Policy Brief

Understanding the Gap Between Rural Students and Higher Education

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Abstract

Approximately one in ten students in California reside in a rural community. A study by researchers at the University of Massachusetts at Amherst found that K-12 students from rural communities are less likely to attend a higher education institution and have higher college dropout rates than their urban peers. Many factors may contribute to this statistic. However, this policy brief focuses especially on how and if the lack of an a-g curriculum and college preparatory classes available in rural school districts play a significant role in students transferring to a four-year university and their retention rates. I conclude with two recommendations: 1) moving away from the average daily attendance as a component to be calculated for public school funding and instead using an average daily membership and 2) establishing a statewide virtual school network that would allow students to take classes from other districts.

Introduction

California leads the nation in having the strongest economy and largest population. It is arguably one of the country's wealthiest socially and politically influential states (Where Does California Place in the U.S. News Best States Rankings?, (2020). However, California continues to fall behind in its K-12 public education system. A recent study ranked California's K-12 public education system at 44 in the United States when analyzing and gathering 42 metrics into three key indicators, student success, student physical and mental safety, and school quality (Scholaroo, 2022). Even more so, K-12 students from rural communities in California are less likely to attend a higher education institution and have higher college dropout rates than their urban peers (Dennon, 2021). While many factors may contribute to this statistic, this report examines how and if the lack of a diverse a-g curriculum and college preparatory classes in rural school districts plays a significant role in students transferring to a four-year university and their retention rates.

As of 2019, one in 10 students in California, more than half a million, live in rural communities, and while eight out of 10 students graduate from high school, many are not college-ready (Jones, 2019). The lack of resources regarding the curriculum and college preparation offered in these communities can be a motivating factor for

the alarming statistic. In the 2018-2019 school year, 28% of rural students completed their A-G required coursework for admission to a University of California (UC) or California State University (CSU), as compared to 41% of students from more populated regions (Jones). College preparation is an issue that goes beyond getting students to fill out applications and submit their transcripts. It can begin as early as elementary school and when a student first begins high school. Although other issues impact college preparation and the curriculum offered, such as the digital divide, teacher recruitment and retention, and district spending and implications, California has the economic, societal, and moral imperative to boost college readiness in rural areas.

The California Department of Education (2022) states in its mission that "California will provide a world-class education for all students, from early childhood to adulthood." The disparities among rural and urban students reinforce that not all students in California are experiencing a "world-class education" from early childhood to adulthood.

The California State Legislature has recognized that school districts have different needs and need more financial assistance. The Local Control Funding Formula (LCFF) was passed in 2013 by the State Legislature to give school districts control over how to spend state funding while requiring them to "increase or improve services" for high-need students in proportion to the increased funding these students generate (Hill & Ugo, 2015). However, since districts have spending flexibility and extra funding for high-need students depends on their districtwide enrollment levels, the LCFF can be harmful when high-need schools in districts with relatively low overall shares of high-need students do not get the funding they need (Hill and Ugo).

This report briefly explores underlying issues tied to rural education, such as staffing challenges, lack of college preparatory classes, financial implications, and the digital divide. This report then dives into a case study on Colusa County's Office of Education. It ends by analyzing the findings and providing recommendations for state policymakers to consider when looking to improve California's rural public education system.

