



WHITE PAPER

# Dropout Prevention: Challenges and Opportunities in Rural Settings

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## Dropout Prevention in Rural Context

Despite our nation's overall pattern of urbanization, nearly one-quarter (24%) of public elementary and secondary students attend school in a rural locale.<sup>1</sup>

According to the Rural School and Community Trust (2012), rural students graduate from high school at a slightly higher rate than their peers nationally. The graduation rate among rural students in 2011 was 77.5%,<sup>2</sup> compared to the national average of 74.7%.<sup>3</sup>

Nonetheless, 22.5% of rural students fail to complete their high school education,<sup>4</sup> a rate that is especially troubling in an era of declining rural community fortunes and diminishing numbers of stable, moderate-wage jobs not requiring high school diplomas.

## Rural Education Challenges

Schools and students in rural communities face numerous location-related challenges.<sup>5</sup> These include:

- **Limited funding to support education.** The per-pupil expenditure rate is lower in rural communities than in urban centers.<sup>5</sup> With few businesses, community organizations, and residences to support funding of public education, the tax base in rural communities can be limited—even when localities tax themselves at the highest rates possible. Moreover, state funding is not enough to make up for the low levels of funding rural schools receive from local sources.<sup>6</sup>
- **Declining student populations.** With limited economic opportunities in rural areas, students who opt to graduate and pursue higher education may have to move out of their communities. This contributes to a generational decline in school populations, which raises the possibility of school consolidation or further losses of per-pupil funding from states.<sup>2</sup> Moreover, given that jobs requiring advanced degrees can be scarce in rural communities, it is not surprising that student aspirations for postsecondary education tend to be lower in rural places than in other settings.<sup>7</sup>
- **Transportation issues.** Rural students face very long bus rides to school.<sup>8</sup> More than 85% of rural elementary schools have one-way bus rides that average more than 30 minutes (the standard recommended limit).<sup>9</sup> Moreover, rural areas rarely have access to public transportation, and high gas prices can further limit transportation options.

1 National Center for Education Statistics. (2013). The Status of Rural Education. Retrieved from [http://nces.ed.gov/programs/coe/indicator\\_tla.asp](http://nces.ed.gov/programs/coe/indicator_tla.asp)

2 Strange, M., Johnson, J., Showalter, D., & Klein, R. (2012). Why Rural Matters 2011-12: The Condition of Rural Education in the 50 States. Washington, DC: The Rural School and Community Trust. Retrieved from <http://files.ruraledu.org/wrm2011-12/WRM2011-12.pdf>

3 Education Week. (2013, May 31). As Graduation Rates Rise, Focus Shifts to Dropouts. Retrieved from <http://www.edweek.org/ew/articles/2013/06/06/34execsum.h32.html>

4 Strange, M., Johnson, J., Showalter, D., & Klein, R. (2012). Why Rural Matters 2011-12: The Condition of Rural Education in the 50 States. Washington, DC: The Rural School and Community Trust. Retrieved from <http://files.ruraledu.org/wrm2011-12/WRM2011-12.pdf>

5 Smink, J., & Reimer, M. (2009) Rural School Dropout Issues: Implications for Dropout Prevention. Clemson, SC: National Dropout Prevention Center/Network. Retrieved from [http://www.dropoutprevention.org/sites/default/files/13\\_Rural\\_School\\_Dropout\\_Issues\\_Report.pdf](http://www.dropoutprevention.org/sites/default/files/13_Rural_School_Dropout_Issues_Report.pdf)

6 Johnson, J., Strange, M., & Madden, K. (2010). The Rural Dropout Problem: An Invisible Achievement Gap. Washington, DC: The Rural

School and Community Trust. Retrieved from [http://www.ruraledu.org/user\\_uploads/file/Rural\\_Dropout\\_Problem\\_2010.pdf](http://www.ruraledu.org/user_uploads/file/Rural_Dropout_Problem_2010.pdf)

