

CASTING OUR VISION

The Lay of the Land A Closer Look at Rural Tennessee Schools



tn educational equity coalition

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Each morning across the state of Tennessee, nearly 1 million students from the urban core of Memphis to the Appalachian foothills of Morgan County walk through the doors of their schools to receive an education. On the surface, these schools do not look so different: Each school has a principal, teachers, a library, textbooks, a cafeteria and students from various backgrounds. And these schools have shared experiences: Each year, they hire new teachers, receive school funding from local and state sources, administer the annual TNReady assessment, and serve students from a variety of backgrounds. At a quick glance, Tennessee's schools appear to have similar characteristics and challenges, making strategies for improvement a straightforward matter for policymakers. But there is a key characteristic that warrants increased focus – a school's *place*.

Geography plays an essential role in a student's academic outcomes and is often overlooked in the quest for school reform and improvement. School administrators may experience difficulty in hiring teachers or in obtaining funding for social-emotional learning, but the solutions must be different for a school serving students in Memphis or another in Kingston. If Tennessee is going to ensure all students achieve, we must examine how a school's urbanicity or rurality affects resources, educators and student success.¹

When it comes to education, rural matters. About one in three Tennesseans attends a rural school, making up nearly 300,000 students.² Rural schools are spread throughout Tennessee's 95 counties, in

areas with varied levels of poverty and economic opportunity. On average, rural schools serve smaller numbers of students, yet these smaller school sizes can create distinct challenges for schools in their efforts to obtain adequate resources or for serving specific student groups.³ As with urban education, rural school systems are subject to the strengths and challenges of their communities, including issues of public health and geographic isolation. To illustrate, rural communities have seen the second

largest number of hospital closures in the nation.⁴ And beyond diminishing access to health care services, almost one-quarter of rural families lack high-speed internet access.⁵

In *The Lay of the Land*, the Tennessee Educational Equity Coalition employs a place-based equity lens across three content areas in rural education, offering targeted policy recommendations that correspond to the issues.

Our analysis of rural education will cover three important areas of focus for why rural matters:

- **English Learner education** in rural schools, exploring on the impact of demographic changes brought by migrant populations in Tennessee
- **Early Postsecondary Opportunity course access** in rural schools, with a focus on Advanced Placement (AP) and Dual Enrollment options for rural students in secondary schools
- **Strong Educators**, with an emphasis on how rural districts and schools are able to recruit and support effective educators

While there is a range of other factors that impact education in rural Tennessee, we believe there are solutions at hand for these three key areas. Across each area of focus, we will share some key themes drawn from our analysis of these issues, as well as best practices in each content area for schools in rural Tennessee.

The report's analysis relies on data from the Tennessee Department of Education, using specified locale codes from the National Center for Education Statistics. Dividing schools into these geographic locales provides meaningful analysis of how geographies affect select student outcomes, but there are key limitations as well. The codes measure schools, not students, and so our measures do not always capture how rural geographies affect students. And these locale codes also measure distance from an urban core, and could capture schools on the urban fringe in addition to those located in the most remote rural spaces. These locale codes provide some insight

into rural education outcomes, but could miss the mark in presenting meaningful analyses for the report.

To complement the locale codes, the Tennessee Educational Equity Coalition conducted a listening tour across select counties in West, Middle and East Tennessee. Interviewees and focus group participants included 10 district personnel, 20 teachers or additional staff, and 11 principals across elementary, middle and high school grades. The information collected across this tour provided valuable information about each area of focus, and allowed findings to emerge.

NOTE ON RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) uses a set of locale codes to classify U.S. school systems based on their geographic location and proximity to Census-defined urban areas. The urban-centric locale codes divide territories into four major categories: city, suburban, town and rural. Each category has three sub-categories for city and suburban, a large-midsize-small gradation; for town and rural, they are categorized as fringe (closest), distance and remote (furthest). These codes can be collapsed into a rural-urban dichotomy, as well as examined across their 12 sub-groups respectively. The methodological appendix (page 34) describes these classifications in further detail.

For the analyses of education indicators in this report, we examine school outcomes across these locales. While we do not merge the locales in an urban-rural dichotomy, we reference town and rural schools to emphasize the ways that distance from an urban core affects student outcomes and school resources.

PLACE-BASED EQUITY IN TENNESSEE: A SNAPSHOT OF RURAL EDUCATION INDICATORS

As an educational equity issue, a student's geography matters. Tennessee students attending rural schools experience a host of issues that require targeted solutions, which are often overlooked because of the emphasis placed on school reform efforts in more urbanized areas. Geography plays a role in the key metrics of success in the K-12 continuum, and must become a critical consideration for policymakers, advocates and stakeholders.

Tennessee's rural communities, like those across the country, face specific challenges. Economic research shows rural communities experience higher poverty rates, lower median household income and lower rates of postsecondary attainment, and are more likely to receive food stamps.⁶ Rural communities have also seen an uptick in the number of male deaths due to opioid addiction, while facing increased barriers to health care and limited access

“These 300 students here deserve exactly the same as a school with 1,500 or more. Same kids. Just because we’re less in numbers doesn’t mean they shouldn’t get the same opportunity as the other kids. And that is a problem.”

– CTE Instructor, East Tennessee

to technology.⁷ These trends point to the economic hardships faced by many rural Tennesseans, and the context for many rural children, which can have a direct impact on their success in school.

Chart 1 depicts two key student demographics related to education outcomes: percent of economically disadvantaged students and percent of students of color across all locales. As the chart shows, schools in urban areas have the highest proportion of students of color and economically disadvantaged students. Suburban schools serve a higher number of students of color than those experiencing poverty, and have a lower number of economically disadvantaged students. Schools

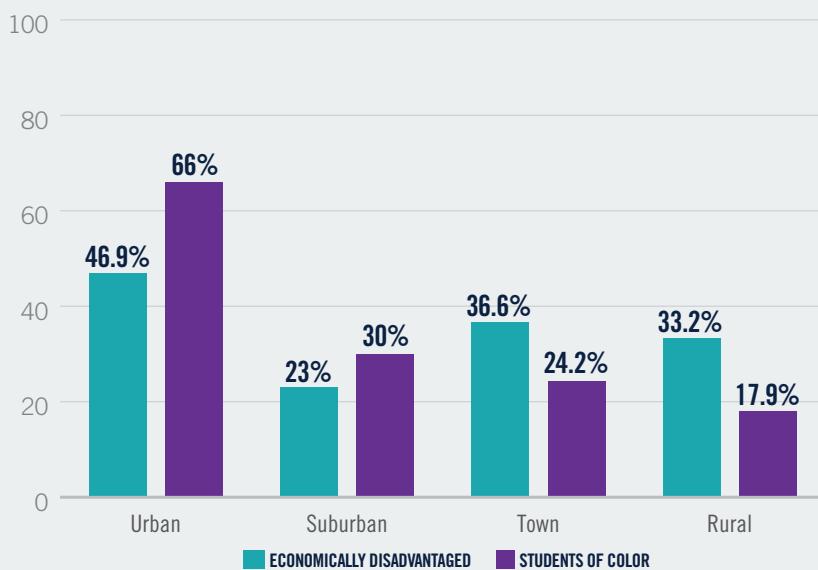
located in town or rural locales serve higher numbers of economically disadvantaged students than students of color.⁸

Chart 1 shows that historically underserved groups form a lower proportion of school population in town and rural schools. However, rural racial diversity has been growing over the past decades. And in rural Tennessee in particular, there has been a decrease in the overall White population, and an increase in rural Latino populations. Even with these smaller numbers of people of color within more rural schools, student achievement and various school supports for all populations must remain a focus for equity-minded advocates regardless of size.⁹

CHART 1

PROPORTION OF ECONOMICALLY DISADVANTAGED STUDENTS AND STUDENTS OF COLOR BY LOCALE

Source: Tennessee Department of Education



1 IN 3
rural students is low-income, and
1 IN 5
rural students is a student of color.

Student outcomes do not differ greatly across locales. Limited variation occurs in student proficiency between students in schools in rural, town, suburban or urban areas. Chart 2 presents data on these proficiency rates for all students across locales, with rates ranging from a high of 49.4 percent in large suburban school systems to a low of 25.7 percent in large city areas. The remaining sub-locales show proficiency rates between the range of 35 to 45 percent.

However, when the data are disaggregated for the combined racial group of Black, Latino and Native American students, all rates drop substantially across all locales except those categorized as schools in mid-size suburban areas (see Chart 3). Students of color who attend schools the farthest away from an urban

core (Rural Remote) have the lowest proficiency rates on student assessments among the locales, with less than 20 percent achieving proficiency.¹⁰ The disparity between the ethnic student groups and all student groups warrants an exploration of the barriers to student success, and district and school capacities to serve them.