Background on Financing K-12 Public Schools

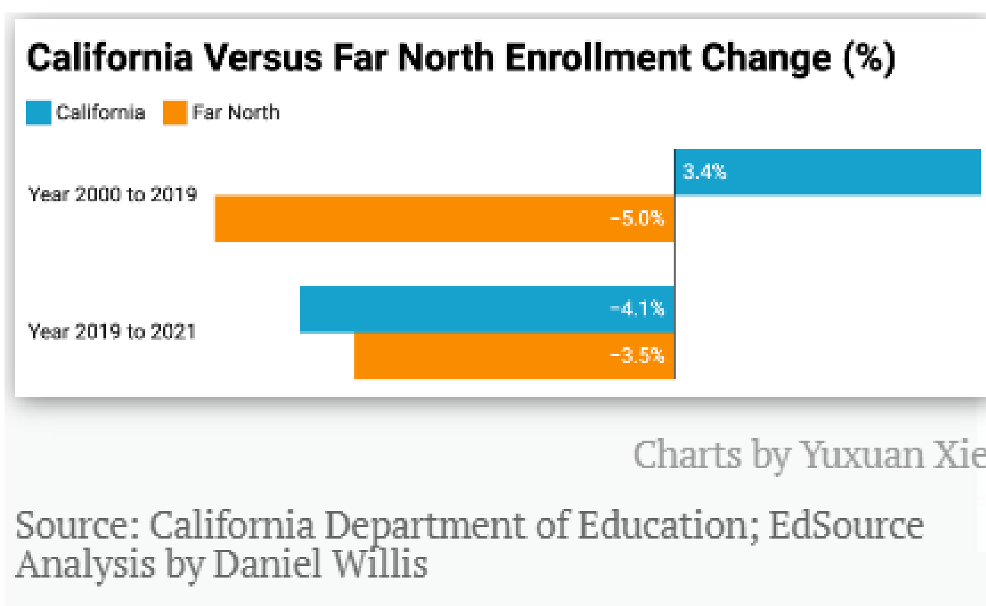
Proposition 13, which voters passed in 1978, did three significant things; capped property taxes at 1% of the purchase price, permitted assessed values to increase no more than 2% annually, and allowed the property to be reassessed only when significant improvements had been made to the property or when it was sold. Proposition 13 is critical to funding public education since property taxes are part of what funds public schools in California. The new initiative caused a vast reduction in revenue and pushed California from having one of the highest per-student funding in schools to one of the lowest in the nation (Chiotakis, 2020). To address this issue, voters passed Proposition 98, which guaranteed a portion, around 40%, of the state's general fund to K-12 schools and community colleges. However, proponents of the initiative envisioned legislators to use this requirement as the minimum level of funding and have, instead, served as the maximum level of funding for public education (Fensterwald, 2022).

After almost two decades of California lagging behind on per-student spending, California is slightly above the national average as of September 2022 (Lafortune & Herrera, 2022).

According to the most recent data from the Department of Education, in 2018-2019, the average per-student spending on current operations, such as staffing and materials, was $14,913 (Lafortune & Herrera). That is $1,000 more than the national average of $13,831.

Although California has increased its per-student funding over the past decades, surpassing the national average, some challenges lie ahead. One prominently noticeable issue is that California's K-12 student enrollment is declining mainly due to falling birth rates and net migration (Fensterwald & Willis, 2022). Lower enrollment levels hurt public schools since they are primarily financed by the students' average daily attendance (ADA) (Fensterwald & Willis). For many rural schools in Northern California, every year that enrollment drops, the less money they will receive. Ultimately, forcing schools to lay off staff in a region that is already scarce of jobs and making cuts to amenities like an after-school program can turn people away even more from seeking to reside in the communities.

Figure 1: California Versus Northern California Enrollment Change From 2000-2021



Northern California, in this context, is considered "the Far North," a region stretching from the rice fields north of Sacramento to the Oregon border.

The far north of California is predominately rural, and declining enrollment has affected the region for nearly two decades. Figure 1 shows the enrollment changes between 2000 to 2019 and 2019 to 2021. It is evident that declining enrollment in California's most remote regions has been an overlooked issue in the state. However, the state and the far north lost student growth due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Now, schools all over the state are feeling the financial effects of having less money come in.

Rural Education Challenges

In this section:

Teacher Recruitment & Retention

The Digital Divide

Lack of a Diverse Curriculum
& College Preparatory Classes

District Spending & Implications

While living in a rural region comes with the advantages of having a close-knit community and a mellow lifestyle, it also comes with disadvantages. These pastoral communities' social classes are often comprised of agricultural farmers and low-income workers. A region is generally considered rural if the population density is less than 500 people per square mile and is fewer than 2,500 people (U.S. Department of Agriculture, 2019). Nearly a quarter-million students attend rural schools in California, which commonly face numerous barriers relating to having less diverse extracurricular opportunities and fewer employment opportunities than compared to urban communities (Ledger and Corona Valencia, n.d). More specifically, teacher recruitment and retention, the digital divide, the lack of a diverse curriculum and college preparatory classes, and district spending and implications are all substantial obstacles that contribute to the rural and urban divide.

