



Printable Edition

Note: This resource includes all articles from the March 2011 Rural Policy Matters newsletter.

Facts and Figures About States With Highest Percentages of Rural Students Qualifying for Special Education Services

Question: In which five states is the percentage of rural students who qualify for special education services is highest?

Answer: New Jersey, at 27.3%, has the highest rate of rural students with an Individualized Education Plan (IEP), followed by New Mexico (18.5%), Arizona (18.1%), Kentucky, (18.1%), Maine (18%), and West Virginia (17.7%). The national average is 14.0%.

Rural North Carolinians Address Important Education Policies

Many schools use harsh and punitive disciplinary policies against students, often for minor infractions. Many such schools also implement harsh punishments unevenly among groups of students.

When the North Carolina Rural Education Working Group (NCREWG) got started, one of the issues many members were concerned about was disciplinary practices in their schools. They looked at the data, which confirmed that many North Carolina schools are suspending students, especially black males, at disproportionately high rates. Then members got active in their own communities to help parents understand the rights of their children — and to help schools find better ways to promote appropriate behavior among students.

So when the group held their first conference, earlier this month, discipline issues figured prominently in the agenda.

“We picked topics for the conference that were affecting a lot of us,” explains Marvis Henderson-Daye, REWG board member from Vance County. “And we picked presenters who were addressing those things effectively. It was a way to reach out to other people who are dealing with the same things that we are.”

North Carolina Rural Education Working Group

NCREWG began in 2006 as a way to bring together people from rural communities who were interested in addressing issues and policies affecting their schools.

Alonzo Braggs, Vice Chair of NCREWG explains: “We were dealing with Title I issues, parental rights and privileges, an alarming suspension rate, a dropout problem, and working for better health for our children and our rural communities, matters that rural school districts may not have had someone doing research or advocacy on. Most of our problems have to do with legislation and policy.”

NCREWG members are active in their communities on issues affecting children and young people. Several members operate after school and summer programs for students, help families find the resources they need, and work on community development. NCREWG is a way to leverage their common interests to make a difference, especially in issues that relate to policy.

Marvis Henderson-Daye says that by bringing people together NCREWG helps share information. “NCREWG rejuvenates me and gets me energized for my own non-profit work. It’s good to have camaraderie with the group and not feel like it’s all just you.”

The group also works to educate people in their own communities. “We educate parents on the issues. There’s a lot

they don't know about what their students are entitled to and what's available to them," explains Doris Mack, NCREWG treasurer and Halifax County resident. "We get legislative updates that we share with our communities. When we need answers we try to get information from the best sources so parents and community residents can let their legislators know how they feel."

NCREWG Conference

After working informally for several years, NCREWG decided to begin seeking non-profit status this year. "We are setting up our 501(c)3 [non-profit] organization," explains Braggs. "And we wanted to do something to present ourselves to the community at large, to let the community know who we are, what we are doing, and why we are here. This was our debut event."

The day-long March 5th conference in Wilson, North Carolina attracted some 60 participants from a number of counties. Attendees included local school board members, school staff, parents, community residents, and students.

Anthony Clark, NCREWG President, welcomed participants and explained the purpose of the conference.

Brandy Bynum of Action for Children, delivered the keynote session, "Addressing Problems with School Suspension: Practice and Policy Strategies." The address set the stage for much of the rest of the day.

Following the plenary, participants chose among four breakout sessions. In "Positive Behavior Intervention Support," Canecca Davis, Principal of the Mariam Boyd School in Warren County described the ways her school had implemented the PBIS program, a school-wide program that supports and rewards positive behavior among all students and provides targeted positive interventions to students who are having difficulty. The program has improved the overall environment of the school and dramatically reduced the number of disciplinary incidents.

In "Student's Rights and Responsibilities," Keith Howard of Legal Aid North Carolina, presented information on the rights of students and parents when faced with school suspension. It also explored alternatives and options and discussed responsibilities of students and schools.

The "Building Leadership through Action Research," session, led by Jereann King Johnson who lives in Warren County, North Carolina and works for the Rural Trust, engaged participants in planning a mini-project to learn about disciplinary practices and policies in their home districts. The group will meet again to share what they are learning and plan next steps.

Marty Strange, Policy Director of the Rural Trust, presented a session, "Formula Fairness Campaign," which explained how the formulas used to distribute funding through the federal Title I program disfavor smaller, poorer school districts.

The conference concluded with a legislative update presented by Representative Angela Bryant of House District 7 and Matt Ellinwood of the North Carolina Justice Center.

Conference Outcomes

"People seem to have been thrilled about the information they received," says Doris Mack.

Information and resources related to disciplinary policy and suspension issues were especially powerful for participants. "We have a lot of bright children getting caught up in suspensions. If they used other strategies it would grab the attention of those children. The PBIS workshop showed us there are other ways to handle children," adds Mack.

"Some school systems don't seem to know that PBIS even exists," says Marvis Henderson-Daye. "A lot of times parents and advocates don't know there are resources out there or better ways to deal with students. The conference helped people understand what they can do."

A number of attendees joined NCREWG as a result of participating in the conference. Several people asked presenters or current NCREWG members to visit their communities and talk with parents about the issues addressed in the conference.

"I was very pleased with support from everyone involved," says Alonzo Braggs. "It helped to validate our passion as well as our position and helped us gauge our progress."

Mack agrees. "The conference did what we wanted it to for building awareness of our organization." She continues, "We want people to know what NCREWG is about and to get involved. We want to stay on top of policies that affect rural areas. We want to let schools know what we do. We want to protect our children."

Then she concludes: "We're interested in responsible strategies."

Rural Trust Webinar Series Features Rural Innovations: Search Institute: Building Assets-Reducing Risks

Editor's note: Links are free and current at time of posting, but may require registration or expire over time.