7 Tompkins, R., & Deloney, P. (1995). Rural Students At Risk in Arkansas, Louisiana, New Mexico, Oklahoma, and Texas. Austin, TX: SEDL. Retrieved from <http://www.sedl.org/rural/atrisk/welcome.html>

8 The Rural School and Community Trust. (2012, February 23). Rural Trust's Williams Joins Work on Dropout Prevention and Recovery. Washington, DC: Author. Retrieved from <http://www.ruraledu.org/articles.php?id=2843>

9 Schwartzbeck, T. D. (2009). Declining Counties, Declining School Enrollments. Arlington, VA: American Association of School Administrators. Retrieved from [http://aasa.org/uploadedFiles/Policy\\_and\\_Advocacy/files/DecliningCountiesandEnrollment.pdf](http://aasa.org/uploadedFiles/Policy_and_Advocacy/files/DecliningCountiesandEnrollment.pdf)



- **Qualified professional staff.** With a limited employment pool, many rural communities may hire teachers who do not have advanced degrees or other certifications. Limited staffing also requires teachers in rural areas to provide instruction outside their core area of expertise, which may limit the quality of a student's educational experience.<sup>10</sup>

### Rural Education Strengths: Levers for Dropout Prevention

Research suggests a variety of practices can improve school persistence and completion.<sup>11</sup> These include assigning adult advocates to students at risk of leaving school; providing academic support; personalizing instructional environments; strengthening school-community connections and family engagement; offering active learning opportunities; and enhancing career and technical education programming.

Unlike practices or programs requiring substantial training, staff, or funding, many of these practices are not only feasible in rural schools, they leverage the unique assets of rural communities and rural social dynamics. Some of these assets include strong school-community relationships, robust parent involvement, and intergenerational relationships among community members. Rural schools and districts may also possess a variety of advantages that can support dropout prevention efforts, including less bureaucracy and organizational complexity, lower student-teacher ratios, and a capacity to respond creatively to challenges by virtue of necessity.

In this section, we describe several practices shown by research to have a positive effect on students' high school persistence and completion—and highlight ways in which such practices could engage the strengths of rural communities.

- **School-community collaboration.** Many rural schools are the epicenter of the community, serving as an employment hub for local residents, a gathering place for civic activities, and of course, a place to educate students. Because of the school's central role in the community, rural schools are often open well before and after school hours, offering a place for credit recovery, tutoring, and adult education. This provides a central and ideal setting to ensure that at-risk students' needs are supported.
- **Family engagement.** Various factors facilitate family engagement in rural schools (e.g., rural families often attended the same school, they may work/volunteer at the school, or they have friends or neighbors who work at the school).<sup>12</sup> Rural schools can leverage these strong school-family and school-community connections to engage families of students who are likely to drop out of school.
- **Adult mentors/advocates.** One of the most consistent findings regarding "what works" in dropout prevention is the importance of a positive adult role model in a child's life. These adult role models can serve as mentors, tutors, or advocates for students. Intergenerational relationships are common in rural places; and because students lack anonymity in closely-knit communities, it is more difficult for them to "fall through the cracks."

10 Hammer, P. C., Hughes, G., McClure, C., Reeves, C., & Salgado, D. (2005). Rural Teacher Recruitment and Retention Practices: A Review of the Research Literature, National Survey of Rural Superintendents, and Case Studies of Programs in Virginia. Charleston, WV: Appalachia Educational Laboratory. Retrieved from <http://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED489143.pdf>

11 ICF International and the National Dropout Prevention Center/Network. (2008). Best Practices in Dropout Prevention. Fairfax, VA: Author. Retrieved from <http://www.tea.state.tx.us/WorkArea/linkit.aspx?LinkIdentifier=id&ItemID=6792&libID=6804>; [http://ies.ed.gov/ncee/wwc/pdf/practice\\_guides/dp\\_pg\\_090308.pdf](http://ies.ed.gov/ncee/wwc/pdf/practice_guides/dp_pg_090308.pdf)