This section of the policy report will explore these issues, with the main focus being the lack of a diverse curriculum and college preparatory classes. I will also conduct a case study on the Colusa County Office of Education, a rural school district in the heart of the Sacramento Valley, and explore how they navigate rural challenges and post-high school opportunities.

Teacher Recruitment and Retention

Recruiting qualified teachers to relocate to secluded areas in California with low pay can be an uphill battle for many small school districts. Since the cost of living is generally lower in California's rural areas, the starting salary for a teacher in a small school district is $46,844 to $50,126 (California Department of Education, 2022). A teacher starting in a mid-to-large school would be paid thousands more. In addition, while a teacher looking to relocate to a rural area may have a secure job on the line, it can be difficult for their partners to find work in a region that hardly offers jobs that pay a living wage, which leaves many of the community members among the working poor (Thiede, Lichter, & Slack, 2016). According to the Journal of Rural Studies, despite one's job qualifications,

a problem rural workers are at risk of is poverty because the jobs available to them are low-paying (Thiede, Lichter, & Slack, 2016). For the educators that do stick around in rural communities, the Hechinger Report reveals that teachers' mental health often declines as they experience feelings of loneliness, culture shock, and taking on heavier workloads to make up for the teacher shortage in the area, resulting in high attrition rates since teachers usually leave rural regions for more attractive locations with better-paying jobs elsewhere (Morton, 2022).

Nearly **1 in 5** public school students attend a rural school in the United States

The COVID-19 pandemic further complicates retaining educators in rural communities. Teachers are expected to teach in communities with a lack of broadband internet access at home and, when back in the classrooms, are encouraged to cover out-of-pocket expenses such as cleaning supplies, personal protective equipment, and other pandemic essentials (Morton, 2022). Additionally, social distancing forces many people to isolate themselves from others, making it harder to build a sense of community and can further strain the recruitment and transition of educators from urban regions.

As previously mentioned, a region is considered rural if the population density is less than 500 people per square mile and is fewer than 2,500 people. Therefore, with fewer people living in these communities, the supply of housing and jobs is limited, making it almost impossible for teachers to relocate to their own places and, even more so, for their spouses to find a job in the region. As well as, recruiting new well-qualified teachers for each school subject can be difficult and forces current educators to teach more than one subject.

The Digital Divide

The COVID-19 pandemic notably highlighted how profound the digital divide in

California is. Many schools abruptly shifted from in-person instruction to a virtual format, which has never been required or done before in K-12 public schools. At the beginning of the pandemic, 1.7 million California students did not have access to a connected device for distance learning, and around 1.1 million lacked broadband access (Gao, Hayes, and Starr, 2022). Millions of students across the state were expected to keep up with their coursework and continue to advance to the next grade while needing the proper materials or information.

Rural households have the lowest broadband subscription rates in California, in this degree, learning loss is still something many schools are grappling with today (Gao, Hayes, Starr). Rural internet infrastructure often lags behind because many internet service providers do not profit from serving rural areas where a small population density makes building and maintaining the infrastructure costlier (Gao, 2022). As a result, the school districts in these regions are less likely than urban districts to equip students with Wi-Fi hotspots or electronic devices to take home, negatively affecting students' academic success (Gross & Opalka, 2020). Addressing the digital divide in an economy that thrives off digital platforms is fundamental in ensuring that all students reach their full academic potential no matter where they live.

Lack of A-G Curriculum and College Preparatory Classes

Students from rural school districts have lower college enrollment and degree completion rates than nonrural districts (Johnson, 2019). A multitude of underlying factors can provoke low enrollment levels in these communities, such as; the fear of the unknown, a solid connection to the local community, and not having the academic resources to properly guide students to higher education.

