



## Printable Edition

**Note:** This resource includes all articles from the January 2014 Rural Policy Matters newsletter. For the latest content updates, please check the [issue index](#) for this edition.

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

## Facts and Figures About School Expenditures: Instruction Compared to Transportation

**Question:** Which state spends least on instruction compared to its expenditures for transportation?

**Answer:** West Virginia. For every dollar the state spending transporting students to and from school, it spends only \$6.92 on instruction. By comparison, Vermont spends \$16.62 on instruction for every dollar it spends on transportation.

*Transportation expenditures are largely a function of distance. Longer bus routes mean more spending on gas, maintenance, and fleet replacement. West Virginia has a highly consolidated school system, with many counties operating only one school at each grade level, therefore bus routes tend to be lengthy throughout the state. In addition, West Virginia's mountainous terrain adds to transportation costs.*

Source: [Why Rural Matters, 2011–12](#).

## Ernest Brooks: Rural American Making a Difference

Growing up in rural Weldon, North Carolina, Ernest Brooks was always active in his community. But it wasn't until he was twelve—yes, twelve—that he became a rural advocate at the national level. He's been doing community-based work ever since. Last year he was named Assistant Dean of the Martin Luther King Jr. International Chapel at Morehouse College.

"When I was a student at Weldon Middle I attended a Rural Rendezvous," says Brooks. The Rendezvous gatherings were sponsored by the Rural Trust and brought together people from rural communities across the country to celebrate their places and address concerns unique to rural contexts. Brooks got involved through the Southern Initiative of the Algebra Project, which was working in partnership with the Rural Trust in Weldon.

Brooks went on to become a founding member of the Rural Trust Youth Council and then the first youth member of the Rural Trust Board of Trustees. He finished his term of service in 2012 as Board Chair.

"The opportunities I had as a young person to wrestle with issues of policy and access, education and community development, had a seminal impact on my work and life," Brooks observes. "The Trust's emphasis on the transformation of communities and the involvement of families in shaping their schools was particularly important."

Brooks graduated from Morehouse College and earned a Masters of Divinity from



*Ernest Brooks was the first youth member of the Rural Trust Board of*

Duke University. While at Duke, he took Leave from his studies to work in New Orleans after Hurricane Katrina. Louisiana had begun a far-reaching experiment to re-organize schools in the city. The Southern Initiative of the Algebra Project along with several foundations, colleges, and non-profits had launched a collaborative effort to build community school partnerships. *Trustees.*

"We were working to establish parent councils and create other opportunities for families and communities to have agency in schools and the direction of education in the city," explains Brooks, who also helped develop mentoring programs for students.

Brooks continued his youth and community-oriented work in Atlanta, where he worked with the Fulton County Children and Youth Leadership Academy to provide entrepreneurial and leadership experiences for boys in elementary school.

While completing his degree at Duke, Brooks also served as pastor of the Mt. Shiloh Missionary Baptist Church in Williamston, North Carolina. In 2011, he was called to Morehouse as Associate Campus Minister before being named Assistant Dean.

Brooks works to recruit rural and small town students to higher education and continues to advocate for rural places. "So much of the national conversation on community development and education reform is approached through an urban lens," he says, noting that rural places have less access to public resources and philanthropy.

"We also have to re-think what it means to be well resourced," he adds. "Rural places have social and community and cultural resources. That's one reason place-based education is so important. The wider narrative needs to reflect what rural America gives to and develops for the nation."

## **Going Two Ways at Once: Distance as a Defining Rural Characteristic**

In many aspects of public policy, rural communities, schools, and institutions are treated as if they have the same characteristics as their counterparts in urban and suburban locations. The consequences can be far-reaching and damaging, not only to rural communities and their residents, but to the well-being of the nation.

In November, *RPM* launched an occasional series on the characteristics of rural and what those characteristics mean for public policy, especially education policy. In that issue, [It's Complicated: Why What's Rural Matters](#) examined the many official definitions of rural and the effects of those definitions on research, the distribution of public resources, and the access of rural residents to a variety of services and opportunities.

