THE STATE OF ARIZONA’S RURAL SCHOOLS

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AT A GLANCE

Save Our Schools Arizona Network is committed to ensuring that all children in Arizona have the opportunity to attain an excellent education in their community.

In order to realize this goal, our state leaders must make a concerted effort to revitalize rural education.

- Approximately 135 of Arizona's 223 school districts are considered rural; they serve about 35 percent of all students in the state.

- Struggles: Arizona's rural students are graduating from high school at one of the lowest rates in the nation.

- Rural students in poverty: More than 23% of Arizona's rural children live in poverty, the second-highest state rural poverty rate in the US.

- Stories of success: Between 2016 and 2019, Arizona's rural four-year high school graduation rate increased from 77.5% to 81.8%.
It is critical to understand that rural communities depend heavily on their local public schools to provide many services beyond education. Indeed, they often provide the central fabric of the community.

In addition to relying on public schools to educate their children, rural Arizona families depend on local public schools for social experiences, adult education, sports, food services, transportation, healthcare, and more.

Approximately 135 of Arizona’s 223 school districts are considered rural by the Arizona Rural Schools Association. They serve about 35 percent of all students in the state.

Wes Brownfield, executive director of the Arizona Rural Schools Association, has said the biggest struggle for many districts is to fund and maintain school facilities.

"If I've got a high school with 80 kids in it, first of all, I have to provide the same services as if I had 800 kids," Brownfield said. "When a school building is built, there's money to build the building, but there's never money included in preventive maintenance. It's those remote school districts who have to provide transportation to their students, more often than not, with a bus fleet that is old and suffers from a lack of preventive maintenance."
RURAL EDUCATORS FACE UNIQUE CHALLENGES

Rural teachers and administrators face many unique challenges. Rural schools are often chronically underfunded and unable to rely on tax credits, bonds and overrides like suburban and urban districts. This contributes to low hiring and retention rates, as the vast majority of rural school districts are forced to offer lower salaries and benefits.

Educators in rural communities are often overstretched due to a lack of resources and must teach multiple subjects and grade levels, as well as cover administrative duties, counseling, art and music classes, and extracurriculars. Paired with a frequent lack of access to professional support, the pressures of the job often lead to burnout and stress, which in turn contribute to the massive teacher shortages across Arizona.
While some rural schools thrive, others and their communities continue to face devastating obstacles in the education and well-being of children. Leaders in every state and our nation’s capital must work together to better address the issues facing rural students, schools, and communities with great haste.

- Robert Mahaffey, Executive Director of the Rural School and Community Trust

Furthermore, rural areas offer less access to high-quality, relevant professional development, which contributes to teacher retention. Physical distance from universities and other providers makes access to professional development a challenge, and the programming developed by metropolitan residents may not be relevant to the needs of rural schools. Nationally, rural teachers participate in professional development at lower rates than teachers in all other settings.

Rural administrators face major challenges as well. Due to low staffing, rural principals often take on additional roles, including classroom instruction, management of athletic and other activities, facilities management, and administrative tasks that would usually be delegated to a vice principal or support staff in a school with a larger student population. In some areas, they may even be assigned as a principal across multiple small schools in one district.
WHAT DO RURAL SCHOOLS NEED?

In order to solve this crisis, it is imperative that Arizona state leaders make critical investments in a multi-pronged approach to salvage our rural schools:

- Increased salaries and better benefits for educators and administrators in order to attract and retain the best talent

- Training for teachers and administrators, including mentorship programs that pair new educators with veteran educators

- School infrastructure, including air conditioning, buses, updated paint and carpet and roofing. Students see when their school is well-kept, which signals that an investment in their education is valued by their community

- Wrap-around services for community schools, including a qualified counselor at each school

- Career and technical education (CTE) programs that provide other pathways to post-secondary success

- Updated learning resources, including computers, curriculum, programs, and more, to ensure that rural students have access to engaging, enriching educational experiences

- Reliable broadband access for schools, educators, and students
Recent investments of federal dollars will, fortunately, help cover some temporary costs. Many of these dollars will be used to cover infrastructure and digital needs in the short term. Other dollars will be allocated to stem the teacher shortage and reward teachers who are retained.

However, a lack of real, sustainable, long-term investments from the state will leave our rural schools high and dry when these one-time federal dollars dry up.