The Rural Trust is hosting a series of webinars featuring programs doing innovative work in rural schools.

"These programs present innovations that have promise or have been proven in rural places," explains Doris Terry Williams, Executive Director of the Rural Trust. The webinars are intended to share information with schools and communities around the country.

The March webinar featured the work of the non-profit Search Institute. Staff and consultants Nancy Tellet-Royce, Angela Jerebek, and Bob Laney discussed the [Building Assets—Reducing Risks](#) (BARR) program, which focuses on building developmental assets among 9th graders.

Rural track record

The Search Institute has worked for 50 years to *help families, schools, and communities make the world a better place for kids*. It has "a track record of working in rural places, and their approach is place-based, which means it is highly adaptable," says Williams.

The scope of Search Institute's work includes publications, on-site training with communities, and surveys of more than three million young people.

Asset-based youth development

"Our surveys are another resource," explains Nancy Tellet-Royce, Search Institute Project Director. "They give communities a strengths-based snapshot of their youth. That's different from many surveys, which are great at cataloging all the negative activities that young people are engaged with. Our feeling is we need to balance that with a portrait of some of their strengths and give communities a way to build from that strengths perspective."

To that end, the Search Institute has identified a framework of [developmental assets](#), experiences, behaviors, and qualities that research has shown lead young people to success. The framework includes both external assets like family and adult support and internal assets like commitment to learning and positive values.

"These assets improve outcomes regardless of students' background or location," explains Tellet-Royce.

BARR Program

The i3 grant will enable the Search Institute to extend its BARR program into several rural schools. Like other Search Institute programs, Building Assets—Reducing Risks (BARR) works with communities and young people to build developmental assets.

BARR specifically focuses on ninth grade, a tipping point for school success when rates of substance abuse, failing grades, truancy, and discipline referrals increase.

The program works to strengthen relationships among students and teachers, enforce school boundaries, increase student engagement, and involve parents and school staff in implementing program strategies.

Bob Laney was principal and Angela Jerebek was a counselor at St. Louis Park High School in Minnesota when BARR was implemented there twelve years ago.

Jerebek explains that when St. Louis Park started the program the school "needed to put a *system* in place rather than doing individual interventions to ensure that students were having a successful transition." She explains that the school wanted a program that would help all students grow and would also help reduce drug use, failure rates, and discipline problems, and improve school attendance.

"We took the asset framework and developed the program using a theoretical model," explains Jerebek. The program created "shifts" in the school, including a new focus on the whole class, strengths-based approaches, and changes in the school's master schedule.

BARR structures ninth grade students into groups of 75–80 students, Laney explains. Each group is paired with a "block" of three core-subject teachers. The teacher block meets one period every day and is responsible for "developing relationships and monitoring progress of all students in their block.

Teachers review the progress of each student, determine if interventions are needed, and plan together. All the ninth-grade teacher blocks meet once each month to share experiences, look for trends, and brainstorm solutions.

Jerebek explains that the BARR program trains teachers in the assets approach, and teachers provide instruction directly to students on how to build critical personal strengths like communication and goal-setting.

Results of the program have been significant. The school has seen decreases in academic failures, discipline incidents, and cigarette usage, and it has seen increases in student attendance, enrollment in challenging classes, and in the percentage of students who report that teachers are interested in them as a person.

Teachers also benefit

While student outcomes have been the predominant focus, BARR has also had important positive effects on teachers, perhaps most importantly through the opportunities it provides for teachers to collaborate with each other.

"The program provides positive peer pressure from teachers," says Jerebek. "The level of engagement with students becomes very high because teachers meet everyday, the necessity of having relationships become very transparent and shifts the entire culture."

Laney affirms the program's capacity to enable teachers to support each other. "It allows for a lot of collaborative learning." Laney describes occasions when teams were able to work together to develop approaches to help a struggling member.

In an era when many teachers feel they are assaulted on multiple fronts, BARR does something else very important. "It makes staff feel more professional," Laney concludes. Teachers "are constantly modifying the program, so it's very fluid and vibrant. Teachers see themselves as integral parts of this program. It enhances their desire to stay as a staff member."

The Search Institute is one of the organizations that won an i3 grant with a match provided, in part, by the Rural School and Community Trust in partnership with the Gates Foundation. The Rural Trust amassed a pool of more than \$14 million to assist rural-focused i3 applicants in meeting the funding match required for i3 eligibility. Contributors to the pool included W.K. Kellogg Foundation, Gates Foundation Walton Family Foundation, and the Walmart Foundation.

You can listen to the March [Search Institute](#) webinar [audio](#) and follow along with the [PowerPoint](#), both of which are posted on the [Rural Trust website](#). Visit the [Search Institute website](#) for additional information about their programs.

You can also listen and follow along with the November webinar, "[Schools to Watch: School Transformation Network](#)," presented by the [National Forum to Accelerate Middle-Grades Reform](#), also a part of the Rural Schools Innovations webinar series.

Save the Children Joins Funding Formula Campaign

Editor's note: Links are free and current at time of posting, but may require registration or expire over time.

[Save the Children](#) is the most recent organization to join the Formula Fairness Campaign. The organization is widely recognized as the leading independent organization for children in need. It has programs in 120 countries, including the United States. Its goal is to "inspire breakthroughs in the way the world treats children, and to achieve immediate and lasting change in their lives by improving their health, education and economic opportunities."

Twenty-six organizations are now participating in the effort to bring fairness to the formulas that are used to distribute funding through Title I, the nation's largest federal program supporting the education of low-income students.

Title I has existed since 1965 and has brought significant, essential resources to school districts to improve educational opportunities and outcomes for the nation's poorest children.

