



Rural Education Policy Landscape

Rural Low-Income Students

Rural communities are often also low-income communities: [according to AASA](#), “in 23 states a majority of rural students are in low-income households.” Although poverty is often associated with urban areas, [64% of rural counties](#) in the United States have high rates of child poverty, as opposed to 47% of urban counties. [Poverty’s impact](#) on [low-educational outcomes](#) has been [thoroughly documented](#), and potential solutions have been hotly debated, and it bears keeping in mind that schools in rural and/or low-income areas will have unique challenges to consider.

According to the [National Center for Children in Poverty](#), 47% of children under the age of 18 in [Idaho](#) live in low-income families, compared to the national rate of 41%.

Access to Advanced Coursework

Another unique challenge facing rural school districts and students is a lack of access to Advanced Placement (AP) courses and dual enrollment options. These accelerated learning options are [associated](#) with higher college enrollment and completion rates, can fuel students’ postsecondary ambitions, and can result in savings of time and money by earning college credit in high school.

According to an [ECS study published in 2017](#), 73% of rural high schools offered AP courses to students, compared to 92% of high schools in urban areas and 95% of high schools in suburban areas. An [ECS Policy Analysis from 2016](#) offers model policy components for

state policymakers to consider for expanding access to AP courses.

[Many organizations](#) have [pointed](#) to the potential of virtual advanced courses as a way to ameliorate the [access](#) problems experienced by many rural students. The [Idaho Digital Learning Alliance](#) in particular seeks to offer digital courses to rural students. However, this potential solution to the access problem is complicated by another challenge unique to rural environments: a lack of high-quality broadband needed for high-tech education options.

Broadband Access

Enrolling in and completing a virtual course would [likely](#) require access to high-speed broadband, but there are many sections of the country - particularly in rural areas - where strong broadband connections are not available. A lack of internet access can also be problematic for students who are expected to use the internet in order to complete homework.

According to the [FCC](#), 7 out of 10 teachers assign homework to students that “requires access to broadband.” Some have pointed to a [“homework gap”](#) between rural and non-rural students in their ability to complete internet-assisted coursework at home or at school; for instance, an [ACT report](#) from 2019 found that rural students were twice as likely as non-rural students to say that their internet connection at home was “unpredictable” (16% and 9%, respectively).

According to a [Microsoft](#) study assessing access and use of broadband, 1.1 million people in Idaho do not



use the internet at broadband speeds, alongside a more liberally-defined [FCC finding](#) that broadband is not available to 190k Idahoans. According to [BroadbandNow](#), Idaho ranks at 42 on their list of “Most Connected States”, and 20% of the population of Idaho is “underserved” in their access to broadband.

Addressing Broadband Access

Many states and school districts have sought to expand broadband access in rural and underserved areas:

- In **California’s** Coachella Valley Unified School District, where only 60% of families had internet access, buses were [equipped with wi-fi](#) and parked in neighborhoods to enable internet access at home. [Similar programs](#) have also been rolled out in [New York state](#) and elsewhere.
- Microsoft and others have been [petitioning the FCC](#) to allow unused spaces on the TV spectrum to be harnessed for the provision of [broadband access in rural areas](#). This may help to close the homework gap, although [opponents argue](#) it is not the best way forward to address these issues.

Many state legislatures have acted to expand broadband access for rural schools and students:

- In 2018, **Illinois** passed [HB 5752](#), which created a Broadband Advisory Council to explore broadband expansion
- In 2019, **Virginia** passed [HB 2141](#), which authorized local governing bodies to contract with broadband service providers to expand access in underserved areas of the state; and
- In 2017 **Arizona** passed [HB 2545](#), which established the Broadband Expansion Fund.
- Other state legislation relevant to broadband access from 2017-2019 can be found [here](#).

Economies of Scale

The economic principle of “[economies of scale](#)” - which says that as producers grow larger, the cost of output decreases - is [also often true for education](#) and expenditures per student. Rural schools and districts often struggle to [procure funds](#), [recruit staff](#), and [tap into opportunities](#) generally available to larger or non-rural environments.

To address these issues, some states have been fostering cooperation across districts through regional [education service agencies](#). For instance, the [Colorado Board of Cooperative Educational Services \(BOCES\)](#) Mission Statement says that BOCES “exist to supply educational services to two or more school districts that alone cannot afford the service, or find it advantageous and cost-effective to cooperate with other districts”.

Similarly, a recent pilot program and study of a collaborative [Rural Professional Learning Network](#) (RPLN) in **California** found that challenges faced by rural communities can be addressed by “providing access to professional development, collaborative time with peer districts, and economies of scale” through the RPLN studied.

Options for Policymakers

- Consider work with the newly-created [Idaho Broadband Task Force](#) to explore broadband access and expansion options.
- Explore regional education service agencies as an option to foster cooperation across school districts in Idaho.
- [Work with Education Commission of the States](#) to learn more about these issues, receive consultation on proposed policies, or schedule unbiased testimony and technical assistance from experts.