview

- **Theme:** *Ready, Set, Rural: Creating Opportunities Everywhere*
 - **Purpose:** This essay contest strives to celebrate rural communities through student expression and promote awareness of rural education issues in an effort to advocate for rural places.
 - **Target Groups:**
 - **Elementary (Grades K-4)** – Written response to a rural-themed picture book
 - **Middle School (Grades 5-8)** – Essay responding to a published article on rural issues
 - **High School (Grades 9-12)** – Video storytelling reflecting on this year’s rural theme
 - **Extended Description for Contest Materials:** Rural communities are full of creativity, resilience, and unique opportunities. Through this contest, students will share their perspectives on rural life, the importance of education in rural areas, and ideas for creating opportunities that can make a difference locally or nationally.
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Age Groups and Details

Elementary (Grades K-4 at the end of the 25-26 school year)

- **Prompt:** Response (detailed below) to *Miss Dorothy and Her Bookmobile*
- **Format:** Short essay, poem, or letter (typed or handwritten and submitted digitally).
 - Students dictate to an adult as necessary.
 - Illustrations are allowed and encouraged.
 - Responses can be handwritten and scanned.
 - Invented spelling is okay for younger grades.
- **Judging Criteria:** Understanding of theme, originality, and personal voice

Middle School (Grades 5-8 at the end of the 25-26 school year)

- **Prompt:** Reflect on and respond to a nationally published article (detailed below) about storytelling in rural America. (typed and submitted digitally)
- **Format:** Typed essay (suggested length: 500-750 words)
- **Judging Criteria:** Clarity of thought, use of evidence, connection to theme, writing mechanics

High School (Grades 9-12 at the end of the 25-26 school year)

- **Prompt:** Create a short video story illustrating “*Ready, Set, Rural: Creating Opportunities Everywhere*” in rural education (detailed below)
 - **Format:** 6-10 minute video, digital submission (YouTube, Vimeo, or file upload)
 - **Judging Criteria:** Creativity, storytelling, production quality, emotional impact, relevance to theme
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Logistics and Administration

- **Submission Window:** All submissions should be submitted no later than midnight on May 31, 2026. Winners, teachers, and schools will be contacted in August 2026.
 - **How to Submit:** Submissions will be accepted via the National Rural Education Association Foundation's email at **nreafoundation@gmail.com**
 - **Permissions:** Media release forms for photos/videos of minors (see below) must be submitted digitally with entries.
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Judging and Awards

- **Judging Panel:** Educators, rural leaders, authors, media professionals.
 - **Scoring Rubrics:** Customized for each age group (see below)
 - **Awards:** Certificates, publication with the National Rural Education Association as well as the Foundation, rural education swag, and monetary awards (sponsored by **Edmentum**) as follows:
 - **Elementary Winner:** \$200.00
 - **Elementary Runner-Up:** \$100.00
 - **Middle School Winner:** \$300.00
 - **Middle School Runner-Up:** \$100.00
 - **High School Winner:** \$500.00
 - **High School Runner-Up:** \$200.00
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Promotion and Outreach

- **Flyers and Social Media**
 - **School and District Outreach**
 - **Partnerships with Rural Organizations and Affiliates**
 - **Press Release Template**
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Wrap-Up and Follow-Up

- **Winners Announced:** August, 2026
 - **Celebration and Showcase at the National Forum to Advance Rural Education:** San Antonio, Texas, October 19–21, 2026
 - **Yearly Archive and Contest Anthology**
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Elementary (Grades K–4): Picture Book Reflection

Miss Dorothy and Her Bookmobile by Gloria Houston (Illustrated by Susan Condie Lamb)

Digitally, the book can be found on YouTube at this link:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UYgrGEaYPfw&t=648s>

- **Connection to Theme:**

Miss Dorothy and Her Bookmobile by Gloria Houston connects with this year's theme of **Ready, Set, Rural: Creating Opportunities Everywhere**, by showing how one person in a rural community found an innovative and creative way to bring books and opportunities to learners in a rural community where there wasn't a traditional library. The story is based on a real librarian who drove a bookmobile through rural North Carolina, fostering literacy and connection throughout the community.

- **Prompt:** *Miss Dorothy drove her bookmobile all over her community so that every child could have a chance to read books. Even if they lived far away from a library, she created opportunities for learning and fun in her rural town.*

Think about your own town, neighborhood, or community. Imagine you had the chance to bring something useful, helpful, or exciting to everyone in your community, just like Miss Dorothy brought books.