In 2019, only 28% of rural students took the required a-g coursework needed for admission to a UC or CSU (Jones, 2019). A factor that can play into this low statistic is

that not all high schools in California offer a complete a-g course sequence. According to a report by the Public Policy Institute of California, during the 2016-2017 school year, 12% of high schools in the state did not offer a full math sequence, 14% did not offer four years of a-g approved English courses, and small and rural schools were even less likely to offer these full course sequences (Gao, 2017). Figure 2 below shows the percentage of high schools offering the full a-g sequence in high poverty, high minority, small, and rural schools.

Figure 2: Small and Rural High Schools Less Likely to Offer the Full A-G Sequence

SMALL AND RURAL HIGH SCHOOLS ARE LESS LIKELY TO OFFER THE FULL A–G SEQUENCE

	All	High poverty	High minority	Small	Rural
% high schools offering the full a–g sequence in...					
English	86%	86%	86%	64%	78%
Math	88%	86%	87%	65%	77%
Science	86%	86%	87%	61%	73%
Social science	90%	89%	89%	75%	85%
% high school graduates completing a–g	46%	46%	49%	33%	31%
Number of high schools	1,607	540	577	401	244

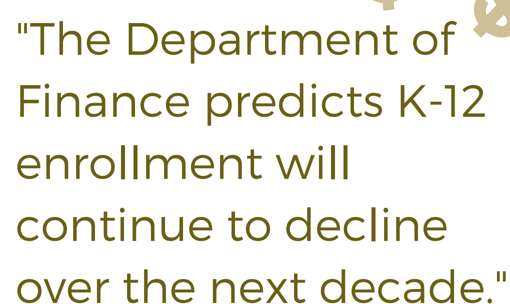
Sources: Course offerings from the California Department of Education, 2016–17. School a–g completion rates from the California Department of Education, 2015–16.
Notes: Table includes regular high schools only. The average a–g completion rate is 30 percent if we include alternative schools, adult education centers, continuation schools, juvenile court schools, special education schools, and other non-regular schools. The full a–g sequence is defined as follows: at least four courses in English, three in math, two in science, and two in social science.
From: PPIC Blog, November, 2017.

Students from rural communities that do attend a four-year university are more likely to drop out than compared to urban students. The University of Virginia's Institute for Advanced Studies in Culture found that people from rural regions were twice as likely to feel powerless and marginalized as their peers from nonrural communities when going to college (Gettinger, 2019). This is mainly in part because many rural students come from low-income backgrounds, are first-generation, and may live far away from their nearest campus (Dennon). These students face steep financial, societal, and economic barriers to attending a four-year university, with little guidance on how to successfully graduate from a higher education institution. The overwhelming culture shock a city-bound rural student experiences may be too much to handle when they can always resort to their work-deprived small hometowns to land a job.

K-12 District Spending and Implications

Education funding for California's K-12 students largely depends on the number of students enrolled in school. However, enrollment is dropping, and the overall population is not rising as quickly as in other states. For the first time in its 170-year history, California lost a congressional seat in 2020 (Ronayne, 2021). More and more people and big businesses are fleeing the sunshine state to settle in a more business-friendly and affordable state like Texas and Florida. As a result, long-term demographic projections from the Department of Finance predict that K-12 enrollment will continue to decline over the next decade due to a drop in birth rates, more people leaving the state, and less international immigration (Lafortune & Prunty, 2022).

The major demographic changes ultimately affect K-12 education since state funding is tied to enrollment. COVID-19 has aided in the drop in enrollment, especially in kindergarten and first grade, leaving many districts and counties to deal with the financial struggles of downsizing over the next decade (Lafortune & Herrera). Fortunately, some rural school districts see increased classrooms as more people leave expensive urban areas to settle for an affordable lifestyle. However, the sudden influx of new students for some districts with stagnant enrollment levels leaves administrators with the challenge of recruiting more teachers and ensuring they have enough resources to support the students. The LCFF, passed in 2013 by the State Legislature, gave local education agencies (LEAs) control over how they can spend state funding while requiring them to increase or improve services for high-need students (Hill & Ugo). Specifically, the LCFF works as follows:



1. **All districts receive base funding for each student.** The base grant is greatest for 9th through 12th grades (ED100, 2017).