There is no single definition of rural because rural and urban are dimensional concepts existing along multiple continuums. Further, rural communities vary dramatically in their circumstances, demographics, histories, economies, cultures, and governance structures. There are many good reasons for using different definitions for different purposes and in different contexts.

Despite this complexity, rural communities share characteristics related to low total population (small size), low population density (sparseness), and relative isolation (remoteness) that distinguish them from urban and suburban places. These characteristics interact with each other and with geographic and economic context in a variety of ways that create both opportunities and challenges deserving of thoughtful policy attention.

### **The costs of distance: direct, indirect, transferred**

Whether the community is sparse, remote, or both, residents and institutions in small places grapple with distance: distance between residents' homes; distance from homes to jobs, schools, shopping, health care; and distance to large population centers and their concentrations of economic activity, services, and supports.

Distance is one of the most important considerations when it comes to public policy for rural areas. So what are its implications, especially for schools and communities?

The most obvious implication is cost. Rural residents and schools spend relatively high percentages of their budgets on transportation: residents often drive long distances in their daily lives and many rural school districts operate extensive bus systems. That means more money for gas, more wear-and-tear on vehicles, more time on the road, more planning and coordination, and higher delivery costs for many basic goods and services. The budgets of rural institutions and households must always account for the financial demands of distance.

But money and time are not the only costs of distance.

Distance takes a powerful toll on participation. It happens in a lot of different ways with surprising ramifications.

For example, students who attend rural schools located far from their homes participate in curricular and co-curricular activities at far lower rates than students whose schools are nearby. It is not uncommon in the U.S. for rural students to spend three to five hours a day on a school bus: leave in the dark, get home in the dark.

Most students with long bus rides don't have time for the demands of rigorous coursework, and unless their families have the financial resources for private transportation, they won't be taking part in school teams and clubs either. Instead, they spend a long portion of their day passive and sedentary.

Distance also constrains the participation of families and communities in schools. This is particularly true for families whose time is limited because of work demands and for families for whom reliable transportation and gas money are problems.

Students who take part in school activities are more likely to graduate, have better chances to receive college scholarships, exhibit better behavior, and experience other protective benefits. Families that engage with schools strengthen the academic and behavioral outcomes of their students. And, communities that maintain strong connections to schools provide a variety of academic and financial supports to the school along with stronger social infrastructure for residents. That's important because communities with strong social infrastructure are able to provide many more supports to students and help relieve pressures on individual families.

These indirect costs of distance affect the lifelong prospects of many rural residents, reducing their lifetime earnings, constraining their financial contributions to the larger economy, and sapping the country of the intellectual, creative, and cultural gifts of large portions of our rural sector.

When states and school districts say they have to close a school to save money (despite research that has shown time and again that significant savings almost never occur), a big part of what they really mean is they are transferring costs of distance to students and their families.

Some school districts attempt to mitigate the negative effects of distance by running two sets of buses, particularly for afternoon routes. One run takes students home at the end of the regular school day; a second run takes students home at the end of after school activities.

But this arrangement is expensive, raising transportation costs by as much as 50% if buses run full routes. Some districts run shortened routes. But that solution excludes students who don't live on the shortened route or forces families to pick up their students at some distance from their homes. Further, many rural schools find that the first run buses are not able to make it back to school in time to pick up the after school students, so a second run is not an option.

### **Policy solutions and alternatives**

Clearly, budget allocations for schools and other rural institutions must account for the added costs of transportation over long distances. Those allocations need to be made in a variety of ways. But before we talk about additional transportation funding, it is important to back up and consider solutions that reduce distance and the costs that go along with it.

Keep institutions as close as possible to where residents live. When schools are located close to students' homes, the direct costs of transportation and the indirect toll on participation and social infrastructure are reduced or eliminated. Further, smaller schools that are more integrated with their communities offer a variety of well-documented academic and social benefits to students. In upcoming installments of this series, we'll examine small size as a defining rural characteristic.