Write a short essay, poem, or letter (suggested length: 3 paragraphs (or age appropriate) and adult transcription permitted for early writers) reflecting on this story and these questions:

1. What would you bring to your community to help people learn, have fun, or create new opportunities?
2. Why do you think this would be important or special for the people in your community?
3. How would it make your community stronger, happier, or more connected?

Middle School (Grades 5–8): Article Reflection

“The Importance of Storytelling in Rural Education Advocacy” published by **NAU Rural Resource Center** (article link and printed version below for use)

- **Connection to Theme:** This piece explores how sharing positive stories from rural schools helps shift perceptions, highlight success, and connect communities to decision-makers, showing how rural voices can shape opportunity and impact.
 - **Prompt:** *The article shows how storytelling helps create opportunities for rural students and schools. What is one idea, action, or solution from your own experience that others could learn from? Write an essay that connects the text to a story from your own experience that could help others understand the strengths of your rural community.*
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High School (Grades 9–12)

- **Project:** Video Storytelling (6-10 minutes)
- **Theme:** Ready, Set, Rural: Creating Opportunities Everywhere
- **Prompt:** *Rural communities are full of creativity, resilience, and opportunities. Some are big, some small, but all are important to the people who live there. Through this contest, we want you to share a story that celebrates rural life, highlights the challenges or opportunities in your community, and shows how people are making a difference.*
- **Your video can include:**
 - Personal experiences or stories from your family, friends, or community
 - Interviews with community members or local leaders
 - Creative storytelling techniques, such as animation, narration, music, or photography
 - Ideas or examples of how opportunities can be created or expanded in rural communities
- **Consider these guiding questions as you plan your video:**
 - What makes your rural community unique or special?
 - What opportunities exist for students, and how are they being used or created?
 - How do people in your community overcome challenges and support each other?
 - If you could add one opportunity to your community, what would it be and why?
- **Requirements:**
 - Video length: 6-10 minutes
 - Original work (collaboration for interviews or filming is allowed, but each student must submit their own original video). Group submissions are permitted (max 2 students).
 - Email a link to a YouTube (or related platform) video. If needed, students can upload in MP4 or a compatible format via email.
 - Include a short typed paragraph (50–100 words) describing your video’s purpose and how it connects to the theme.

Criteria for Judging

Elementary (Grades K–4) Rubric *Writing in response to a picture book*

Criteria	4 – Excellent	3 – Good	2 – Developing	1 – Beginning
Connection to Theme	Clearly shows understanding of the theme: <i>Ready, Set, Rural: Creating Opportunities Everywhere</i>	Shows good understanding of the theme	Mentions the theme but lacks a clear connection	Little or no connection to the theme
Creativity & Voice	Unique ideas and a strong personal voice	Some creative ideas and personal expression	A few original ideas; voice not fully developed	Lacks originality or personal voice
Organization & Clarity	Clear beginning, middle, and end; easy to follow	Mostly organized with a clear idea	Some structures may be confusing at times	Hard to follow or missing parts of the story
Effort & Presentation	Neatly written or typed; shows great care	Mostly neat and complete	Some signs of effort may be messy or incomplete	Rushed or incomplete work

Middle School (Grades 5–8) Rubric *Essay in response to a nonfiction article*

Criteria	4 – Excellent	3 – Good	2 – Developing	1 – Beginning
Understanding of the Article	Demonstrates a clear and accurate understanding of key issues	Mostly accurate understanding with some detail	Partial understanding; may miss key points	Misunderstands or lacks grasp of article content
Connection to Theme	Insightful and meaningful link to the theme: <i>Ready, Set, Rural: Creating Opportunities Everywhere</i>	Good connection to at least one theme element	Vague or limited connection to the theme	No clear connection to the theme
Organization & Structure	Clear intro, body, and conclusion; logical flow of ideas	Mostly organized with some flow	Some structures may jump around	Disorganized or hard to follow
Support & Examples	Strong evidence from the article and/or personal ideas	Some evidence or reasoning	Few examples, mostly opinion-based	Lacks support or reasoning
Grammar & Mechanics	Few or no errors	Some minor errors	Frequent errors that distract	Many errors make writing hard to understand