But in 2002 changes were implemented in the way the formulas are calculated. The result is that poor children in about 10,700 smaller school districts (80% of all districts) get less Title I funding than students in about 550 large districts, many with very low poverty rates.

The differences in the funding levels are significant — oftentimes more than \$1,000 per child.

Think this is unfair? Want to learn how the formulas affect your school district? Visit the [Formula Fairness Campaign](#) website, where you will find all kinds of useful information.

For information on how your organization can become a sponsor, contact marty.strange@comcast.net.

Number Weighting in a One-Page Handout

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Most school districts and millions of children are affected by serious inequities in the way the federal Title I program distributes funding to school districts to support the education of very low-income children. (Visit the [Formula Fairness Campaign](#) website for more information.)

But the reasons for this inequity can be a little hard to explain. They have to do with the set of formulas that govern how Title I funding is distributed among school districts.

Beginning in 2002, the formulas began to distribute a larger portion of Title I funding to districts with large *numbers* of low-income children than to districts with large percentages of *low-income* children. This is called “number-weighting” in the formulas, and it’s unfair to smaller districts, especially smaller districts with high poverty rates.

Your school district is probably losing Title I funding that it would receive if Title I funding were distributed according to the percentage of low-income children, rather than the number of low-income children. (Visit the [Formula Fairness Campaign](#) website to find out exactly how your district is faring under these formulas.)

Now there’s a handy **one-page tool** to explain number-weighting. Click [here](#) to download the PDF and share it with members of your school board and community.

Paying Teachers for Performance: Issues and Dilemmas for Rural Schools, Part One

This first installment in an occasional series on performance pay introduces the topic and some of the related issues that are part of the debate.

Almost everyone understands that a great teacher can have a lasting influence on a person’s life. Most of us can remember a teacher who inspired our imaginations and stretched our minds. Unfortunately, most of us can also remember a teacher who lacked skills, didn’t care, or was downright mean.

In recent years, research has confirmed what most adults — and children — already knew: good teachers make a huge difference in how well students learn, and, in turn, how well they do on a number of other measures.

It is no surprise then that there would be increasing interest in identifying strong teachers and finding ways to help weaker teachers get better — or get into a more suitable career.

Pay-for-performance is one strategy that some policymakers and opinion leaders say will improve the quality of teaching in our nation’s classrooms.

This first installment in our series on pay-for-performance introduces some of the most relevant issues in the national debate. We will explore these issues in greater depth in upcoming installments.

What is pay-for-performance? At the most basic level, pay-for performance provides extra income to employees who meet or exceed goals set by the employer. Pay-for-performance goes by a number of names including performance pay, incentive pay, and merit pay.

How does pay-for-performance apply to teachers? In most states and districts, teachers are paid according to how long they have taught and the advanced degrees they have earned. In some states, local districts set teacher salary levels. Other states create statewide salary schedules, and in these states local districts can generally pay teachers more, but not less, than the schedule. In both approaches, wealthier districts tend to pay teachers more, on average, than poorer districts.

Most advocates of performance pay claim these “step” or “step and lane” salary systems, reward longevity rather than good teaching. They claim that performance pay will reward good teachers and spur weaker teachers to get better or get out of teaching altogether.

So how do we know which teachers are really good? Most people can readily describe qualities of great teachers they know. But it turns out that those qualities are not easy to measure. Further, many teachers are more effective in some settings or with some students than with others. And even great teachers have off years, periods of poor administrative support, or other circumstances that compromise their effectiveness. So, figuring out what to measure, how to measure it, who should be involved in the measurements, and over what period of time the measurements should occur are complicated questions.

What about using student test scores as a measure teacher quality? In the absence of a consistent way to measure teaching effectiveness, many performance pay advocates have proposed using student test scores as the proxy for determining how effective a teacher is.

In the simplest form, these proposals would provide higher pay to teachers whose students score higher on standardized achievement tests than to teachers whose students score lower.

But because student test scores are so closely correlated to student income levels, this approach would have the effect of rewarding teachers of the most affluent students and punishing teachers of poorer students and students with more learning challenges.

What are "Value-Added" Measures? As an alternative to rewarding teachers on the basis of students' raw test scores, some performance pay advocates propose rewarding teachers whose students make large gains in learning, regardless of where those students start. In a very simple application of the approach a teacher might earn performance pay if her group of fifth graders who started the school year reading on the second grade level ended the year reading on the fourth grade level. These students would have made more than a year's worth of progress, even though they still ended the school year "behind." This approach is generally referred to as "value-added."

Value-added approaches, however, have their own complications. They are statistically complex when structured to be useful in meaningful ways. Data is only accurate when collected over several years, and even with several years of data, value-added measures mostly identify the best and worst teachers and do little to differentiate teachers in the middle of the spectrum.

Do the levels and kinds of resources available to teachers and students affect students learning growth?

The kinds of curricular and material resources available in the school do have an effect on how much a teacher is able to accomplish (for example, a school with a great science lab and one with no science equipment at all). External resources like after-school and summer programs, access to health care, and youth arts and sports programs also contribute to how much students grow academically. A teacher whose students have many supports will likely get better test scores and more test score growth than a teacher whose students have few additional resources — in or out of school.

Individual or collaborative rewards? Most performance pay proposals are based on the premise that school success is primarily related to the efforts of individual teachers. But research is confirming that improved performance and innovation are related to opportunities for collaboration. Competition, especially as related to pay, can undermine the kinds of collaboration among teachers that support dramatic and lasting improvements. In response to research on productivity and innovation, many businesses are turning away from competitive models.