Invest in high-speed internet and other technologies that provide services and communications in place. Technological infrastructure reduces the need for travel and is a necessary resource for economic development.

Coordinate programs and services to reduce travel requirements. Coordination can happen in a variety of ways that do not require eliminating services and can be tailored to needs and preferences of local communities. For example, some school cafeterias work with Meals on Wheels programs; book mobiles and mobile clinics might collaborate; full-service schools can offer medical, social service, health and fitness, adult education, and arts cultural programming to all residents.

Take programs to communities, rather than requiring communities to come to centralized programs. For example, instead of trying to make an after-school program work at a highly consolidated school, take after school services to communities. Those programs might include tutoring, community gardens, entrepreneurial

training, and academic place-based learning assignments in small community centers where families can more easily participate and entire communities can benefit.

Consider the school bus system a rural public transportation system. Few rural areas have workable public transportation programs. But almost all rural areas have school buses. Liability, capacity, and coordination concerns do pose barriers, but these issues can be addressed. The potential benefits of parents being able to ride the bus with their child, volunteer at school, visit the doctor, and ride home that afternoon are obvious. Similar benefits could happen with transportation to community after-school centers.

Allocate sufficient transportation funding for rural institutions—and their patrons. Sufficient transportation funding means schools and other institutions do not have to sacrifice their core mission to cover transportation costs that simply do not exist in urban and suburban places. Sufficient transportation funding also means funding to cover costs transferred to participants. For example, parent engagement programs in high-poverty rural areas should provide reimbursements or mileage allocations to families.

## Urban School Closures Similar to Rural Closures

The [National Opportunity to Learn Campaign](#) (OTL) has a great new infographic visualizing the [Cycle of School Closures](#).

The infographic is part of a series publicizing the economics and effects of school closures. [Debunking the Myths of School Closures](#) addresses the realities that closures do not save money, result in better education for students, or affect “empty” schools; they do, however, result in significant educational, economic, and social harm to communities that lose schools. [The Color of School Closures](#) demonstrates that school closures in three cities disproportionately affected low-income students and students of color.

While the content of the infographics is directed toward urban school closures—particularly those in Philadelphia, Chicago, and New York City, which have seen extensive use of the policy in recent years—the patterns, myths, implications, and implementation strategies apply in rural areas as well.

For much of the 20th century the primary education policy implemented for rural schools and districts was consolidation. The rationale: it will save money and offer a better education than is available in smaller, more rural, community-based schools. That policy has continued unabated in the 21st century.

Research has consistently found that neither significant savings nor improved educational outcomes result from rural consolidation. Instead, opportunities for student participation and family involvement fall significantly and communities suffer a range of negative effects including loss of business, declining home and property values, and erosion of social infrastructure.

Research has also demonstrated that rural school and district closures have disproportionately affected low-income communities and students and communities and students of color. As in urban areas, it is not uncommon for higher-performing schools serving at-risk students to be targeted for closure. Daily bus rides of three to five hours are not uncommon in some rural, high-poverty parts of the country.

The OTL infographics point out the role of charter schools in closures in urban centers. Until recently, charter influence in most rural areas has been minimal, with pressure for consolidation coming from states and larger towns, towns sometimes anxious to gain the resources of smaller schools and communities.

But the charter/privatization dynamic is changing. For example, in North Carolina, a dramatic expansion of the state’s charter law is putting pressure on cohesive higher-performing rural communities, especially those in low-income counties. A new law in Alabama will provide public money to cover a significant portion of private school funding in communities with a “failing” public school. Much of this money will go to private schools that were established as whites-only alternatives to desegregation. And, underfunded rural schools in South Carolina and Louisiana have long struggled with further funding cuts when new charters open and take students and their funding. As in urban areas, these schools often find struggling students returning to regular school after being “counseled” out of the charter.