2. **For each high-needs student, districts receive 20% additional funding.** High-need students are classified as English-language learners, in poverty, and/or in foster care (ED100).
3. If more than 55% of a district's children qualify as high-needs, they will receive additional funds. Specifically, **a district will receive 60% more than the base grant for each high-need student beyond the 55% threshold** (ED100).

The problem with the LCFF is that not all LEAs utilize the money as they should. A study by Edunomics Lab found that in 2020, two out of 14 school districts spent money on high-needs students in proportion to the additional money received (ED100). The Local Control Accountability Plan (LCAP) is a document intended to hold school districts accountable by being transparent with community members about how these funds are being spent—although the accounting detail is minimal. Ultimately, the LCFF can be hurtful to small and rural school districts that do not have a larger high-need student population and also face a sharp decline in enrollment. However, it can also greatly benefit those rural regions with a larger high-need student population and increases in enrollment.

Where This Leaves Us

A digital divide and inadequate funding to rural school districts ultimately trickle down to a teacher recruitment and retention dilemma and lack of a-g curriculum available. With more and more people leaving California and enrollment levels declining, the less funding a school district receives, making districts limit how they can spend their funds. Less can be invested

in increasing a teacher's salary; thus, educators turn to higher-paying regions to work or leave the profession entirely. When districts cannot compete with urban school districts, it is difficult for them to recruit qualified educators to fill the a-g curriculum students need to complete in order to attend a four-year university. The digital divide can also prevent students from attending a four-year university since they have limited access to online resources.

Case Study: Colusa County Office of Education

Why CCOE

I chose CCOE for my case study since it is mainly rural and because of my familiarity with Colusa County. My entire K-12 educational experience has been in a rural community. After graduating from Colusa High School in 2016 and going to California State University, Sacramento, in the fall of 2016, I quickly realized the disparities in rural education compared to my urban peers' education. My first college class made me aware of what I have been deprived of in terms of lack of diversity, extracurricular activities and having my high school electives limited to agricultural classes. I want to learn more about the biggest challenges the administrators in CCOE face.

Background

Colusa County, approximately 1,156 square miles, is located an hour Northwest of California's State Capitol, Sacramento. The county encompasses the school districts of Arbuckle, Williams, Colusa, and Maxwell and is best known for its agriculture in rice, tomatoes, and almonds (SeeCalifornia, n.d.). The 2020 State Census revealed that Colusa County's population was 21,902, and only 14.9% had a Bachelor's degree or higher (Colusa County, California, 2020).

Colusa County Office of Education (CCOE) is a public agency that administers various programs for the community's youth, children, and families. It specifically supports the county's schools by providing academic, business, consulting, and vocational services. Additionally, they offer educational programs for students with special needs, adults, preschool children, and wards of the Juvenile Court system. Between the California State Department of Education and local school districts, CCOE serves as the middle person, representing the districts on specific issues before the State government (Colusa County Office Of Education, 2022).

"The 2020 State Census revealed that only 14.9% of Colusa County had a Bachelor's degree or higher."

In March 2020, the county was criticized for having the highest unemployment rate in California (21.4%), which negatively correlates to the financing of schools in the area (Employment Development Department, 2022). Today the unemployment rate in Colusa County is 7%, with 800 people in the county being unemployed and 10,640 being employed (Employment Development Department). Districts that face a high-poverty population get less money per student, ultimately disadvantaging students of color (Allegretto, Garcia, & Weiss, 2022).

Interview with CCOE's Superintendent of Schools

Having the honor to interview Colusa County Office of Education's Superintendent of Schools, Michael West, and Pierce Joint Unified School District Superintendent, Carol Geyer, I got an honest perspective on how administrators juggle the complexities of rural education. As a Superintendent of Schools, Michael West's primary responsibilities include the following:

- Superintending all the schools in the county
- Approving the LCAPs

- Reviewing and approving schools budgets
- Administering all county offices of education schools and programs, among countless other things.