What about paying teachers more in hard-to-staff schools and subjects? Some states and school districts offer salary incentives to teachers who are certified in hard-to-staff subjects like math and science or agree to work in hard-to-staff schools. Although this type of incentive pay is related to performance pay, it rewards teachers for taking on challenging circumstances not for the scores of their students.

What's the role of teacher tenure? Tenure is frequently mentioned in policy debates related to teacher evaluations and salaries. It is often cited as an obstacle to removing ineffective teachers from the classroom. Tenure, however, is not a guarantee of perpetual employment. It simply provides due process rights to teachers faced with termination. Tenure is granted to teachers by their school districts after a certain number of years of teaching if the district believes the teacher is effective; districts are not required to grant tenure to weak teachers. Once tenure is granted, it protects teachers from malicious or retaliatory firings by requiring the district to document cause, follow established procedures, and providing the teacher with an opportunity to express their perspective on the situation. Districts that have demonstrated cause and followed the law can dismiss tenured teachers.

What is the role of collective bargaining? Collective bargaining generally refers to the negotiations unions make with employers for pay and benefits for union members. Some large cities have teacher unions that negotiate with the district on a variety of issues, including salaries. Most school districts do not have local teacher unions.

Most states *do* have professional teacher associations that many teachers belong to. These associations often lobby legislatures for education funding and work with state departments of education on a variety of issues. If the state has a teacher salary schedule, the education association may be involved in negotiating that schedule. In addition, education associations typically provide professional development and other services, including legal assistance to teachers who are sued or fired. Teachers choose to join education associations.

How do salaries of American teachers compare to teachers in other countries? Teacher salaries make up the bulk of school budgets. That leads many people to think of teachers as an "expense." But compared to teachers in most countries that out-score U.S. students on international standardized tests, American teachers make much less. There are a variety of reasons U.S. students lag behind students in many other countries; relatively low pay for teachers is often cited as one of those reasons. High-scoring countries also generally give teachers plenty of time during the school day for collaboration, team planning, and learning, and they usually invest heavily in pre-service

teacher preparation compared to the U.S.

Is Performance Pay Effective? The research evidence is thin on either side, but there is little evidence that performance pay effects student achievement. Trends in other aspects of the teacher pay and support system indicate that teachers tend to migrate to wealthier school systems where salaries and support as well as student achievement are high.

Critics of performance pay suggest that tying pay to student test scores will create incentives for teachers to avoid the kinds of schools and classrooms where good teachers are most needed.

What are some of the unique rural issues? Performance pay issues can be especially complicated in rural schools. Rural teachers are more likely to teach multiple subjects and grade levels, raising questions about how performance pay would be administered across this spectrum. Rural schools have fewer resources in and out of school that help boost achievement. And, rural teachers earn about \$10,000 less on average than teachers in urban and suburban schools.

Incentive pay does not address these inequities.

One final issue is at play in rural schools as well. That issue is scale. Rural schools are generally smaller than other schools so teachers are more familiar with each other's practices and often highly reliant on one another within the faculty dynamic. In such personal circumstances, paying some teachers more than others based on student test scores can be especially disruptive to the collegiality and cooperation that drive lasting improvement.

Rural School Funding News

Rural School Funding News Special Series: Financing Rural Schools: Characteristics of Strong Rural School Finance Systems

Editor's note: Links are free and current at time of posting, but may require registration or expire over time.

In this series, Rural School Funding News is reviewing general principles of school finance and sharing information about school funding systems that support rural schools and their unique characteristics and needs. While there are no easy answers to questions about how to fund schools, especially in this economic climate, we hope that these articles will provide you promising practices, ideas for advocacy, and guidelines that are easily transferable in your analysis and work on your own school finance systems.

If you are new to the series, you can review a brief introduction to the subject and discussion of Characteristic 1: A Strong Foundation Formula, [here](#); Characteristic 2: Effective Use of the Judicial System, [here](#); Characteristic 3: Fair Accounting for Cost of Living and Geographic Differences, [here](#); Characteristic 4: Recognition of the Benefits of Small Schools, [here](#); Characteristic 5: A Balance of Revenue Sources for Schools, [here](#); Characteristic 6: Efficiency in the State Revenue System, [here](#); Characteristic 7: Equity and Adequacy, [here](#); and Characteristic Eight: An Accurate Match of Resources to Needs, [here](#).

Characteristic Nine: Sufficient Pay and Other Supports to Ensure Teacher Quality

Teachers' salaries are by far the largest portion of school district budgets. And because a strong teaching force is critical to students' success, a good school finance system must account for the costs associated with getting and keeping successful teachers in all schools. Unfortunately, teacher recruitment and retention have historically been serious challenges for many rural districts. For these reasons, teacher issues are key for advocates working to improve school finance systems in their state.

Sometimes teacher finance issues are obscured by state regulations related to required degrees and training. Often, state or local salary schedules are the only significant policy mechanisms related to teacher finance. But these measures may not mean much to rural schools that are unable to attract or keep all the teachers they need in the first place.

The rural context. More than 400,000 teachers work in rural schools in the U.S. Most of these teachers work in contexts and face challenges that are different from those in more urban settings. For example, rural teachers are more likely than other teachers to have multiple teaching assignments and to be required by NCLB to become "highly qualified" in more than one subject. Yet, rural teachers have less access to college courses and less access to professional development and mentoring. Moreover, what is provided is infrequently targeted to rural circumstances or need.

Other challenges may be even more important.

Lower salaries. On average, rural teachers and administrators in the U.S. earn about \$10,000 less than their counterparts in non-rural schools. In some states the gap between high-paying urban and suburban districts and rural districts runs closer to \$20,000 for teachers with similar characteristics.