High School (Grades 9–12) Rubric *Video Storytelling Entry*

Criteria	4 - Excellent	3 - Good	2 - Developing	1 - Beginning
Connection to Theme	Deeply explores <i>all</i> aspects of the theme: <i>Ready, Set, Rural: Creating Opportunities Everywhere</i>	Connects to at least one part of the theme	The theme is present but underdeveloped	The theme is unclear or missing
Storytelling & Creativity	Engaging, original, and emotionally resonant	Interesting and well-thought-out	Some creative elements, but may lack focus	Lacks story or originality
Visual & Audio Quality	Clear visuals and sound enhance the message	Mostly clear; few distractions	Some distracting elements in visuals or sound	Poor audio/visual quality interferes with the message
Structure & Flow	Strong opening, middle, and end; easy to follow	Mostly well-structured	Some flow, but jumps around or lacks transitions	Disorganized or hard to follow
Effort & Impact	Shows strong effort; leaves a lasting impression	Shows good effort and purpose	Basic effort; limited emotional or intellectual impact	Minimal effort; unclear purpose

Academic Honesty and Media Release Form:

National Essay Contest: “Ready, Set, Rural: Creating Opportunities Everywhere”

This form must be filled out and accompany all submissions.

Participant Information:

Student Name:	
Grade Level:	
School Name:	
School District and Email:	
City and State:	
Teacher or Sponsor:	
Teacher or Sponsor Email:	

Please read the following regarding academic honesty and original work certification:

By submitting an entry to the National Rural Education Association Essay Contest: *Ready, Set, Rural: Creating Opportunities Everywhere*, the student and parent/guardian certify that:

- The submission is the student’s original work.
- The student is the primary creator of all written, visual, and audio content.
- The work has not been previously published or submitted to another contest.
- Any sources, quotations, music, images, or outside materials are properly credited.

Please review our artificial intelligence (AI) policy before continuing: To preserve the integrity of the contest and ensure authentic student voice:

- Submissions must not be generated by artificial intelligence (AI) tools (including but not limited to ChatGPT, Gemini, Copilot, or similar platforms).
- Excessive AI assistance, AI-generated writing, or AI-generated video content may result in disqualification.
- Entries found to contain substantially AI-generated content or plagiarized material may be disqualified at the sole discretion of the National Rural Education Association Foundation.

The National Rural Education Association Foundation reserves the right to review submissions for authenticity and to request drafts, process work, or teacher verification if questions arise. By signing the submission form, the student and parent/guardian affirm that this entry complies with these academic honesty expectations.

I certify that this submission is my original work and was not generated by artificial intelligence.

Signature: _____

Parent/Guardian Consent (Required for all minors under the age of 18)

I permit my child, named above, to participate in the national essay contest sponsored under the theme “Ready, Set, Rural: Creating Opportunities Everywhere.” I understand that their written work or video submission may be:

- Shared publicly on websites, newsletters, and social media related to the contest
- Displayed at events or used in publications promoting rural education
- Edited for length or formatting while keeping the student’s original meaning.

I acknowledge that my child will retain ownership of their work, and this release grants permission for **non-commercial** educational and promotional use.

By checking the following and signing below, I grant my permission for:

- My child’s **full name** may be published with their submission
- Only my child’s **first name and grade** may be published
- My child’s **photo or video image** may be used if included
- My child’s **school name** may be included in announcements

- I **do NOT permit** public sharing (entry will be judged, but not published)

Parent/Guardian Signature: _____

Parent/Guardian Name (Print): _____

Signature: _____ **Date:** _____

Email or Phone (for contact only, not for publication): _____

Student Signature: _____ **Date:** _____

- I understand that my writing or video may be shared publicly and used to help others learn more about rural education.

The Importance of Storytelling in Rural Education Advocacy

NAU Rural Resource Center

November 13, 2024

Storytelling is one of the most powerful tools a rural educator can wield. In a world where policy discussions and education reform are often shaped by urban-centric viewpoints, rural schools and their unique challenges can easily be overlooked. By sharing personal experiences, innovative solutions, and the specific barriers rural schools face, rural leaders can ensure their voices are heard and their needs are represented.

For rural schools, storytelling is more than a form of advocacy—it is a lifeline that connects rural communities with decision-makers and stakeholders who may not fully understand the intricacies of rural education. Sharing these stories helps dispel misconceptions, generate empathy, and highlight the innovation and resourcefulness that define rural schools.

Why Storytelling Matters in Rural Education

Rural schools are often misrepresented or ignored in national education discussions. Media narratives and policy conversations tend to focus on urban issues, leaving the challenges faced by rural schools—such as teacher shortages, lack of infrastructure, and the threat of consolidation—on the sidelines. When rural education is discussed, it is often through a narrow lens, focusing on stereotypical images of isolation and underperformance. This limited understanding not only hinders the development of policies that effectively address rural challenges but also perpetuates a false narrative that rural schools are inherently inferior.

