Private School Vouchers Don’t Work in Rural Areas

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.¹

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.² Growth in rural school enrollment continues to outpace non-rural enrollment growth in the United States, and rural schools continue to grow more complex 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.

Rural Areas Lack Actual School Choice

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.³

In addition to logistical challenges, there are also financial challenges. For rural states like Nebraska,⁴ adequately financing rural public schools is already difficult. Even public school choice options like charter schools, which are financed through public revenues, have yet to flourish in many rural areas. Given these challenges, voucher programs in rural states are rare. Indeed, of the most states where more than half the students attend rural schools⁵ only three (Oklahoma, Mississippi and New Hampshire) currently have voucher programs.

² Id.
⁵ Id.
There Are Significant Barriers to Choice in Rural Areas

Transportation is challenging. Rural schools face significant challenges in transporting children between their homes and their schools. “Rural schoolchildren were more likely than their suburban counterparts to have bus rides of 30 minutes or longer. Their rides also tended to be more arduous, traversing poorer roads and more hilly or mountainous terrain than those experienced by suburban students.”  

Rural districts can spend twice what urban districts spend per pupil on transportation.  

And there are other costs that come with longer commutes: when students spend more time commuting, that means less time to participate in extracurricular activities, do their homework, or help out at home, as well as increased safety issues for children leaving for school and arriving home in the dark.

Another major hurdle in bringing vouchers to rural communities is that the public schools are more than just places for children to learn: they serve a critical social and economic function by serving as the primary employer of small communities, offering healthcare for children and adults alike, and frequently offering food pantries, breakfast or lunch programs and night classes. 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—it simply means that the school has fewer resources to provide the non-educational benefits critical for community members.

And with lower average enrollments, rural schools encounter diseconomies of scale 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.

Private School Vouchers Are Untenable in Rural Areas

Even conservative education leaders like Chester Finn, who helmed the Thomas B. Fordham Institute, agree that private school choice is untenable in rural schools. “Choice, save for the virtual kind, is harder to make work in spread-out suburbs, small towns, and rural areas, where one seldom has workable access to multiple schools," Finn wrote. "I strongly suspect that most Trump voters with kids—to the extent that education is on their minds—are chiefly interested in having their current schools work better, ensure a decent and prosperous future for their students, including readiness for real jobs."

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