Previous articles in this series have discussed some of the funding mechanisms that account for this difference: rural districts generally have lower levels of overall funding than other districts; funding formulas rarely account fully for expenses associated with geography, isolation, or scale. Rural districts have lower property wealth and therefore generate less local revenue for schools. State salary scales that tie pay to experience and degrees penalize rural teachers who have less access to college and therefore less ability to earn higher degrees. Some states include so-called cost of living indices in their salaries scales, which usually serve to subsidize salaries in affluent districts and discount salaries in rural areas. Even the federal Title I program shifts money out of poorer and smaller rural districts and into larger districts with lower poverty rates.

All of these factors mean rural schools are on an unequal playing field in the competition for teachers.

Isolation. Recruitment and retention challenges are even more severe in isolated or remote rural schools because local communities do not have the retail, medical, and entertainment amenities that people, especially young people, from urban areas are accustomed to. Isolated schools need targeted incentives to attract and keep teachers.

High poverty rural schools. The rural schools with the most severe teacher recruitment and retention issues are located in high-poverty communities. These schools have the lowest average teacher salaries in the nation. They almost always lack basic teaching materials, equipment, books, and playground equipment. And, their buildings are often in severe disrepair. Recruitment and retention challenges are worsened when the rural school is either very isolated or located close to more affluent districts where teachers can easily transfer.

These tough working conditions are not the only difficulties for teachers in high-poverty rural schools. Unlike, urban areas where teachers can work in a high-poverty school and live in a more affluent neighborhood with better resourced schools for their own children, working in a high-poverty rural school usually also means living in a high-poverty community. High poverty rural communities have little in the way of housing, health care, recreation, or other amenities to offer prospective teachers. They usually lack jobs for spouses and provide weaker educational opportunities for children. Teaching in these schools require sacrifices few experienced or prospective teachers are willing to make.

All these conditions should be addressed in discussions about rural teachers and the resources they need.

Policies that work

The salaries it takes. Strong school finance systems should provide all students with equal access to high quality teachers. This means the finance system should provide poor districts with the capacity to recruit and retain excellent teachers. The key principle here is: what does it cost to get an excellent teacher to choose to work long-term in a challenging high-poverty rural school?

The question is *not*: what does it cost to live in a low-income rural community?

Proving the "salary it takes" may mean providing teachers in high poverty rural schools with significantly higher salaries than teachers in other schools. Policies to increase pay should not be limited to new teachers or punish strong teachers who are already working in the school.

It should be noted that statewide "across the board" (for all districts) salary increases will not eliminate inequities between rural and non-rural districts. Strong funding systems should eliminate the rural salary gap.

By increasing overall salaries in poor rural schools and providing targeted incentives (higher pay) for "hard-to-staff" schools and subjects, a good finance system can help the poorest districts compete for teachers. But the policy details matter and the amount of the financial incentive makes a big difference in how effective these types of policies are.

Better working conditions and supports. Attracting teachers to challenging rural places will take more money. But higher salaries are not enough. Competitive salaries must be accompanied by adequate materials, distance learning technology, high quality professional development and pre-service training targeted to conditions in rural schools as well as opportunities for teachers to network and collaborate with other teachers and receive other in-school supports.

Grow-Your-Own programs. Rural and low-wealth schools need teachers who want to be there and who understand and respect student cultures. The most committed rural teachers often come from rural communities. High quality grow-your-own programs that support local residents, including adults who may not have been in the workforce, to become well-trained teachers can address some of the staffing problems in rural schools.

College and university programs. Higher education plays a critical role in addressing rural teaching challenges. Colleges that work with rural schools to develop pre-service programs that offer rural practicums, multiple certification

options, and flexible grow-your-own options help prospective teachers develop the skills and contacts needed in rural settings. School-college partnerships for professional development and mentoring can also support and strengthen the rural teaching force.

Technology. Technology, and technology training, that supports distance learning for rural students and teachers is essential for rural schools. It not only allows schools to share teaching resources and offer low-demand classes, it enables teachers to share expertise and to access professional development and college classes.

Community engagement and support. Community residents and parents also play a vital role in developing school programs and policies and in supporting teachers. Community residents can help new teachers improve their cultural understanding and awareness, bridge gaps between school and community, and become socially connected and rooted in the community.

Working for a Stronger Teaching Force

If a state has serious disparities in teacher pay among districts or if rural districts struggle to staff their schools with high quality teachers, the state does not have an equitable or adequate finance system. Advocates who desire a better school funding formula for rural schools must include issues of teacher pay and support on any checklist of rural-friendly policies.

Three basic questions can help you analyze whether your state supports rural teachers:

- Are salaries and benefits equitable for all rural teachers?
- Are there additional pay and support incentives for hard-to-staff rural districts?
- Are there additional policies and programs to improve rural teacher quality and retention, including grow-your-own teacher programs, rural components in teacher training programs, and research on other strategies that specifically addresses rural contexts?

The following resources can help explain best practices for financially supporting the staffing needs of rural districts.

Read more:

- 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: Edvantia, Inc. www.edvantia.org/products/pdf/Rural%20Recruitment%20Report.pdf
- Hobbs, V. (2004). *The Promise and the Power of Distance Learning in Rural Education* (Policy Brief). Rural School and Community Trust. www.ruraledu.org/articles.php?id=2067
- Jimerson, L. (2002). *The Competitive Disadvantage: Teacher Compensation in Rural America* (Policy Brief). Rural School and Community Trust. www.ruraledu.org/articles.php?id=2064
- Jimerson, L. (2004). *Teachers and Teaching Conditions in Rural Texas* (Policy Brief). Rural School and Community Trust, www.ruraledu.org/articles.php?id=2065
- Johnson, J., & Strange, M. (2009). *Why Rural Matters 2009: State and Regional Challenges and Opportunities*. Rural School and Community Trust, 2009. www.ruraledu.org/articles.php?id=2312

South Carolina Faces Multiple Budget Woes

Editor's note: Links are free and current at time of posting, but may require registration or expire over time.