High school graduation rates presented in Chart 4 follow a pattern similar to proficiency rates. Graduation rates in all locales range from 90 percent to 95 percent, except for schools in large cities, where the rate is 76.3 percent. While Tennessee has rightly earned accolades for increasing their high graduation rates, deeper analysis is needed about graduates' ability to succeed in the postsecondary arena.¹¹

CHART 2

PROFICIENCY RATES BY LOCALE

Source: Tennessee Department of Education

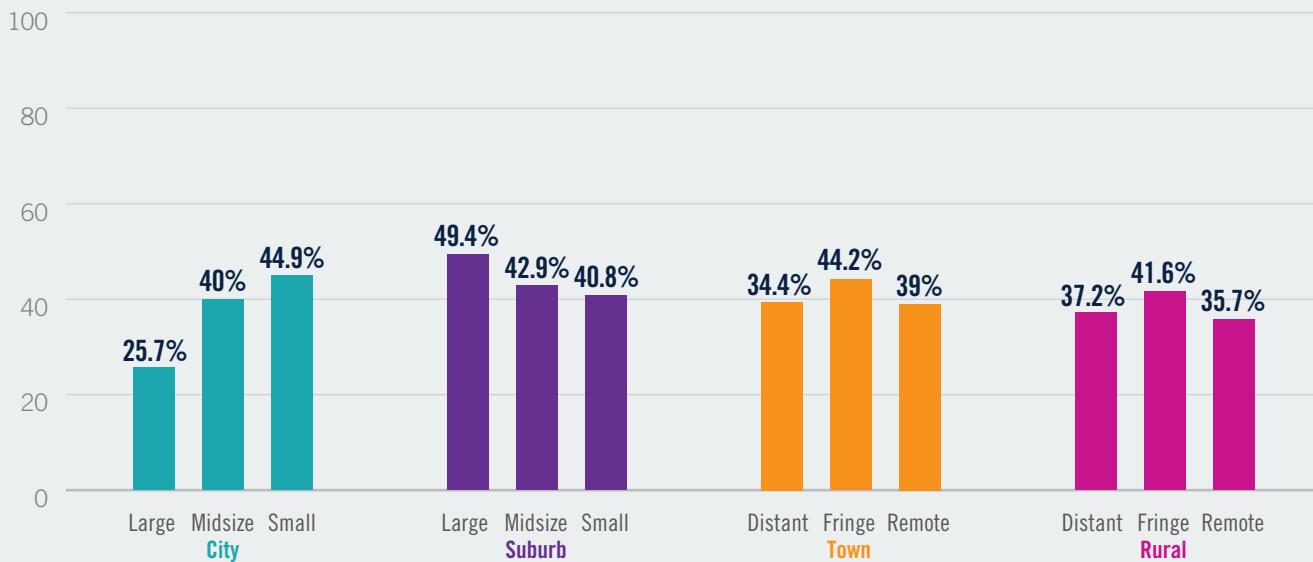


CHART 3

PROFICIENCY RATES FOR BLACK, LATINO AND NATIVE AMERICAN STUDENTS

Source: Tennessee Department of Education

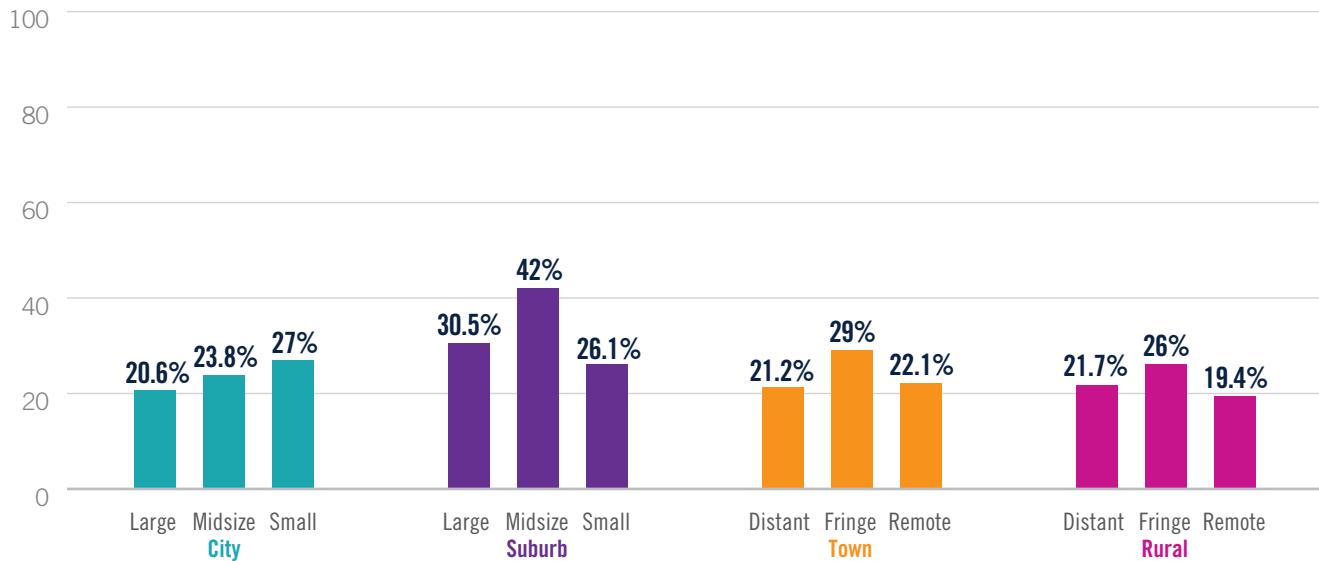
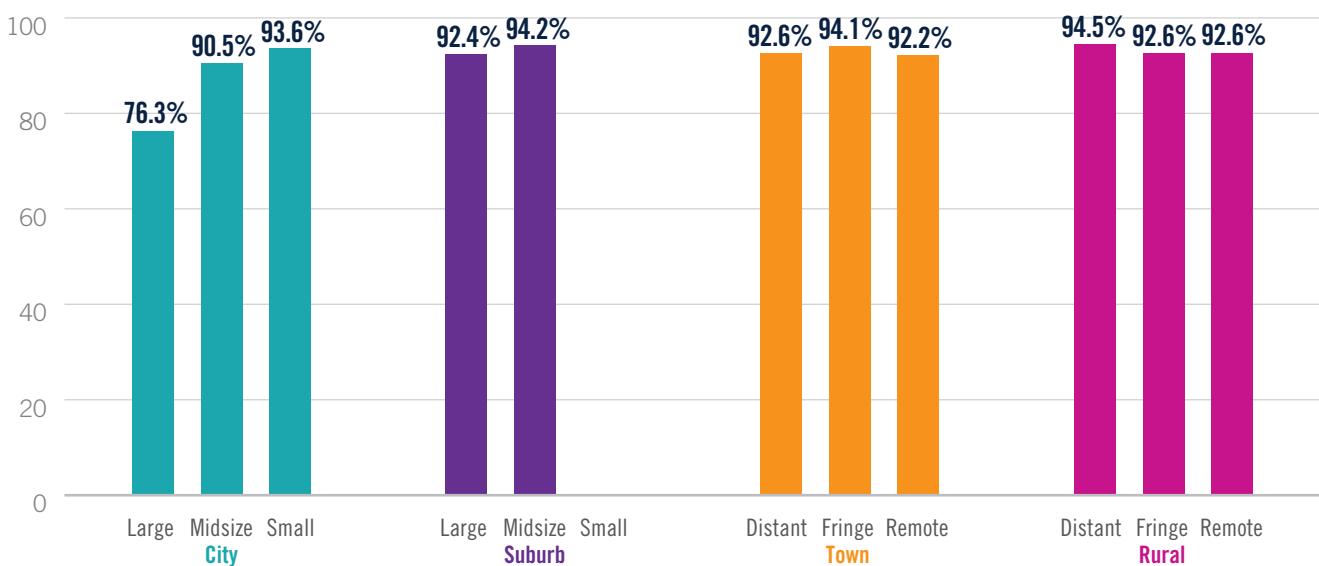


CHART 4

HIGH SCHOOL GRADUATION RATES¹

Source: Tennessee Department of Education



¹ No Tennessee high school is located within the "Suburban: Small" locale.

ACT scores are considered common predictors for postsecondary readiness. In the 2017-18 school year, Tennessee's Ready Graduate measure highlighted the ratio of students who achieved a composite score of 21. As shown in Charts 5 and 6, only 33 to 42 percent of students in all four locales achieved a composite ACT score of 21 or higher, with students in rural schools the least likely to meet this requirement for Tennessee's Ready Graduate measure.