According to the 2021 “State of Our Schools Report” from the 21st Century School Fund, the International WELL Building Institute, and the National Council on School Facilities, U.S. schools currently spend roughly $110 billion per year on facilities, which the report asserts is $85 billion less per year in building construction and improvements than would be needed to achieve full modernization.

According to this report, rural areas tend to be further behind than urban and suburban areas. High-poverty districts spent 37 percent less on facilities during the last decade than low-poverty districts, according to the report. Rural school districts, meanwhile, spent half the national average on facilities during the same period.

- Cole Young, Superintendent Mohave Valley Elementary School District
More than half of Arizona’s over 220 school districts serve rural areas. These students deserve access to the highest quality education, and their communities rely on the resources these schools afford.

However, many of Arizona’s rural schools receive less funding from the state due to outdated formulas and are forced to seek additional funding from local taxpayers.

Unlike suburban districts, rural communities cannot easily offset state funding losses with local taxes. Similarly, bonds and overrides are not often realistic as an option in rural communities.

Inadequate funding is the most significant barrier that rural schools face throughout the country. In the United States, rural districts receive only 17% of the state’s education budget, despite increased costs for transportation and services in rural and smaller schools.

- 67% of rural students are from low-income families
- Over 23% of Arizona’s rural children live in poverty
- Just 53% of rural minority students graduate from high school
- 5% of rural students are English language learners
- Less than 30% of rural high school school juniors and seniors take AP classes
Buckeye Elementary School District
- 5,560 students
- $4,730 state spending per student
- $2,055 less than the national average of state spending ($6,785 per student*)
- 860 students with special education IEPs
- Median household income: $61,455

Prescott Unified
- 4,094 students
- $1,863 state spending per student
- $4,922 less than the national average of state spending ($6,785 per student*)
- 504 students with special education IEPs
- Median household income: $57,987

Kingman Unified School District
- 7,092 students
- $2,458 state spending per student
- $4,327 less than the national average of state spending ($6,785 per student*)
- 1,257 students with special education IEPs
- Median household income: $42,860

Sierra Vista
- 5,541 students
- $3,537 state spending per student
- $3,248 less than the national average of state spending ($6,785 per student*)
- 684 students with special education IEPs
- Median household income: $58,285

*The average state spending on K12 education is $6,785 per student. Source: National Center for Education Statistics
Lobbyists and special interests pushing private school vouchers typically serve national groups that look for the biggest profit. Vouchers disproportionately benefit suburban families, while providing no benefit to rural communities. These groups often play by the numbers: they can profit more from students in more densely populated urban and suburban communities. When these special interest groups work to push vouchers at all costs, they drain public education funding for the whole state — leaving rural schools in a lurch.

Funding for rural schools has been on the decline for nearly 30 years, and extreme budget cuts enacted during the Great Recession in 2008 have not yet been restored. Five percent (5%) of Arizona’s private school students were enrolled in private schools 20 years ago; that percent remains the same today. However, Arizona taxpayers now spend $300,000,000 on private school (ESA and STO) vouchers for that same 5% of student enrollment, primarily in Maricopa and Pima County urban and suburban centers, while our rural students go without.

“ESAs are not beneficial to rural Arizona... so funding to make it the best possible place for an education should be a priority,” said Don German, executive director of Arizona Rural Schools Association. In addition, the results-based formula instituted in 2017 again leaves struggling rural schools behind by penalizing them financially for lagging results due to poverty and lack of resources. “Results-based funding only works in a totally even playing field for all students and rural students are already starting behind.”

It’s critical to note that 76 percent of Arizona’s school districts fall into the categories of sparse and average districts. In these districts, the public schools serve the entire range of student needs; vouchers used by urban and suburban students merely strip funding from rural schools.

While voucher programs drain resources from all public schools, they disproportionately hurt rural public schools by exacerbating their very real challenges, including low teacher pay, lack of funding for school infrastructure and transportation services, limited ability to offer professional development for teachers and administrators, limited access to advanced coursework for students, a lack of extracurricular and enrichment programs, low college achievement rates, and more.
"While some rural schools thrive, far too many rural students face nothing less than a national emergency. Many rural schools and districts face vastly inequitable funding and simply cannot provide the opportunities that many suburban and urban schools do."

Robert Mahaffey, the executive director of the Rural School and Community Trust.

It is time for Arizona leaders to prioritize raising per-student spending for all of our students, particularly our rural students who have been hit hardest by repeated and unrestored budget cuts. Our rural communities, our future workforce, and our state economy depend on it.
References