I met with Michael West on November 1, 2022, through Zoom for an hour and asked him a series of questions, such as “What are the biggest challenges you currently face as a county superintendent? How are you navigating this?” and “How difficult is it to recruit qualified teachers for Colusa County? Is there a plan for retaining staff?” I chose to interview Michael West because aside from being the current superintendent of schools for the county, he was also my vice principal when I was attending Colusa High; therefore, he understands the county’s education from different positions he has had.

West started his career in Kansas, teaching physical sciences for three years. He then started his own business for six years in Wyoming and relocated to Colusa County, where he started teaching in the alternative education high school in Colusa. Soon after, West moved to be the assistant vice principal, and in 2013, he looked for additional challenges to take on in the community. He decided to run for county superintendent and has been doing it for the past eight years.

When asked about the challenges CCOE currently faces in the community, West mentioned that due to the COVID-19 pandemic, many students are still struggling with learning loss. Students were taken away from their usual learning environment. They were forced into a virtual learning operation which many of the instructors in Colusa County were not prepared to do, and in an area with a poor broadband connection (M. West, personal communication, November 1, 2022). Even further, the county needed more funds to provide every student with the right technology for virtual learning. The COVID-19 pandemic added another layer of challenges for the county when its

population, which is usually stagnant, increased due to more families relocating from California's expensive cities to more affordable communities (M. West, personal communication). For example, West noted that in 2020, California had 6.1 million students and around 10,000 schools. Today, California has around 5.4 million students enrolled in 9,006 schools, losing 700,000 students that have either left the state or gone elsewhere. Cities in Alameda County have closed four schools since the start of the pandemic since many people cannot afford to live in the region.

Another hardship hitting the state and Colusa County is the teacher shortage. West mentioned that the state currently has a shortage of around 25,000 teachers. Hence, the county has to compete even harder with nearby urban districts in recruiting educators (M. West, personal communication). The county competes by increasing their wages as much as possible; however, in some cases, they cannot offer signing bonuses or advantages because they do not have the funding (M. West, personal communication). On top of that, finding affordable housing for a job with an already low salary is nearly impossible when attempting to relocate to the county. A trend the county also sees is that educators will only teach for a couple of years, and then they eventually leave for a higher-paying district elsewhere. The high attrition rate makes it bothersome for students to build connections with their teachers and consumes much time for administrators to bring in new staff and hire constantly. West argues that California's Commission on Teacher Credentialing, which serves as the state's standards board for educator preparation for public schools and the licensing and credentialing of

professional educators in the state, complicates recruiting out-of-state educators to California since they would need to go to school for an additional year and a half if they would like to teach in the state (M. West, personal communication). Figure 3 below shows each district in the county's high school completers and the college enrollment percentage. It further shows how many students will attend a University of California, California State University, or California Community College. This data is collected from the 2019-2020 school year.

Figure 3: College-Going Rate for Colusa County

College Enrollment Timeframe: 12 Months

Reset Filters

Name	High School Completers	High School Completers Enrolled in College	College-Going Rate	Enrolled In-State				Enr
				University of California	California State University	California Community College	Private 2- and 4-Year College	4-Year C (Public/P
Colusa County Office of Education	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	
Colusa Unified	121	71	58.7%	2	7	53	0	
Maxwell Unified	22	14	63.6%	0	1	11	0	
Pierce Joint Unified	102	52	51.0%	4	9	30	0	
Williams Unified	95	39	41.1%	5	9	25	0	

Interview with Pierce Joint Unified School District Superintendent

I virtually met with the district superintendent of Pierce Joint Unified School District, Carol Geyer, through Zoom on November 3, 2022. West recommended that I also meet with Geyer since she deals directly with post-educational opportunities for students in Arbuckle. Geyer's responsibilities consist of planning, organizing, monitoring, and coordinating the school's operations in the district. Geyer grew up in the county her whole life and has been Arbuckle's superintendent for the past nine years. I asked Geyer

seven questions, three of them being “How difficult is it to recruit qualified teachers for Colusa County? Is there a plan for retaining staff?”, “What is PJUSD’s current framework to ensure that graduates leave the school system with the opportunity to choose the future they desire? Whether that be college, employment, and/or creatively designing their own future.” and “What do you think is the underlying cause of the gap between rural students and higher education?”