Across all locales, there are stark racial disparities in college preparedness across locales, with at least twice as many White students scoring an ACT score of 21 as Black or African-American and Latino students. White rural and town students

reach the ACT benchmark at lower rates than White peers in city and suburban schools. Rural Black or African-American students and Latino students show rates of college readiness somewhat higher than comparable urban student groups, but lower than students in town locales.¹²

However, concerning equity gaps exist between student groups within rural locales. Rural Latino students are two times less likely to achieve an ACT score of 21 compared to their rural White peers, and Black or African-American students are three times less likely. While Tennessee's accountability framework for the Ready Graduate measure will include a host of additional options for students (industry certifications, advanced placement

CHART 5

STUDENTS RECEIVING A 21 OR HIGHER ACT COMPOSITE SCORE BY LOCALE

Source: Tennessee Department of Education



courses, dual enrollment courses, etc.), these data reveal alarming gaps in college preparedness for historically underserved students in rural schools.

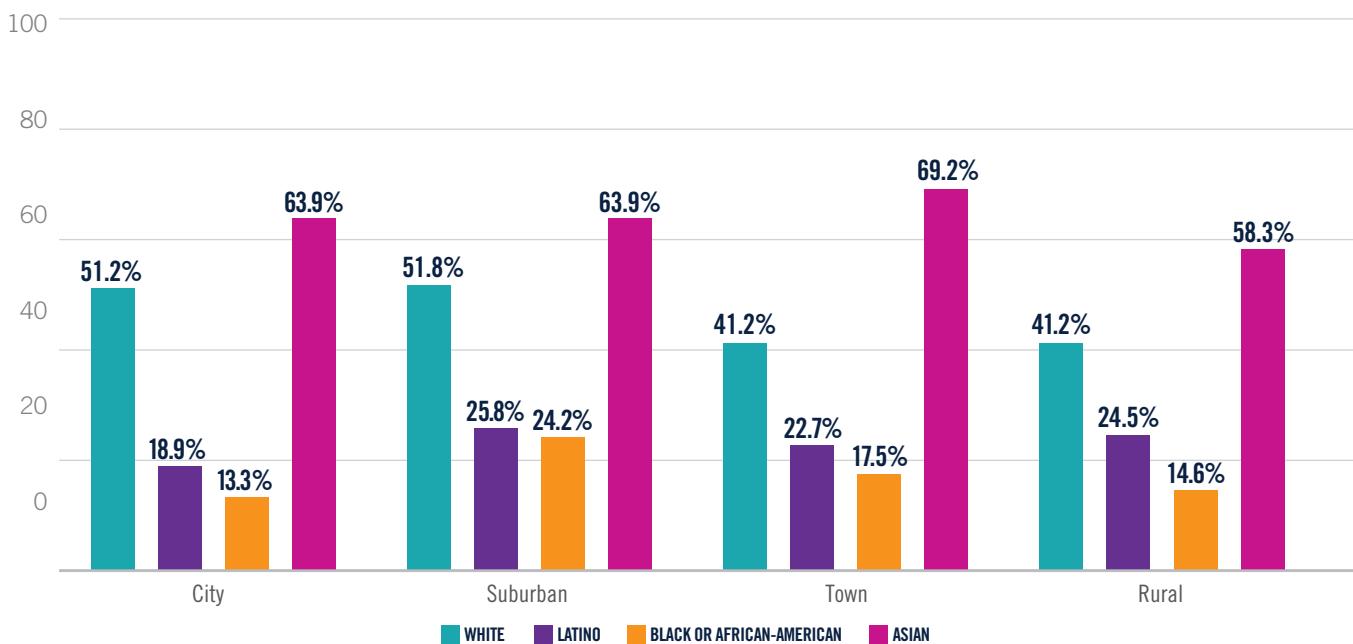
Charts 2 and 4 demonstrate that students in rural schools have rates of proficiency and high school completion similar to those of students attending city, suburban and town locales on average; but these Ready Graduate rates by student group indicate that rural schools must focus on increasing rigor and postsecondary preparation for all students. While the reasons for this disparity may vary from student to student, they may go a long way in explaining the lower rates of college enrollment and success for students from rural communities across the nation.¹³

Tennessee's accountability plan signals that ACT need not be the sole measure of college readiness, but these trends still cause concern. Considering many rural communities' low postsecondary attainment rates, and the value of postsecondary education on economic development, these data also compel action on the part of policymakers and advocates to ensure the rural student's postsecondary options match their individual aspirations. *All students, regardless of where they live and attend school, should be equipped to attend any college or begin any career of their choosing upon graduation from high school. The data presented here indicate that, for Tennessee, this is not yet the case.*

CHART 6

STUDENTS RECEIVING A 21 OR HIGHER ON ACT

Source: Tennessee Department of Education



HOW DOES RURAL MATTER

for Education?

Consider Three Tennessee Principals²

SUBURBAN PRINCIPAL

Median Household Income in the County: \$103,503
School Enrollment: 1,730
Teacher Count: 99
Additional Staff: 7
EL Students: 7
Starting Instructor Salary: \$39,764
Nearest Public Postsecondary Institution: 9 miles

RURAL PRINCIPAL

Median Household Income in the County: \$39,692
School Enrollment: 879
Teacher Count: 56
Additional Staff: 3
EL Students: 26
Starting Instructor Salary: \$36,960
Nearest Public Postsecondary Institution: 24 miles

URBAN PRINCIPAL

Median Household Income in the County: \$52,458
School Enrollment: 956
Teacher Count: 65
Additional Staff: 16
EL Students: 106
Starting Instructor Salary: \$38,295
Nearest Public Postsecondary Institution: 2 miles

An important perspective in education is that of the school principal. We can see that rural matters when we consider the context for principals in an urban, suburban and rural school district. Each day, these leaders make difficult decisions to ensure that their students, staff and schools have opportunities to succeed. Sidebox A provides school profiles of these principals in unnamed urban, suburban and rural high schools. A close examination of this geographical context reveals how locale truly impacts a principal's administrative decisions and overall school performance, highlighting *why rural matters*.

Consider the median household income in each community. Local wealth through local property taxes is directly tied to a school's budget, and this measure provides a gauge on the average property value and economic prosperity of the school's community. As a result, wealthier or poorer property values translate into disparate funding capabilities between wealthier and poorer communities. Median household income is not tied directly to the quality of a region's school, but it does point to the opportunities and challenges that schools face in accessing and leveraging resources. Pillars of support, such as local fundraising and strong community partnerships, become more difficult in communities with lower average incomes. For instance, let's imagine there is a suburban principal who is interested in constructing a new reading center to address K-3 literacy in his school. Bond issuances and other local funding mechanisms for the project might be feasible in a suburban district where the average family earns \$103,000. But in rural Tennessee, where the average family's income for the rural community is

²For high schools used in Sidebox A, each profile uses the most recent data from the U.S. Census, the Tennessee Department of Education, the Tennessee Education Association and Standard GPS measures from school's location. Schools were chosen based on their classification as rural, suburban or urban according to NCES locale codes.

a third of this amount, the opportunities and levers for funding are more scarce.

Beyond a community's average income, consider the impact of *enrollment-based funding* on districts across locales. A city principal leads a school serving 106 English Learners, while a rural principal has an average of 26 students who are learning English. The Basic Education Program provides funding for one instructional position for every 20 English Learner students. While the urban principal will have state money to fund about four instructional positions, the rural principal can fund only one and will need to locate additional funding sources to meet the needs of their 26 English Learner students, who may be spread across grade levels and have a range of fluency in English. The schools within this rural district might be 15 to 30 miles apart, creating logistic challenges for English Learner instruction when schools attempt to share teachers. Suburban principals average seven English Learner students, meaning they will lack a state-funded instructional position. However, the school's local revenue would likely enable the principal to allocate additional funds to support English Learners instruction, perhaps even exceeding what a rural district is able to provide.

Teacher hiring also presents a challenge to the rural principal. Compared to urban and suburban schools, the rural administrator offers a less competitive first-year salary for a candidate with a bachelor's degree. If the candidate were to choose between the rural, urban or suburban principal's offer, they would have the opportunity to make \$3,000 more in the suburban school compared to the rural one. In addition to a less competitive salary, younger and more diverse candidates might have a harder time adapting to rural communities,

which are often more isolated and with fewer amenities than urban and suburban communities.

Further, a school's distance from a postsecondary institution matters when principals want to increase student access to early postsecondary courses. As a principal looks to expand the options for industry certifications or dual enrollment courses, the proximity to a postsecondary institution can help with the provision of adjunct faculty, or in the certification of in-school teachers to teach the course. As Sidebox A shows, a rural district often faces 20- to 30-mile distances to the nearest postsecondary institution, while urban and suburban principals have much shorter distances in order to access these institutions. While this is not the case for every school district in rural areas, these "higher education deserts" are essential considerations when addressing rural postsecondary access.

Each day, these leaders make difficult decisions to ensure that their students, staff and schools have opportunities to succeed.

In the sections that follow, the Tennessee Educational Equity Coalition will cover three areas that matter for education opportunity in rural communities. These areas will be explored across quantitative measures for urban, suburban, town and rural schools, and include a spotlight on the voices of principals, district leaders, teachers and students in paving the road to equity in rural education.