South Carolina faces a state budget shortfall of \$800 million and the consequences could be severe for schools that have already made dramatic cuts. Statewide more than 3,600 teaching positions have been eliminated, class sizes have increased, and many schools have reduced critical educational services and resources.

Compounding these difficulties is the fact that the state lost its chance to receive \$143 million in stimulus funding that could be used for schools this year or next. In the first round of stimulus funding, then-governor, Mark Sanford publicly spurned the money, but the legislature took action to secure the funding despite the governor's position. In this round of stimulus funding, South Carolina ran into a different set of troubles: it made cuts to higher education, a violation of a new stipulation in the stimulus package.

Former State Superintendent of Education Jim Rex had vowed to work with the state's Congressional delegation to fix the problem. But the state's two Republican senators, both of whom opposed the stimulus, have not indicated they will pursue a fix for the state. Meanwhile, the newly elected State Superintendent, Mick Zais, says districts do not need the stimulus funding and should use reserve funds to cover their budgets. Reserve funding in most districts, however, is committed to capital costs and other fixed budget items.

South Carolina's revenue system is being blamed, at least in part, for the shortfalls in funding for schools. Five years

ago, the state virtually eliminated property taxes on primary residences and shifted revenues for school funding to sales taxes. One percent of the state's 7% sales tax is dedicated to education. Sales taxes are especially vulnerable to economic downturns and tend to fall more heavily on people who spend more of their income on necessities.

In addition, many items are exempted from sales tax altogether in South Carolina. But a lawsuit brought by a Columbia parent charges that current sales tax exemptions are arbitrary and have no rational basis. In pleadings, the lawsuit estimates that the state collects \$2.19 billion and exempts \$2.7 billion in sales tax annually. Among items exempted are parts for amusement park rides. In addition, sales taxes are capped at \$300 on cars and boats, regardless of value, whether a 1996 jalopy or a yacht off Hilton Head.

Things might look up slightly this coming year. The state's House of Representatives has passed an education budget that sets the Base Student Cost at \$1,788. Last year the BSC was set at just over \$1,600, about the same level as the 1995–1996 school year.

A separate bill to update the 1977 Education Finance Act (EFA), the state's foundation funding formula, has passed the House and has been introduced in Senate subcommittee. The bill would add a small per-pupil weight for poverty, English Language Learners, and gifted and talented students, beginning in 2011. However, amendments were added in the House that would make the additional weights subject to available funding.

The House has approved an appropriation of \$25 million in additional funding for the South Carolina Public Charter School District, a group of 11 charter schools in the state not sponsored or chartered by their local districts.

Read more:

Local coverage on stimulus funding issue:

- www.postandcourier.com/news/2010/dec/29/incoming-outgoing-school-chiefs-differ-on-bailout/
- www.goupstate.com/article/20101229/ARTICLES/12291016
- www.goupstate.com/article/20101230/ARTICLES/12301006

Coverage of sales tax lawsuit:

- www.thestate.com/2011/03/15/1737247/lawsuit-sc-sales-tax-exemptions.html
- www.thestate.com/2011/03/15/1736817/lawsuit-challenges-sales-tax-exemptions.html#storylink=misearch
- www.midlandsconnect.com/news/story.aspx?id=593030

Coverage on budget process and charter schools:

- www.thestate.com/2011/02/24/1709772/budget-plan-cuts-education-health.html

Kansas Lawmakers Propose Constitution Change

Editor's note: Links are free and current at time of posting, but may require registration or expire over time.

New constitutional language proposed. A committee in the Kansas State of Representatives Committee has passed a proposed constitutional amendment that would bar courts from ordering increases in school spending. The move is a response to recent lawsuits that challenged the state's school funding levels. (For more information, read previous RSFN coverage of the issue [here](#).)

The proposed language reads: "The Legislature shall provide the equitable distribution of public school funds in a manner and amount as may be determined by the Legislature." This change would replace the current language, "The Legislature shall make suitable provision for finance of the educational interests of the state," which has been the basis for the finance lawsuits.

Supporters of the amendment, among them Governor Sam Brownback, claim that by giving the legislature sole authority to establish spending levels, the change would stop the "continuous cycle of litigation."

Constitutional amendments must pass both the state House and Senate with a 2/3 majority and be approved by voters.

Legal bid to allow districts to exceed property tax caps fails. In other legal news, parents in the wealthy suburban Shawnee Mission Unified School District have lost their legal bid to lift the state cap on property taxes in order to increase funding in their schools.

Currently, districts are allowed raise an additional 31% of the state per pupil aid amount in local property taxes. One issue in the case was whether school districts have the ability to levy taxes independently of state permission to do so.

The U.S. District Judge who dismissed the case ruled that the cap is integral to the school funding system as a whole and that lifting it would cause unconstitutional disparity among districts and call into question the entire school funding system.

The suit was opposed by the mostly rural plaintiffs in the current school funding lawsuit, who expressed agreement with the ruling. It was also opposed by Governor Brownback.

An appeal is planned.

Budget cuts and consolidation proposals. Governor Brown unilaterally cut \$56.5 million in state spending, including \$50.2 million from public schools earlier this month when the legislature did not balance the budget during early House-Senate negotiations. Brownback's office characterized the cut to education funding as a transfer to cover increased health and human services caseloads.

The Kansas legislature has not completed its budgetary process. The Senate Ways and Means committee has adopted a budget that is similar to the governor's, although proposed cuts to education are about \$22 less per student than Brownback's proposed cuts.