I took away four main things from the interview.

1. Rural school districts can struggle with finding a qualified teacher in a specific subject.
2. Remote districts like Arbuckle are filled with many first-generation students.
3. Utilizing and applying for grants can help advance a district by increasing the number of counselors available.
4. Geyer wears too many hats for the role of superintendent, which can lead to a messy transition to the next superintendent.

When I asked Geyer how difficult it is to recruit and retain teachers, she mentioned it is one of the biggest challenges she faces in the district. The biggest struggle is recruiting a well-qualified math teacher. The district is located 30 minutes north of a nearby urban community and 40 minutes west of the other nearby urban region. Due to the proximity, PJUSD finds itself competing with the local urban regions by offering one of the highest teachers’ salaries in the county (C. Geyer, personal communication, November 3, 2022). PJUSD seeks to put teachers first and attempts to create a tight-knit community that aids an educator in having a sense of belonging, which can prolong their careers in Arbuckle.

Arbuckle’s largest racial/ethnic groups are Hispanics (76.3%), followed by White (20%) (United State Census Bureau, 2020). The community has a vast majority of first-

generation students, which Geyer argues could be a factor as to why many of the students in the small town do not choose the pathway to higher education. First-generation students may be fearful of the unknown, do not know how to navigate the financial aspects of paying for their education, and do not have parents who can guide and mentor them throughout their higher education experience (C. Geyer, personal communication). Fortunately, the school district requires high school freshmen to complete a Get Focused, Stay Focused dual-enrollment course with the nearby Woodland Community College. Students receive college credits for completing the course while working on discovering what their passion and strong skill sets are, what colleges are offering those skills, informing students on the cost of college, and what kind of lifestyle and income they can receive if they were to pursue the job they are interested in (C. Geyer, personal communication).

"Underinvestment takes a toll on the access to opportunities for rural children, such as the absence of services most schools see as commonplace, like instructional coaches for teachers, instructional aides, therapists of all kinds, and administrators." — Julie Boesch & Tim Taylor

Pierce Joint Unified School District has four counselors whom each serve a different purpose. One high school counselor focuses on college readiness, and another counselor focuses on prevention and intervention. The other two counselors are college and career technicians, which provides the students with additional mentors to hold them accountable to their post-high school plan. One college and career technician at PJUSD is a counselor that works specifically on credit recovery for seniors. Essentially, a student who is failing a class is required for one class period a day to work on repairing their grade. The counselor also contacts the student's family to let them know how their child is progressing on making up that credit so they can graduate.

Considering that Geyer has been the superintendent for the last nine years and is

entirely responsible for planning, organizing, monitoring, and coordinating the school's operations in the district, including writing grants for the district, I was curious if there was a current onboarding system in place for the next district superintendent. Geyer revealed that although there is no current onboarding system, she would likely bring on someone familiar with the community and someone whom she feels can fill her shoes.

It is evident that rural school districts must overcome a sufficient number of barriers to successfully increase their college-going rate. Throughout the policy brief, I have transiently covered a few issues rural communities face: the teacher recruitment and retention challenges, the financial implications, the digital divide, and the lack of college preparatory classes and a-g courses offered. However, it is important to note that there are other factors that play into the disparities in a rural school district, like not enough jobs in the community for an educator's spouse or the fact that one in four rural children live in poverty (U.S. Department of Agriculture, Economic Research Service, 2020). Altogether the research I gathered on rural education challenges and the case study on the Colusa County Office of Education further emphasizes the need for policymakers to pass legislation that would alleviate the fiscal, monetary, and social divide between rural and urban communities.

Recommendations

Rural education is a topic that is frequently overlooked in California politics—leaving more than half a million students in the shadows. There are several approaches lawmakers can take that could increase the college-going rate for rural school districts. I propose two recommendations that can benefit rural school districts and their students.