1. RURAL MATTERS FOR ENGLISH LEARNER INSTRUCTION & STUDENT SUPPORT

For the past several decades, Tennessee has experienced notable demographic population shifts. Between 1990 and 2016, the state experienced a substantial increase in the number of foreign-born residents. By 2016, immigrant students made up 12 percent of Tennessee's population in schools.¹⁴ Demographic shifts in non-English-speaking populations impact schools, communities and geographies differently. For many native- and foreign-born migrant populations, Tennessee's rural communities offer gainful employment.¹⁵ Many families arrived as migrant workers in the agriculture sector, but chose to put down roots in local communities, even as those

rural locales experience population decline in light of changing economic opportunities and increased urbanization.

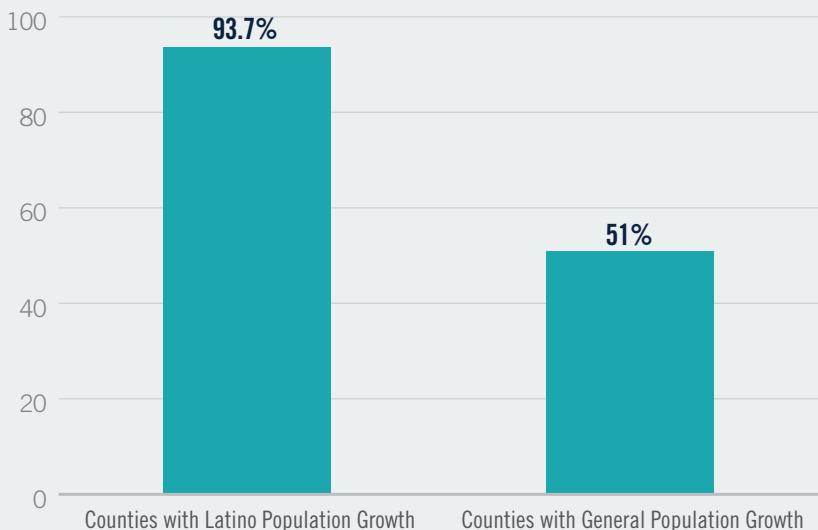
Tennessee's rural demographic shifts increase the need for rural school districts to better serve English Learner and migrant students. On average, nearly eight in 10 English Learners in Tennessee are native Spanish speakers.¹⁶ Chart 7 captures the average Latino population growth across counties where rural schools are situated; 89 counties experienced some Latino population growth, while just 48 counties experienced overall population growth.¹⁷

*On average,
nearly
8 IN 10
English Learners
in Tennessee are
native Spanish
speakers.*

CHART 7

PROPORTION OF TENNESSEE'S 95 COUNTIES EXPERIENCING POPULATION GROWTH

Source: Coalition analysis of U.S. Census Bureau and ACS 2010 and 2013-17 5-Year Estimates



Tennessee's 15 distressed counties were designated in 2019 by the Appalachian Regional Commission through a composite average of unemployment rates, per capita market income and poverty, and are located in rural Tennessee areas. An analysis of demographic shifts in Tennessee's distressed counties reveals further need to ensure rural schools and communities have the capacity to serve English Learner and migrant students.¹⁸ Eighty-seven percent of these counties experienced overall population decline between 2010 and 2017, while one had a Latino population decline (see Chart 8). The absolute number of Latino residents remains relatively low in these areas, but their persistence and contribution to these communities requires a continued focus on the state of English Learner support in rural Tennessee schools.¹⁹

Even as these communities experience dire economic circumstances, they provide gainful employment to migrant families and other non-English-language speakers. Often, these population shifts bring new English Learners to rural schools, but their numbers remain small. As a result, they do not bring additional state funding or resources to the schools, and districts struggle to provide social-emotional supports or translated information for parents. Chart 9 depicts a **57 percent increase in classified English Learners** in rural schools over the past six years.²⁰

CHART 8

PROPORTION OF TENNESSEE'S 2019 DISTRESSED COUNTIES EXPERIENCING POPULATION DECLINE

Source: Coalition analysis of U.S. Census Bureau and ACS 2010 and 2013-17 5-Year Estimates

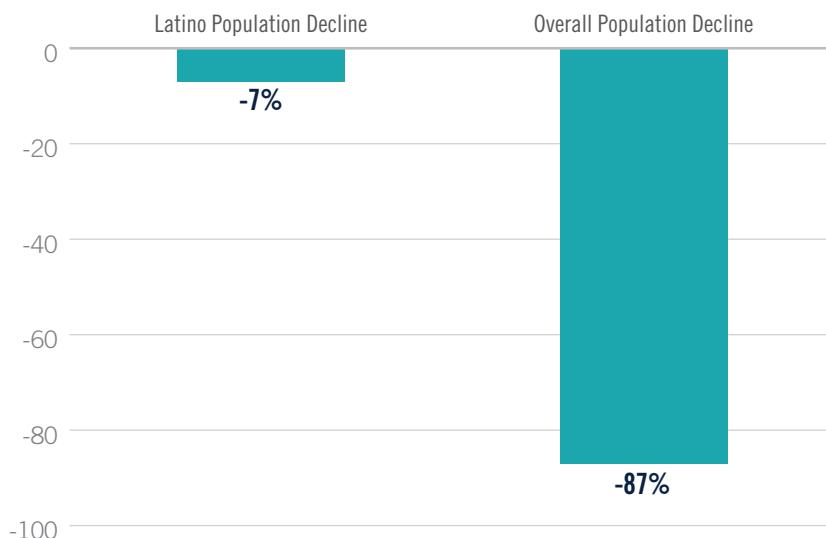
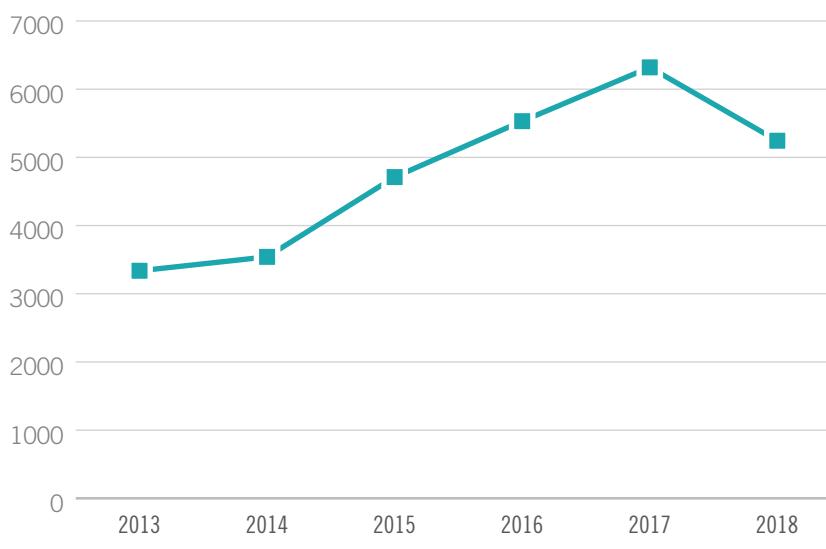


CHART 9

NUMBER OF CLASSIFIED ENGLISH LEARNERS IN RURAL SCHOOLS

Source: Tennessee Department of Education, 2013-2018



To measure the success of a school's English Learner programs, the Tennessee Department of Education reports a school's *exit rate*, which measures the rate at which English Learners reach proficiency and exit the program, attending regular education classes for the remainder of their K-12 education. Chart 10 presents the measure for schools by locale.

According to Chart 10, schools differ in their success in exiting English Learner students across

locales. Suburban schools perform better, with the exception of those in the Suburban Small locale, while city, town and rural schools have different levels of success based on the school's geographic distance from urban areas.²¹ To develop a more detailed understanding of English Learner student success in rural Tennessee, we present three distinct findings that emerged in our discussions with English Learner coordinators and instructors. Table 1 presents findings from individuals in East, Middle and West Tennessee.