Last year, Kansas lawmakers increased the state's sales tax to avoid drastic cuts. But Brownback and Republicans who control both chambers of the Legislature promised not to increase taxes this year. Schools have said they will be looking at layoffs to deal with the cuts.

Other proposals would require teachers to live within the state, restrict the activities of unions, reduce retirement benefits, and require the consolidation of school districts into 10,000 student units. Some education leaders have characterized this current mix of political and legal action as a "full frontal assault on education."

Read more:

Coverage on proposed Constitutional amendment:

- <http://www2.ljworld.com/news/2011/feb/09/statehouse-live-proposed-constitutional-amendment-/>
- <http://www2.ljworld.com/news/2011/mar/03/kansas-house-speaker-urges-constitutional-amendmen/>

Shawnee lawsuit:

- www.marketwatch.com/story/judge-rules-against-kansas-parents-2011-03-11
- www.boston.com/news/education/k_12/articles/2011/03/11/judge_rules_against_kan_parents_in_education_suit/?rss_id=Boston.com+--+Education+news
- www.shawneedispatch.com/news/2011/feb/23/school-lawsuit-national-spotlight/

Kansas state budget process:

- http://www2.ljworld.com/news/2011/mar/11/statehouse-live-brownback-says-he-will-cut-budget-/?kansas_legislature
- www.kansasreporter.org/72254.aspx
- <http://www2.ljworld.com/news/2011/mar/18/senators-endorse-budget-close-brownbacks-plan/>
- <http://cjonline.com/legislature/2011-03-07/dems-frontal-attack-education>

Consolidation proposal:

- www.kansasreporter.org/71888.aspx

California Lawsuits Must Have Different Focus

Editor's note: Links are free and current at time of posting, but may require registration or expire over time.

This month two plaintiff groups challenging the California school finance system have resubmitted their complaints to an Alameda County Superior Court Judge who ruled in January that the state constitution does not require any set level of funding for schools.

In his ruling, Judge Steven Brick wrote that there is no equal protection for student against inadequate funding, "however devastating" the results might be. The Judge said, however, that an amended lawsuit could move forward if it focused on whether an equal opportunity for students to master state content standards existed in the state.

Both lawsuits were re-filed with amended complaints but the parties also reserved the right to file an appeal of the original ruling.

Read more:

RSFN coverage of the two school finance suits:

- Robles-Wong: www.ruraledu.org/articles.php?id=2506
- Campaign for Quality Schools: www.ruraledu.org/articles.php?id=2523)
- Plaintiff websites: <http://fixschoolfinance.org/> and www.fairschoolsnow.org/

Local coverage of the decision:

- www.mercurynews.com/breaking-news/ci_17161813?nclick_check=1

Coverage of the amended complaint:

- <http://toped.svefoundation.org/2011/03/17/robles-wong-lawyers-reframe-case/>

Wyoming Backs Off Local Control

Editor's note: Links are free and current at time of posting, but may require registration or expire over time.

The Wyoming legislative session has ended with Governor Matt Mead signing into law several key pieces of education legislation, including the five-year school finance recalibration required by the *Campbell* school funding court decision. A significant change this year requires districts to limit class sizes in grades K–3 to 16 students. This requirement represents a move away from the block grant funding approach that allowed Wyoming districts to make decisions locally about how best to use state funding.

The legislature debated a number of accountability-style measures in this session. An attempt to repeal teacher tenure failed, but a bill requiring school districts to measure teacher performance annually with a provision tied to student academic achievement was passed into law. Another new law will use state standardized test scores to divide schools into groups according to their performance.

Read more:

Background on funding model recalibration:

- www.wyomingnews.com/articles/2011/01/22/news/19local_01-22-11.txt
- http://trib.com/news/state-and-regional/govt-and-politics/article_f1f88628-7552-50d6-81bc-7f393c77d71a.html

Background on accountability emphasis and teacher tenure legislation:

- http://trib.com/news/state-and-regional/govt-and-politics/article_cf493d54-1dc8-51a5-abc-f8094a1e018a5.html
- http://trib.com/news/state-and-regional/govt-and-politics/article_d308a8d4-cd68-5a70-bcb2-f8b63995e7b3.html
- http://trib.com/news/state-and-regional/govt-and-politics/article_cf1654f2-3336-56fc-b6e0-c8587820a347.html

Summary of legislation passed:

- www.deseretnews.com/article/700117243/Gov-Mead-signs-education-reform-legislation.html

Alabama Funding Discrimination Lawsuit Moves Forward

Editor's note: Links are free and current at time of posting, but may require registration or expire over time.

After multiple setbacks in the state courts through 2002, Alabama school funding plaintiffs have turned to federal court for relief with a new litigation strategy. The hearing in *Lynch v. Alabama*, first filed in 2008, began earlier this month in Huntsville. Plaintiffs from rural Lawrence and Sumter counties asked a federal court in the Northeastern Division for Alabama to suspend several provisions of the state's constitution, claiming that those provisions place severe limits on property taxes, are rooted in historic efforts to deny educational opportunity to African Americans, and continue to severely restrict the capacity of rural and majority black counties to raise revenues necessary for schools.

The lawsuit charges that these provisions are purposefully discriminatory and violate Title VI of the Civil Rights Act and the U.S. Constitution. It alleges that Alabama's property tax revenues fail to adequately fund K–12 public schools and that this shortfall unconstitutionally shortchanges black public school students. Plaintiffs are asking the court to allow the Governor and Legislature one year to reform the tax code before imposing a complete injunction on the challenged provisions. State attorneys deny any linkage between state property tax policies and discrimination, and say that the students named in the suit cannot show that they have been harmed by the low tax revenues.