1 Move away from attendance-based funding.

Most recently, Senator Anthony J. Portantino (D - Burbank) introduced SB 830, which, if enacted, would provide supplemental funding to local education agencies, including school districts, charter schools, and county offices of education, based on average daily enrollment as opposed to attendance (Supplemental Education Funding based on Average Daily Membership, 2022). California has been using the ADA method for more than five decades and is one of six states that still use that method (the other states being Idaho, Kentucky, Mississippi, Missouri, and Texas).

The proposed legislation would define Average Daily Membership (ADM) as the quotient of the aggregate enrollment days for all pupils in a school district or county office of education from transitional kindergarten to grade 12 and divide that by the total number of instructional days for the local education agency (LEA) in an academic year. Opponents of the bill fear that moving to an ADM funding model would

disincentivize schools to address absenteeism; however, SB 830 would require LEAs to use at least 30% of their supplemental education funding to existing LEA expenditures to address chronic absenteeism and habitual truancy (Supplemental Education Funding based on Average Daily Membership, 2022).

The passage of SB 830 (Portantino) would tremendously benefit rural school districts that commonly have a larger share of working-class families in the community. Poor students are two to three times more likely to be chronically absent and face the most harm since their schools lack the resources to make up for learning loss (Attendance Works, n.d.). Penalizing school districts by providing less funding to the districts that face a higher number of absent students only prevents rural schools from being able to invest in better practices.

Furthermore, many parents do not fully understand the financial implications that can take away critical dollars from districts when scheduling medical, dental, or optometry appointments for their children. The ADA method has done nothing to address chronic absenteeism and truancy in the state. Moving away from this method and focusing on what issues truly cause absent students and then launching programs with the funds received from the ADM formula would be a better approach to target absenteeism in the state.

2 Establish a statewide virtual school network so students in rural schools can enroll in online courses offered by other districts.

Rural school districts often do not have the capacity or resources to offer students qualified educators to teach in diverse subject areas. Establishing a statewide virtual school network would reduce the burden on California's rural public schools for recruiting and retaining teachers in remote areas. It would also provide students from rural schools the opportunity to enroll in classes offered in other districts across the state. States like Florida, Wisconsin, Texas, and Georgia have already taken the step of establishing a virtual school network to help provide middle and high school students with academic courses and test prep resources (Gao, 2017).

Texas's Virtual School Network (TXVSN) offers collaborative, interactive, and instructor-led classes taught-by state certified and credentialed teachers who are trained in effective online instruction (Texas Education Agency, 2021). The Texas Education Agency oversees and administers TXVSN and sets standards for and approves courses and professional development for online teachers, and has fiscal responsibility for the networks (Texas Education Agency, 2021).

The TXVSN model is comprised of two components —the statewide catalog of supplemental high school courses and the full-time online school program. The statewide supplemental course catalog provides

online courses for high school graduation to public school students and allows students to enroll in high school, Advanced Placement, and dual-credit courses offered through the network by approved providers (Texas Education Agency, 2021). The catalog partners with public schools to meet the needs of their students. The full-time online school program provides students in grades 3-12 with free, full-time virtual instruction. The instruction is 100 percent virtual, and students in the program are not required to be physically present on campus during instruction (Texas Education Agency, 2021).

Since not all California high schools have the resources to offer a full a-g course sequence and rural schools are less likely to be able to offer the full course sequence, modeling California's Virtual School Network after systems existing in states like Texas would provide California's rural students and schools with equitable access to quality education.

Conclusion

Rural school districts face a unique set of challenges than urban school districts. Smaller and remote schools are less likely to offer a full a-g course sequence and college preparatory classes, which results in K-12 students from rural communities being less likely to attend a higher education institution and, thus, having greater college dropout rates than their urban peers. The state can do more to help rural school districts from falling behind, My two recommendations— shifting from an ADA to ADM funding method and establishing a statewide virtual school network— would allow rural students and schools an equitable educational experience and improve the college-going and retention rates.

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