CHART 10

AVERAGE PROPORTION MEETING EL EXIT CRITERIA

Source: Tennessee Department of Education, 2017-2018

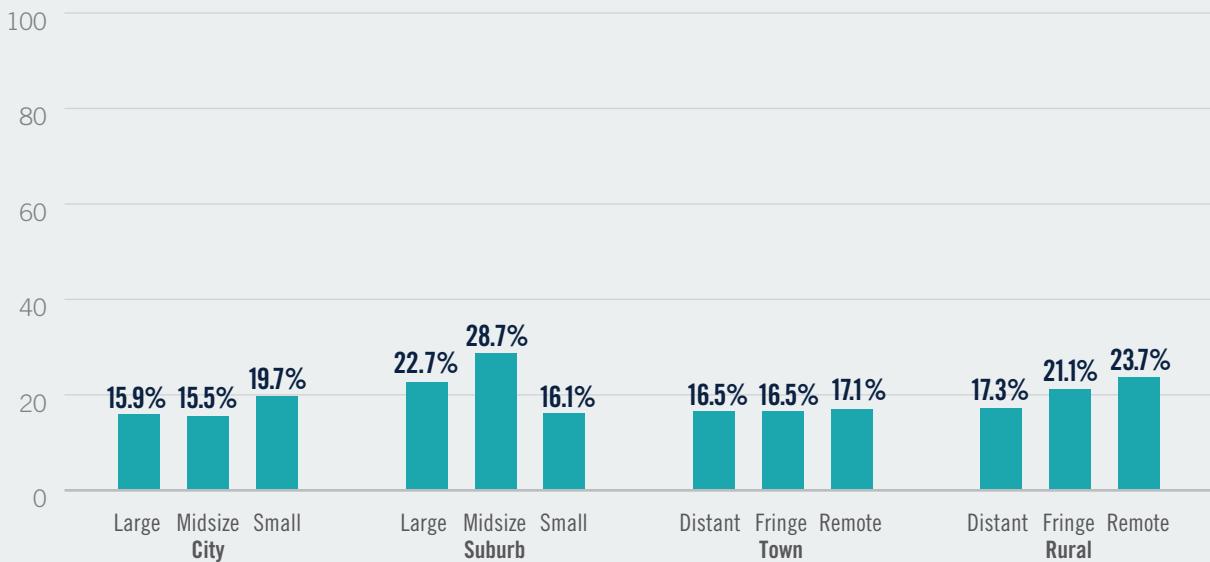


TABLE 1

WHAT WE HEARD	
For many schools serving EL students and families, rural is a strength for school-family communication and relationships.	<p><i>“...the relationship with the families....when I get students in school, usually I know the older siblings, the younger siblings, I know the families, if it’s somebody coming from outside, I know who they’re connected to.”</i> <i>– ESL Coordinator, Middle Tennessee</i></p> <p><i>“Well, something that we have that’s unique to us is the relationship that we have between our ESL teachers and our parents in the community. It is second to none. [ESL coordinator] can call any parent right now, have a conversation with them, if they need to come in they’re going to come in and speak with [them], [they] have put together an ESL class that meets once a week for our parents. And that has been extremely successful. We’re seeing an increase in parent participation, parent-teacher conferences, open houses, math and reading nights, they’re coming to school more because they’re more comfortable.”</i> – District Personnel, West Tennessee</p>
Funding and distance both seem to matter when it comes to rural ELs.	<p><i>“I just think you need to look at how are you supporting rural programs, like the amount of time in services that you give to that child. If they’re supposed to get an hour day, they’re supposed to get an hour day. But if you’re traveling [miles between schools], and you’re covering multiple grades...compared to an urban school...your responsibilities are very different.”</i> <i>– ESL Coordinator, Middle Tennessee</i></p> <p><i>“Our EL students...it’s kind of hard to get enough modifications for them. Because we have one ESL teacher...and we have one translator that helps her, but then we have a large quantity [of students].”</i> <i>– High School Teacher, Middle Tennessee</i></p>
Educator preparation programs (EPPs) can improve preparation of teacher candidates to better serve EL students.	<p><i>“[On EPPs] that is an area we definitely need to work on. There should definitely be at least one class dedicated to serving ESL students. And the ESL student spends the majority of the day with the content teacher, not with the ESL teacher.”</i> – ESL Coordinator, Middle Tennessee</p>



SPOTLIGHT

New York State Education Department²²

In New York state, the Education Department has proposed regulatory changes that would require teacher preparation programs across specific subject areas to dedicate a minimum of three semester hours to language acquisition and literacy development of English Learners. The proposed regulation would cover English Learner instructional needs, strategies for co-teaching, and integrating content and language instruction. Teacher preparation programs are given a few years to align their program requirements with the proposal, with the revision complete for students enrolling in programs in the fall of 2022.

As the section shows, school-community communication, funding, distance and preparation are important factors in rural English Learner instruction. Many rural communities present strengths for English Learner success in the small-scale relationships that the schools, instructors, families and students develop with one another. However, schools are short-staffed due to funding and the additional distances between schools create unique difficulties for English Learner programs. One district we visited serves about 50 English Learner students across a wide geographic space, yet receives funding for only two English Learner instructor positions. Additionally, many respondents felt that educator preparation programs (EPPs) could improve their preparation of candidates in serving students with limited English proficiency as well. While many of these issues transcend a school's rural location, issues of funding, distance and increasing population growth for non-English-speaking populations warrants an intensive focus on English Learner success in rural Tennessee.

2. RURAL MATTERS FOR EARLY POSTSECONDARY OPPORTUNITIES IN HIGH SCHOOL

When it comes to access to postsecondary coursework for students, rural also matters. For every high school student in Tennessee, a diploma is a first step into the postsecondary sphere. A high school student's postsecondary success – whether at work, in a community or technical college or at a four-year university – is undoubtedly affected by the rigor and scope of their high school coursework. Tennessee's ESSA plan prioritizes early postsecondary opportunities (EPSOs) as a key accountability measure for high schools, emphasizing that graduation alone is no longer enough for students.²³

In 2019, the Tennessee Higher Education Commission reported that 46 percent of Tennessee graduates entering postsecondary education required remedial coursework in mathematics, and 33 percent in reading, indicating a need to examine the quality of academic preparation students receive.²⁴ Tennessee Promise data shows that academically underprepared Promise recipients face significant difficulty in acquiring a degree.²⁵ Without rigorous academic preparation prior to postsecondary entry, the uphill battle for student success will persist.

Beyond the impact of course access on postsecondary student outcomes, multiple EPSO offerings require very particular supports and resources to ensure student success. For instance, AP courses allow students to test out of college courses in certain subjects. Industry certifications provide students the entry into high-wage and skilled jobs upon graduation. Both examples require districts to align resources, such as specialized

instructor certification, professional development, or the provision of facilities or materials that require funding, regardless of the ability of districts to subsidize them.

Early Postsecondary Opportunities: An Analysis of Advanced Placement and Dual Enrollment Access

Early postsecondary opportunities in Tennessee include Advanced Placement (AP) courses, Cambridge International Examinations, College Level Examinations, International Baccalaureate, Local Dual Credit, State Dual Credit, Dual Enrollment and Industry Certification. These courses not only are important to expose high school students to postsecondary options, but have the potential to increase the school's graduation rates and average ACT score.²⁶ While EPSOs expand the academic rigor and scope of students' secondary education experiences, access to EPSOs is inequitable across schools and districts. Here we will explore school and student access, by locale, to two popular forms of EPSOs utilized across districts and schools: advanced placement and dual enrollment courses.

Advanced Placement

Advanced Placement (AP) courses offer college-level curricula and examinations to students in high school. AP exam scores range from 1 to 5, with postsecondary institutions providing college credit to students with a particular score – usually from 3 to 5. Research continues to explore the impact of taking and succeeding AP coursework on postsecondary outcomes. Overall, students who score a 3 or higher have higher chance of success in college.²⁷

But student access to AP coursework can depend on whether a school is more urban or more rural. Rural schools, in particular, face barriers in offering these courses to their students. For instance, AP courses require a specific certification that many rural teachers do not hold, as well as course and test fees that families in poverty are often unable to afford. Additionally, short-staffed rural schools struggle to place an instructor in an AP class if they need the instructor to teach in another subject area with bigger enrollment numbers.

Chart 11 further examines the state of access to Advanced Placement courses across locale. The median number of distinct courses by locale is greater for city and suburban schools, compared to rural schools. In fact, in many cases students attending a school within a city might have up to