This is where storytelling becomes essential. Rural educators and leaders can change the narrative by sharing the stories of their schools, students, and communities. In doing so, they highlight that while rural schools face distinct challenges, they are also places of innovation, resilience, and success.

Take the example of a rural district in the Midwest that partnered with local farmers to develop an agricultural program, teaching students essential skills while contributing to the local economy. This kind of initiative doesn't just address a lack of traditional resources—it leverages the strengths of the community to provide meaningful, practical education. In another region, a school might create a mentorship program that encourages graduates to return as teachers, helping address teacher shortages by fostering local talent.

These success stories are not just anecdotes; they offer a glimpse into how rural schools adapt to their circumstances and thrive. By sharing these examples, rural educators can challenge misconceptions and elevate the status of rural schools as critical and innovative parts of the educational system.

The Power of Personal Experience

One of the most effective ways to advocate for rural education is through personal stories that convey the real-life impact of education policies—or the absence of effective policies—on students and their families. These stories help bridge the gap between raw data and the lived experiences of rural communities, making it easier for decision-makers to understand the unique challenges rural schools face.

Imagine the story of a student who spends several hours on a bus each day because their local school was closed due to consolidation. It's one thing to discuss the academic performance data of students affected by long bus rides, but it's another to hear how those extended commutes affect their family life, extracurricular participation, and friendships. This kind of storytelling makes the issue personal, relatable, and harder to ignore.

A rural teacher, for instance, might explain how they've had to innovate in the classroom due to a lack of resources. Without the latest technology or extensive training programs, they may have developed a blended learning model that allows their students to access online coursework while still fostering hands-on learning with local community resources. This shows not only the challenges but also the creativity and dedication of rural educators in providing a quality education with fewer resources.

By putting faces to the issues, rural educators can make their stories resonate with a wide audience—from local community members to state legislators and federal policymakers. These stories can foster empathy, build support, and ultimately lead to better policies that address the specific needs of rural schools.

Shaping Policy Through Storytelling

One of the most compelling aspects of storytelling is its ability to influence policy. Too often, education policy is created with urban and suburban contexts in mind, leaving rural schools to navigate a system that doesn't fully account for their unique circumstances. By sharing stories that highlight the barriers rural schools face, educators can push for more inclusive and supportive policies.

For instance, many rural schools struggle with limited broadband access, making it difficult for students to complete online assignments or participate in remote learning. By sharing stories of students who have to travel to a local library or even sit in a parking lot to access Wi-Fi, rural leaders can highlight the urgent need for infrastructure improvements. These stories put a spotlight on the real-world consequences of inadequate internet access, making it clear why rural broadband initiatives must be a priority.

Similarly, the issue of teacher shortages can be made more tangible through storytelling. A rural leader could share the story of a promising young teacher who left the district after only one year, not because they didn't love teaching, but because they couldn't find affordable housing or access to professional development. Stories like this one provide concrete examples of why targeted support for rural teachers—such as housing subsidies or loan forgiveness programs—can make a significant difference.

These personal narratives help policymakers understand that the challenges facing rural schools aren't abstract problems—they affect real people in real communities. By connecting stories to policy discussions, rural leaders can drive the development of solutions that are tailored to the needs of rural schools.

Celebrating Rural Innovation

While storytelling is a powerful way to highlight the challenges that rural schools face, it's equally important to celebrate the creativity and innovation that define rural education. Despite limited

resources, rural schools often excel in finding creative solutions that address local needs while fostering a rich educational experience for their students.

In agricultural regions, schools might collaborate with local farms or dairies to create hands-on learning opportunities. This not only gives students practical skills but also strengthens the bond between the school and the local economy. In other areas, rural schools have partnered with nearby universities, enabling students to take college courses or gain early access to vocational training—opening doors to higher education or career opportunities that might not have been available otherwise.

These stories of innovation show that rural schools are more than just places of learning— they are hubs of opportunity and ingenuity. By sharing these stories, rural leaders can help shift the perception of rural schools from places that are struggling to survive to centers of growth and possibility. This shift in narrative can inspire other rural educators and show policymakers that investing in rural education yields innovative, sustainable solutions.

Call to Action: Share Your Story

If you are a rural educator, administrator, or community member, your story has the power to make a difference. Take the time to share your experiences, successes, and challenges with others. Whether it's through blog posts, social media, speaking at community meetings, or attending legislative hearings, your story can help raise awareness about the unique needs of rural schools, inspire others to advocate for change, and shape policies that better support rural education.