The lawsuit raises holdings by the Alabama Supreme Court in a 2004 decision on a higher education desegregation case, *Knight and Sims v. Alabama*. That case claimed that the tax policies were adopted for segregative purposes and with discriminatory intent. Although the Alabama high court refused to grant the relief requested by the plaintiffs — striking down those constitutional provisions, the finding that the provisions were racially discriminatory still stands. Plaintiff Knight is Democratic State Representative John Knight of Montgomery; he is also involved in the *Lynch* case.

Alabama's property taxes are by far the lowest in the nation, and rural instructional expenditures are also among the lowest in the nation. The state is characterized by significant corporate property holdings. The most powerful advocates for low property taxes in Alabama have traditionally been those entities and individuals that hold huge tracts of "unimproved" acreage, primarily large timber tracts.

Property tax restrictions are part of the 1901 state constitution and include constitutional amendments added in the 1970s that further restrict the capacity of localities to raise property taxes, especially in rural areas. Property tax millages are limited, assessment rates are kept artificially low, and local governments must go through a long and arduous series of steps to hold referenda on local property taxes. School boards have no taxing authority. As a result of these restrictions, local governments are forced to rely heavily on sales taxes to fund schools. However, rural counties generate low sales tax revenues, so they often lack the means of raising any significant revenues for schools.

New law sets education spending caps

In other school funding news, Alabama has a new funding law that sets spending caps for education. Supporters say will help reduce the likelihood of "proration" in the future. Proration occurs when revenues fall short of projections and school funding is cut after the state budget has been approved — usually in the middle of the school year.

The cap will be based on a 15-year average, and overages will be used to replenish the state rainy day fund and to create a reserve fund for lean economic years.

This month, Governor Robert Bentley announced a 3% across the board cut in the Education Trust Fund, which provide state funding for K–12 and higher education. Those cuts go into effect this school year. Bentley also released a budget for next year based on higher expected revenues. That budget would not require cuts to teachers, but it underfunds other school costs including non-teaching staffs, maintenance, and transportation. State Superintendent Joe Morton has warned that under the Bentley budget many local school systems will be pushed into deficit spending.

Read more:

Update on funding lawsuit:

- www.montgomeryadvertiser.com/article/20110321/NEWS02/103210318/1009/news02/Trial-over-funding-education-starts-today

Website housing all of the legal pleadings from both the *Knight* and *Lynch* cases along with various summaries and updates at:

- <http://knightandsims.com/index.php>

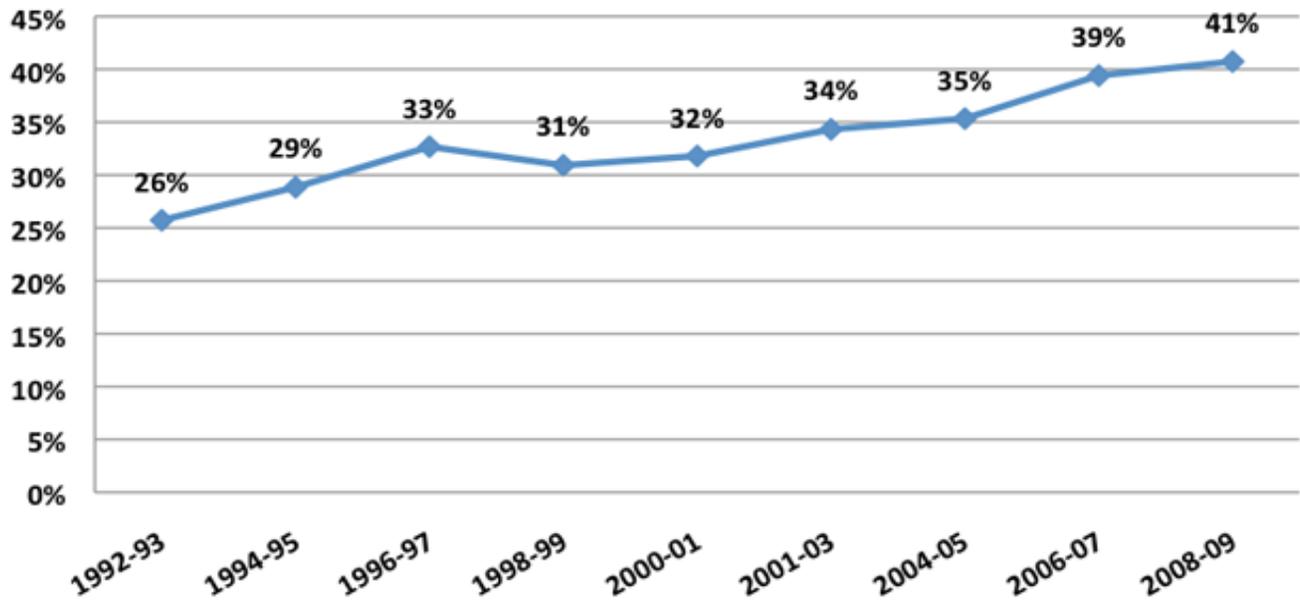
School funding proration and new spending cap law:

- http://blog.al.com/wire/2011/03/alabamas_pinched_finances_mean.html
- http://blog.al.com/spotnews/2011/03/alabama_legislative_committees.html
- www.tuscaloosaneews.com/article/20110303/NEWS/110309937
- http://blog.al.com/spotnews/2011/03/alabama_senate_panel_approves_5.html
- http://blog.al.com/spotnews/2011/03/alabama_gov_robert_bentley_and.html
- www.montgomeryadvertiser.com/article/20110312/NEWS02/103120319/1009



Percent Rural Students Eligible for Free or Reduced Meals, 1992-2009

Percent Rural Students Eligible for Free or Reduced Meals, 1992–2009



Data Source: NCES Common Core Data, U.S. Department of Education.

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