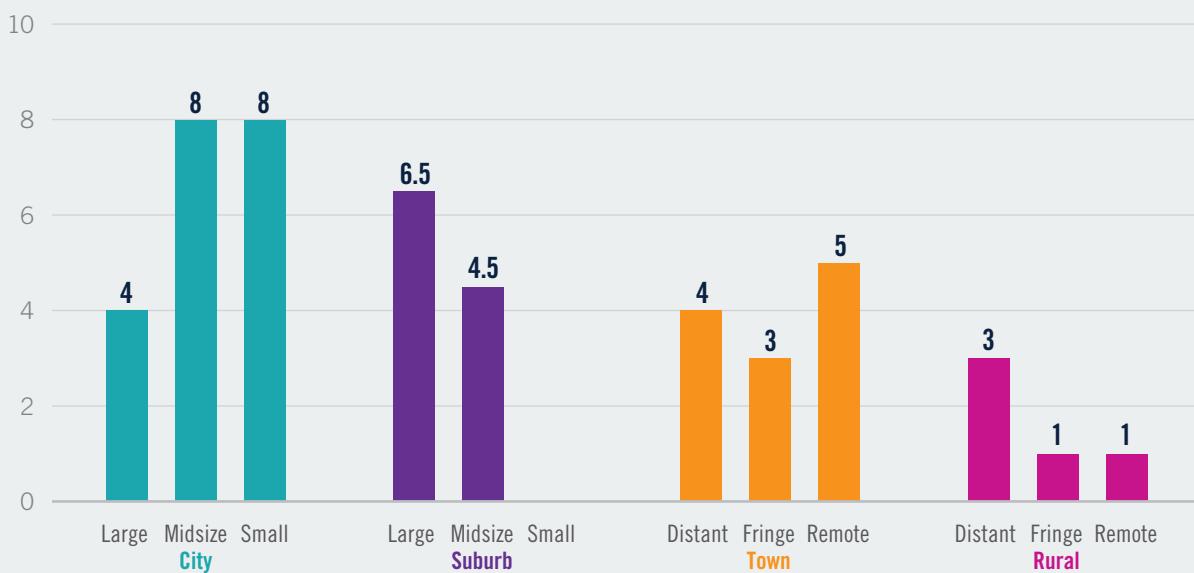
five more AP options than a student residing in a rural locale. Most notable is that the median number of courses essentially decreases as a school's distance from an urban core increases.²⁸

For the students represented in these locales, this data implies that urban and suburban students have greater access to rigorous, college preparatory coursework. And subsequently, these students are more likely to take multiple AP exams, an option providing a head start to students in attaining college credits, which mostly remain inaccessible for rural students. Such inequities affect not only the number of AP courses a student may access while in high school, but the *student's progress toward a postsecondary credential* after high school in an age when Tennessee hopes to see 55 percent of its population obtain a degree by 2025.

CHART 11

MEDIAN NUMBER OF AP COURSE CODES PER SCHOOL WITHIN LOCALE³

Source: Tennessee Department of Education, 2017-2018



³ No Tennessee high school is located within the "Suburban: Small" locale.

Dual Enrollment

Dual enrollment is another EPSO that many districts and schools offer students. Dual enrollment is a postsecondary course offered by either a postsecondary institution or at a high school, with postsecondary faculty or credentialed adjunct faculty teaching the course. Historically, dual enrollment has provided academic coursework to accelerate students through school, and providing postsecondary credits upon course completion.²⁹ Courses may be offered across a variety of academic subject areas, such as science, mathematics, social sciences, arts and health sciences. As with other EPSOs, students who succeed in dual enrollment courses are more likely to enroll in postsecondary institutions and succeed there as well.³⁰

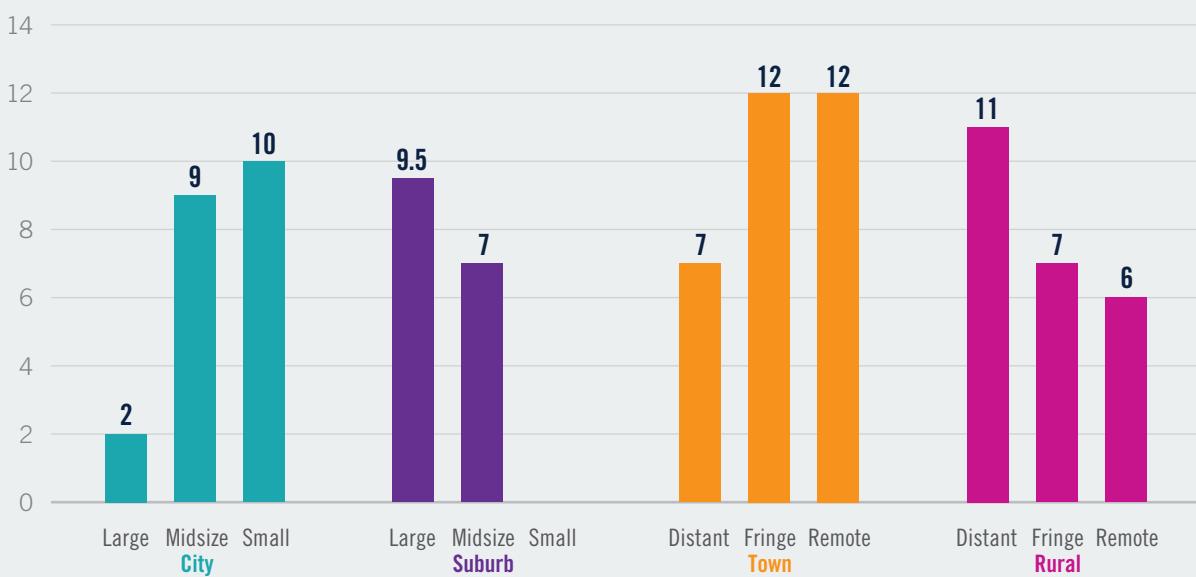
According to Chart 12, rural students participate in dual enrollment at a higher rate than AP coursework. In fact, students who attend a school in towns or rural areas appear to access more dual enrollment courses than urban and suburban locales. However, the median number of distinct courses in rural schools begins to decrease the farther the school is located from more urban areas. Such a decrease has real implications for students, especially because these same students have limited opportunities to enroll in advanced placement courses.

As a school's location extends from the urban core, however, some trends in dual enrollment participation are important to highlight (see Chart 13). First, there are fewer math and science

CHART 12

MEDIAN NUMBER OF DUAL ENROLLMENT COURSES PER SCHOOL WITHIN LOCALE⁴

Source: Tennessee Department of Education, 2017-2018



⁴ No Tennessee high school is located within the "Suburban: Small" locale.

dual enrollment courses offered in town and rural schools than in urban districts. However, there is relative parity across locales in access to career and technical education courses, which include a broad range of options and industry certifications. CTE courses provide workforce-aligned content across multiple subject areas for students, but many geographically isolated schools vary in their ability to provide a diverse suite of postsecondary options that include CTE options. Additionally, students attending the most remote rural schools located the furthest from the urban core in Tennessee – where there is a

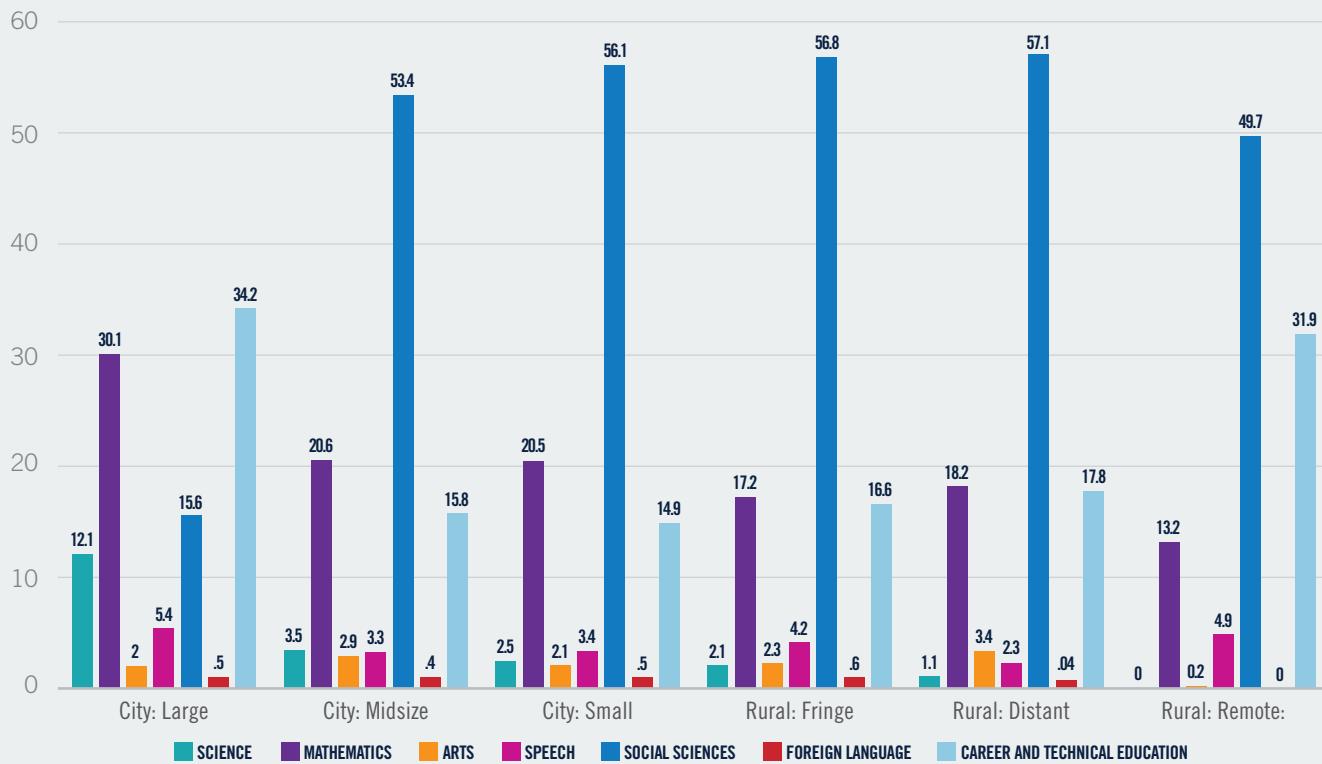
median number of only six dual enrollment courses offered – do not participate in dual enrollment science courses and participate in fewer dual enrollment math courses, and a larger portion of CTE courses compared to other locales.³¹