**Read more:**

[National Opportunity to Learn Campaign](#)

## Promise Zones Include Two Rural Areas

An eight-county region of rural southeastern Kentucky and the Choctaw Nation of Oklahoma, including 12 rural counties, are among five economically struggling locations designated as federal Promise Zones. The designation provides competitive advantage in certain federal grants along with federal assistance and partnerships to revitalize communities through job creation, expanded educational opportunities, improved housing, better public safety, supports and training for small business development and entrepreneurial activity, and infrastructure development.

The initiative reflects the federal "place-based" focus to invest strategically for improved outcomes for children and local residents in struggling neighborhoods. The cities of San Antonio, Los Angeles, and Philadelphia also received designations for selected neighborhoods.

The Promise Zones were selected through a competitive process in which applicants identified key strategies, partnerships, and outcomes.

Promise Zone initiatives in the Choctaw Nation and in southeastern Kentucky will focus on economic diversification, workforce training, and partnerships with regional colleges and local school districts.

The Choctaw Nation economic initiatives specifically include development of farmers markets and other activities to support local production of and access to healthy foods as well as an emphasis on the development of women-owned businesses. Education initiatives focus on early literacy, parent support, and STEM training. The initiative will also invest in water and sewer infrastructure development.

Southeastern Kentucky economic initiatives emphasize retraining for local skilled workers (particularly laid-off miners affected by significant reductions in coal mining); job creation and entrepreneurship training. Education initiatives focus on college and career-readiness programs for high school students.

The designations will remain in place for ten years. The administration has said it hopes to expand the program to 20 communities by 2016.

### **Read more:**

Description of the Promise Zone Initiative

- [http://portal.hud.gov/hudportal/HUD?src=/program\\_offices/comm\\_planning/economicdevelopment/programs/pz](http://portal.hud.gov/hudportal/HUD?src=/program_offices/comm_planning/economicdevelopment/programs/pz)

White House Fact Sheet on the Promise Zone Initiative

- [www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2014/01/08/fact-sheet-president-obama-s-promise-zones-initiative](http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2014/01/08/fact-sheet-president-obama-s-promise-zones-initiative)

National News coverage

- [www.nytimes.com/2014/01/10/us/politics/obama-announces-promise-zones-in-5-stricken-areas.html](http://www.nytimes.com/2014/01/10/us/politics/obama-announces-promise-zones-in-5-stricken-areas.html)
- [www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/post-politics/wp/2014/01/08/white-house-picks-first-five-economic-promise-zones/](http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/post-politics/wp/2014/01/08/white-house-picks-first-five-economic-promise-zones/)

Coverage of the Choctaw Nation of Oklahoma Promise Zone:

- [www.choctawnation.com/news-room/press-room/media-releases/choctaw-nation-of-oklahoma-designated-a-promise-zone/](http://www.choctawnation.com/news-room/press-room/media-releases/choctaw-nation-of-oklahoma-designated-a-promise-zone/)
- [www.npr.org/blogs/codeswitch/2014/01/09/261072657/white-house-picks-choctaw-nation-to-fight-poverty-in-okla](http://www.npr.org/blogs/codeswitch/2014/01/09/261072657/white-house-picks-choctaw-nation-to-fight-poverty-in-okla)

Coverage of the southeastern Kentucky Promise Zone

- [www.npr.org/2014/01/16/263077694/new-hope-in-southeastern-kentucky-promise-zone](http://www.npr.org/2014/01/16/263077694/new-hope-in-southeastern-kentucky-promise-zone)
- [www.courier-journal.com/article/20140108/NEWS0104/301080141/President-Barack-Obama-designate-southeastern-Kentucky-promise-zone-](http://www.courier-journal.com/article/20140108/NEWS0104/301080141/President-Barack-Obama-designate-southeastern-Kentucky-promise-zone-)

## Recent School Shootings Follow Familiar Patterns

School shootings in recent months bear hallmarks of many prior school violence incidents: all three involved

student perpetrators, victims were random, and assailants had easy access to their weapons.