12 Herzog, M. J., & Pittman, R. (1995). Home, family, and community: Ingredients in the rural education equation. Phi Delta Kappan, 77(2), 13–18. Retrieved from <http://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED388463.pdf>



- **Active learning.** The term “active learning” refers to teaching and learning strategies that engage and involve students in the learning process, as opposed to the traditional “stand and deliver” model of classroom teaching. Rural schools are in ideal locations for active, place-based learning, such as environmental and outdoor education, local history projects, or community service efforts.<sup>13</sup>
- **Career, technical, and accelerated education.** Rural businesses, civic organizations, and postsecondary institutions often maintain close relationships with community schools. School-community partnerships can facilitate cooperative relationships with businesses and institutions of higher education to support internships, apprenticeships, and accelerated learning (e.g., early college high school or dual credit programs).

### Evidence-based Programs to Support Dropout Prevention Efforts in Rural Areas

Perhaps because high school dropout is stereotyped as an urban issue, or perhaps due to logistical challenges in obtaining a large enough sample to study, research on dropout prevention in rural areas is scarce.<sup>14</sup> None of the dropout prevention programs reviewed by the What Works Clearinghouse were studied in an exclusively rural setting.<sup>15</sup> And, although there are several large, branded dropout prevention programs operating in rural areas (e.g., Communities In Schools, Career Academies, National Guard Youth ChalleNGe Corps), research on these programs tends to focus on urban centers. More research is needed to understand whether the evidence base underlying extant interventions will apply to rural contexts and what specific elements of dropout prevention programming could be viewed as universal or context-specific.

### Looking Forward

For students in many rural areas, the choice to complete high school and attend college is also a choice to move away from home permanently. With limited opportunities available to students with advanced degrees, rural communities can easily lose young talent, which in turn can hinder local economic viability.

Dropping out of school may be a rational decision for students who want to remain in their tightly-knit communities. However, completion of high school at least allows students the ability to make their own life choices, whereas dropping out is likely to constrain them immediately as stable, well-paying jobs for unskilled workers continue to disappear.

Rural schools may confront many challenges associated with their locale, but rural communities also can leverage their numerous strengths to prevent students from dropping out of school. By mobilizing the tightly-knit social fabric and abundant opportunities for active learning in rural communities to engage and retain students, it is possible for rural schools to prevent dropout even in resource-poor environments.

13 Gruenewald, D. A., & Smith, G. (Eds.). (2008). Place-based education in the global age: Local diversity. New York, NY: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates; Loveland, E. (2003). Achieving academic goals through place-based learning: Students in five states show how to do it. Washington, DC: Rural School and Community Trust; Shamah, D., & MacTavish, K. A. (2009). Making room for place-based knowledge in rural classrooms. *Rural Educator*, 30: 2, 1–4.

14 Texas Education Agency. (2009, January 13). News. Austin, TX: Author. Retrieved from [http://www.tea.state.tx.us/news\\_release.aspx?id=3551](http://www.tea.state.tx.us/news_release.aspx?id=3551)

15 What Works Clearinghouse. (2013). Dropout Prevention: Publications and Reviews. Retrieved from <http://ies.ed.gov/ncee/wwc/Topic.aspx?sid=3>



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Allan Porowski is an expert in the design and conduct of comprehensive mixed-method evaluations. He is the Co-Principal Investigator of the Drug Free Communities National Evaluation, which involves an assessment of efforts by more than 650 community coalitions to prevent substance use. He also leads ICF's subcontract on the What Works Clearinghouse and is Principal Investigator for the Accelerating Connections to Employment (ACE) National Evaluation, funded by the U.S. Department of Labor.

He has served as Technical Director for the national evaluation of Communities In Schools (CIS), the nation's largest dropout prevention program. He has led technical aspects of other dropout prevention evaluations, including the Collaborative Dropout Reduction Pilot Program in Texas, Performance Learning Centers in Georgia, and CIS of Texas.

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