Access to early postsecondary opportunities like AP or dual enrollment courses is complicated, with many factors playing into adding new courses. Experienced and trained instructors must be hired, and often must receive additional certification. If schools are short-staffed, an EPSO addition may

CHART 13

SUBJECT AREA DUAL ENROLLMENT FOR STUDENTS BY SUB-LOCALE⁵

Source: Tennessee Department of Education, 2017-2018



⁵Another EPSO option distinct from dual enrollment is **dual credit**. Although not covered in this report, many schools are exploring opportunities to expand dual credit by providing a high school course aligned with a local postsecondary institution's course and exam. Dual credit may be offered statewide or locally, with local dual credit requiring special partnerships between districts and other entities. This data is beyond the scope of the report, but is an important aspect of EPSO expansion and is being practiced by many Tennessee schools.

mean an instructor has to teach both regular content and EPSO coursework. This is particularly true with AP courses, which require fees and unique teacher training. Dual enrollment courses are also difficult to offer if a postsecondary institution is far from the school's community. To understand more about these factors, we asked about EPSO access in our listening tour. Four themes emerged.

TABLE 2

WHAT WE HEARD	
When it comes to offering an EPSO, proximity to postsecondary institutions matters.	<p><i>"I don't feel like us being rural has held us back. I really don't. I feel like we're fortunate in that we've got outlined partners with postsecondary and if we didn't have [a community college] in our backyard, that would look different...it would be so different. Such a different ball game." – CTE Director, Middle Tennessee</i></p> <p><i>"It's 30 miles to the TCAT....I have a lot of students that will not take dual enrollment classes because they don't have transportation." – High School Counselor, East Tennessee</i></p>
External partnerships, including industry, also seem to be important.	<p><i>"...we have our local education foundation and when we have special projects or have different things going on, we can reach out to them to seek some sponsorship there, and they're wonderful partners for us." – CTE Director, Middle Tennessee</i></p> <p><i>"We're looking into it, [an instructor has] tried to find someone to come and do courses in OSHA...so we're looking for ways to get them certified, but that's been a struggle to get people to come in and do the OSHA training. We've not been able to find anyone so far." – High School Principal, East Tennessee</i></p>
Exam fees and transportation are important barriers to access for students.	<p><i>"I had 7 kids [out of 67] sign up for AP bio and they told me it was because it took \$96 to take the test." – High School Teacher, Middle Tennessee</i></p> <p><i>"I have a lot of students that will not take dual enrollment classes because they don't have transportation. As far as funding, if my students don't have the transportation they have the opportunity to take classes online, but that costs more. There's about a \$100 online fee for a class. And so that's kind of hindering the opportunities."</i> <i>— High School Counselor, East Tennessee</i></p>
For EPSO course expansion and complete programs of study, staffing is an important consideration.	<p><i>"...next year we're implementing an advanced placement computer programming class, and our calculus teacher is the one that's going to be teaching that. I mean those are two major preps, calculus and AP computer programming and can she be able to give it her all?" – High School Teacher, Middle Tennessee</i></p> <p><i>"But the piece I have the problem with is our smaller rural schools...a lot of the programs there's one teacher. Can that teacher offer a seamless program of study? No. And that's a problem. When you've only got one health science teacher, one advanced manufacturing teacher...it's harder to do a sequence of a program of study. Because you want to give those kids experience in like health science for example... [the health science teacher] probably has – she teaches a block schedule. And she probably out of her 6 courses she teaches this year, she's probably had 5 preps. Which that's okay...But is there a seamless transition? Well, for a handful of students. I guess what I'm saying is I don't know what to do to fix that problem." – CTE Director, Middle Tennessee</i></p>



SPOTLIGHT

Tennessee Pathways³²

Tennessee Pathways is a K-12 strategy of Tennessee's initiative to increase postsecondary attainment statewide. Tennessee Pathways seeks to create stronger alignment among K-12, postsecondary and industry to ensure all students are prepared for high-quality careers in their communities and across the state. The work is driven by nine regional coordinators who act as the "glue" between schools, postsecondary institutions and industry leaders, advocating for expanded early college and career experiences that prepare students for the future of work. The program also offers a recognition for schools called the Tennessee Pathways Certification. Schools that earn the certification have demonstrated their high school pathways to postsecondary and career are seamless, leading to an industry certification, postsecondary college credit and/or postsecondary credentials of value. If expanded, Tennessee Pathways has the potential to address many of the unique needs of rural communities in adding EPSO coursework, providing seamless programs of study for postsecondary and the workforce, and supporting schools and instructors in addressing staffing and student needs for EPSO provision.

Lawrence County Higher Education Center³²

Governor Bill Haslam and other funders played a key role in the development of a higher education center in Lawrence County, Tennessee. Their financial commitment was a recognition of the importance of proximity for creating student pathways to early postsecondary opportunities. Though still under construction, the Center will house degree-bearing programs from Columbia State Community College, Tennessee Tech and Middle Tennessee State University. Local residents will have the opportunity to obtain degrees in closer geographic proximity to their communities. In addition to providing accessible degrees, existing higher education centers provide substantial economic benefits to the communities in which they are constructed.

3. RURAL MATTERS FOR GREAT EDUCATORS

Perhaps the most critical factor for student success is their access to highly effective educators. Ample research underscores the theory that teachers and leaders have a profound impact on a school's overall performance.³³ Classroom teachers are the single most important in-school factor for student success. Leaders, whether superintendents or principals, have tremendous influence over the type and quality of teachers in our schools, but rural school leaders face additional challenges when staffing their schools. Across rural Tennessee, teacher shortages are pervasive. Pay or geographic location serves as a disincentive to employment in rural parts of the state.³⁴ As a result, rural principals are faced with a host of staffing challenges and subsequent trade-offs as a consequence of these disincentives.³⁵ This environment affects staffing, but also the climate and capacities of schools as well.

School Funding & Educator Recruitment

Money matters for educator recruitment, and this is particularly true for rural schools. Tennessee's Basic Education Program funding formula provides money to schools for salaries, instructional benefits, classroom and non-classroom components.³⁶ Dollars are distributed on a per seat space basis. For example, a school funds salaries for x number of English Learner positions based on the number of English Learner students per school. But this funding does not incorporate the number of years a student has been classified as an English Learner, the geographic location of the school or the socio-economic status of students.

This distribution of dollars uniquely impacts students and schools in Tennessee's rural communities. In the

BEP's structure, locales must provide a matching contribution to the formula's various components. This contribution draws from local tax revenue, which relies on a community's tax base to support the community's public education system. As a result, there is great variation in a local community's capacity to fund education. The state offers an equalization formula, which is meant to offset the difference in a local district's ability to pay. But the formula applies at the county level, not districts within counties, and is unable to adjust for how a locale may provide progressive or regressive per-pupil funding for their students based on community wealth. For example, in Obion County in West Tennessee, 36.6 percent of the school district's total revenue is derived from the local contribution, while Williamson County School District is able to contribute 51.2 percent of its total school funds from the local contribution.³⁷ The state of Tennessee provides the balance of the revenue to the schools.

Even with attempts to equalize funding based on local capacity, these revenue structures affect schools differently, and perhaps most acutely in a school's capacity to hire and retain strong teachers. In Tennessee, the state sets a flat teacher salary (\$47,150) upon which it funds all instructional positions through the BEP.³⁸ A comparison of two school systems illuminates the disparity: For example, Lawrence County and Williamson County school districts both need funds for 420 instructors. The funding formula provides state and local funding for their instructional salaries at \$47,150. However, there is no guarantee that either district will provide a newly hired teacher with that exact salary.