In the most recent incident, two students were injured when shots were fired in a gym at Delaware Valley Charter School in Philadelphia. Two people have been charged in the incident, including the 17-year-old student accused of firing the shots and an 18-year-old graduate of the school accused of providing the weapon. Attorneys for the shooter have said the incident was an accident and the student obtained the weapon to protect himself from the threat of an after-school attack.

In Roswell, New Mexico, a 12-year-old seventh grader shot randomly in the school's gym where students were waiting for classes to begin. Two students, ages 12 and 13, were injured, one critically. The student used a shotgun reportedly purchased legally by his family and kept unlocked in the home.

The student is reported to have kept a journal in which he outlined his plans. Several media accounts have noted the young age of the shooter. A Rural Trust [report](#) examining media accounts of mass violence events in U.S. schools found that 6% of assailants were thirteen or younger.

The December shooting at Arapahoe High School in Littleton, Colorado, also involved a student who shot randomly. The 18-year-old senior opened fire in the school's library, fatally injuring one student before killing himself.

The student had legally purchased his shotgun earlier in the month. He skipped part of his morning classes and entered the school through an unlocked door carrying 125 rounds of ammunition, a machete, and three Molotov cocktails. Reports indicate the student said he was looking for a staff member who had disciplined him earlier in the school year.

The Arapahoe High incident has focused attention on some of the difficult issues related to privacy and discipline that complicate considerations about how schools should best respond to students suspected of having behavioral or psychological problems. Some reports suggest the student had previously threatened the school staff member he was reportedly looking for the day of the shooting.

A school security guard posted accusations on Facebook that the school ignored warnings that the student might be dangerous. According to media reports, the guard, who is currently on administrative leave, wrote that the student had been caught looking at guns on his personal computer, had written questionable symbols on papers, used the word "comrade" often, and had anger outbursts.

Police are currently investigating.

***Read more:***

News coverage:

- [www.philly.com/philly/news/2nd\\_teen\\_charged\\_in\\_Delaware\\_Valley\\_Charter\\_High\\_School\\_shooting.html](http://www.philly.com/philly/news/2nd_teen_charged_in_Delaware_Valley_Charter_High_School_shooting.html)
- [www.cnn.com/2014/01/18/justice/philadelphia-high-school-shooting/](http://www.cnn.com/2014/01/18/justice/philadelphia-high-school-shooting/)
- [www.philly.com/philly/news/breaking/DA\\_approves\\_charges\\_for\\_one\\_school\\_shooting\\_suspect.html](http://www.philly.com/philly/news/breaking/DA_approves_charges_for_one_school_shooting_suspect.html)
- [www.cnn.com/2014/01/15/justice/new-mexico-school-shooting/](http://www.cnn.com/2014/01/15/justice/new-mexico-school-shooting/)
- [www.nydailynews.com/news/national/new-mexico-school-shooter-chose-victims-random-police-article-1.1580998](http://www.nydailynews.com/news/national/new-mexico-school-shooter-chose-victims-random-police-article-1.1580998)
- [www.cnn.com/2013/12/30/justice/colorado-school-shooting/index.html](http://www.cnn.com/2013/12/30/justice/colorado-school-shooting/index.html)
- [www.denverpost.com/news/ci\\_24724553/arapahoe-high-school-shooting-sheriffs-office-interview-hundreds](http://www.denverpost.com/news/ci_24724553/arapahoe-high-school-shooting-sheriffs-office-interview-hundreds)
- [www.cbsnews.com/news/arapahoe-high-security-guard-warnings-about-shooter-ignored/](http://www.cbsnews.com/news/arapahoe-high-security-guard-warnings-about-shooter-ignored/)
- <http://abcnews.go.com/blogs/headlines/2014/01/arapahoe-death-threats-warnings-ignored-says-hs-security-guard/>
- <http://abcnews.go.com/blogs/politics/2014/01/is-your-kid-safer-inside-or-outside-during-a-school-shooting-the-answer-will-surprise-you/>

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***More from the Rural Trust***

[RPM Special Edition  
on School Violence](#)

[Consolidation  
Fight-Back Toolkit](#)

[Global Teacher  
Fellowship](#)



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