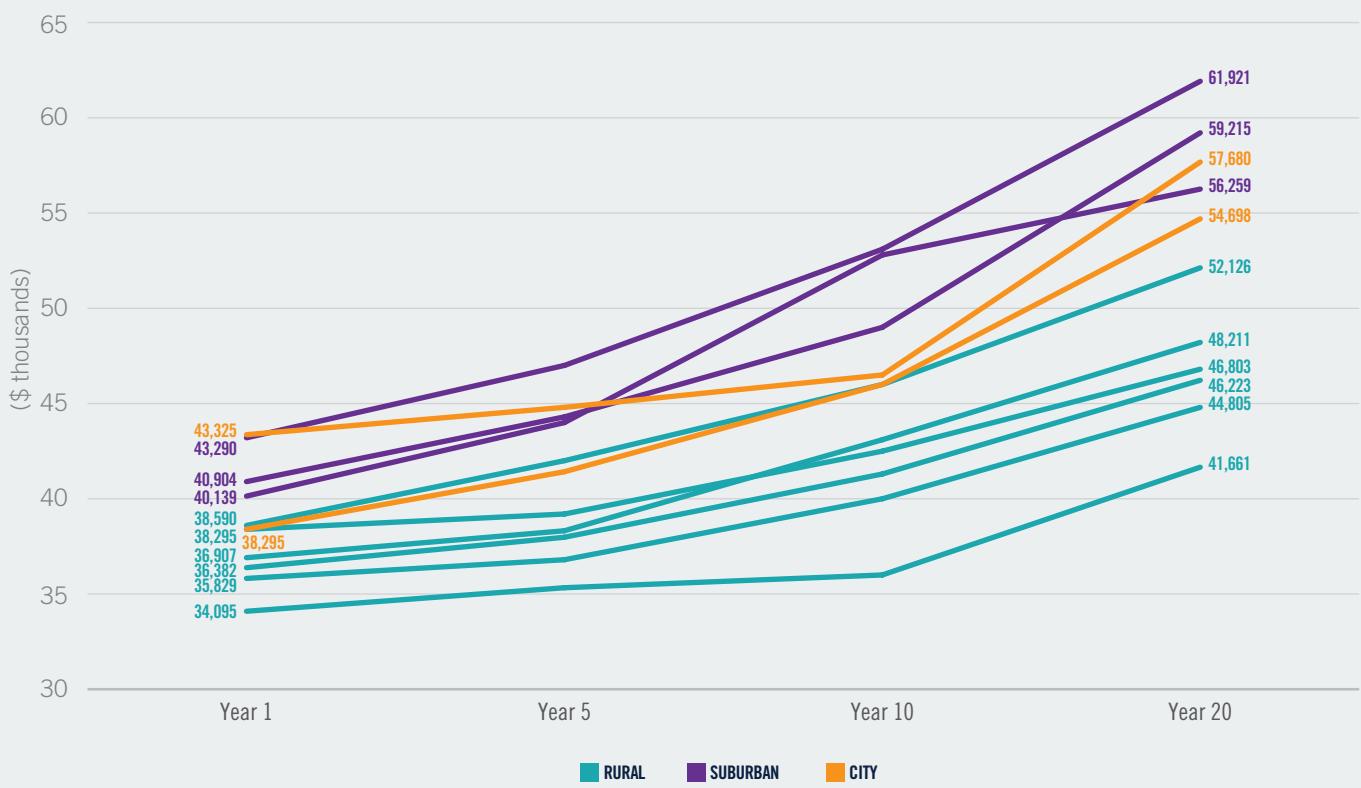
Williamson County has the means to supplement and raise that salary if necessary because of the local contribution, which gives them more flexibility. Williamson County contributes 42.5 percent of instructional salary funds from its local base, while Obion County contributes 23.2 percent from its local revenue, which reflects Obion County's decreased ability to supplement salaries. The state's equalization formula may

attempt to offset any funding inequities, but it does not consider how the scope of local property wealth can impact a district's ability to offer much higher salaries to beginner teachers. Chart 14 shows the teacher pay schedules for a sample of rural, suburban and urban counties. As the figure's small sample depicts, these urban and suburban schools are able to offer higher starting salaries for beginner teachers with a bachelor's

CHART 14

TEACHER SALARY SCHEDULES FOR TEACHERS WITH A BACHELOR DEGREE IN SELECT RURAL, SUBURBAN AND URBAN SCHOOL SYSTEMS⁶

Source: Tennessee Education Association, 2018



⁶Sample includes six rural counties across West, Middle and East Tennessee, and selected suburban and city locales. Locales were determined using the NCES locale codes. The figure is certainly not representative of all Tennessee districts' capacities to support teachers, but showcases basic salary differentials between rural, suburban and urban locales.

degree. In some cases, the difference is about \$9,000.³⁹

While it is important to remember that the standard of living varies across counties, these trends show salary differences of several thousand dollars for first-year teachers with only a bachelor's degree. A newly credentialed teaching candidate in Bartlett Municipal School District, (see Chart 14) can earn nearly \$20,000 more a year than a teacher in a rural school district like Grundy County Schools after 20

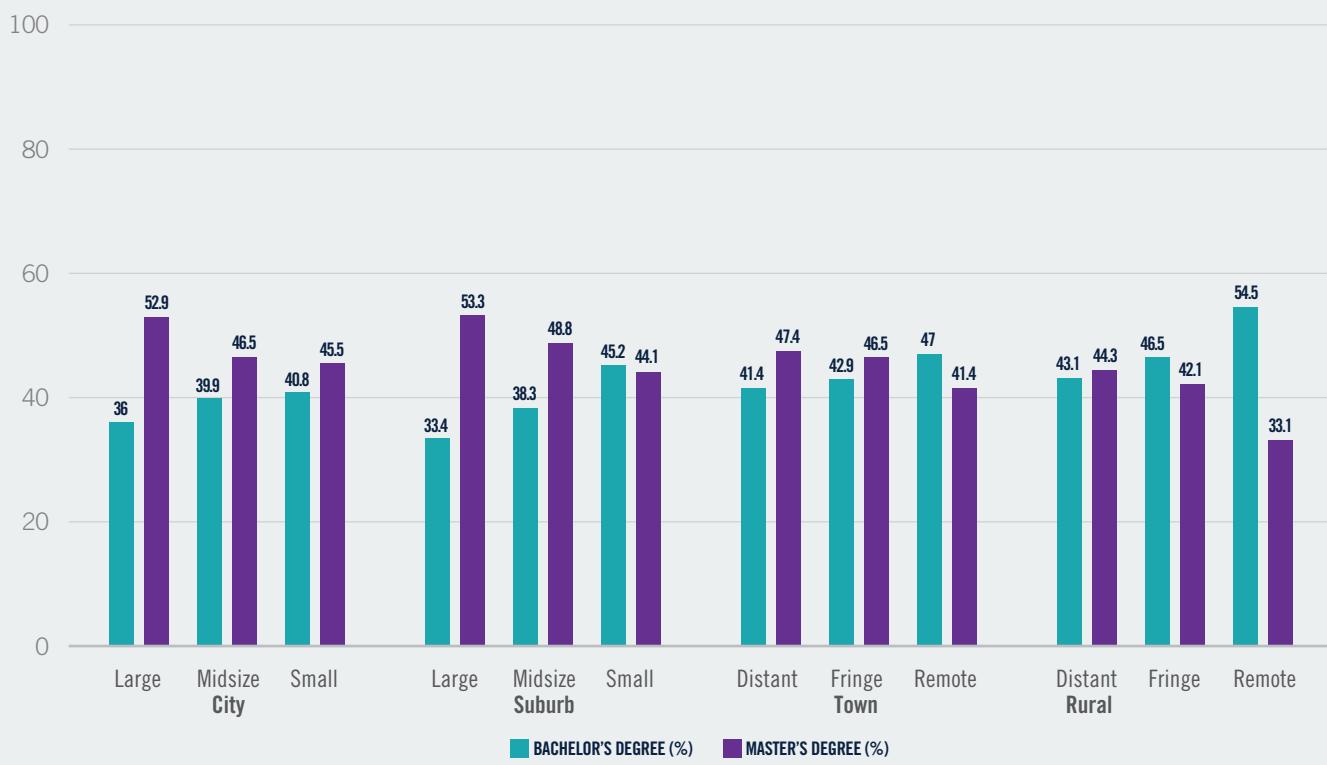
years of teaching.⁴⁰ These salary differentials affect the ability of rural principals to recruit teacher candidates, and serve as an underlying cause for the teacher shortage occurring in rural communities.

These salary gaps are greater for instructors with graduate degrees, who bring additional skills and experience to the classroom.⁴¹ Wealthier districts pay teachers with master's degrees more than most rural districts, thus creating inequity in teacher education levels across districts.

CHART 15

HIGHEST DEGREE EARNED FOR TEACHERS

Source: U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, Schools and Staffing Survey (SASS), 2011-12



Listening sessions with district and school personnel in rural Middle Tennessee provided valuable insight into the challenge of competing for elementary school teachers with a neighboring, suburban school district. One rural principal described the \$1,000 difference in starting teacher salaries that the neighboring suburban county could offer as a significant benefit for new hires. As a result, administrations are sometimes forced to provide emergency “permits” to individuals without teaching licenses to staff unfilled positions. The funding formula seeks to adjust for cost-of-living expenses for teachers, but it does not control for the *wide variation* in ability that individual school districts have to supplement teacher pay.

In addition to teacher staffing, rural schools face additional barriers to accessing *instructional*

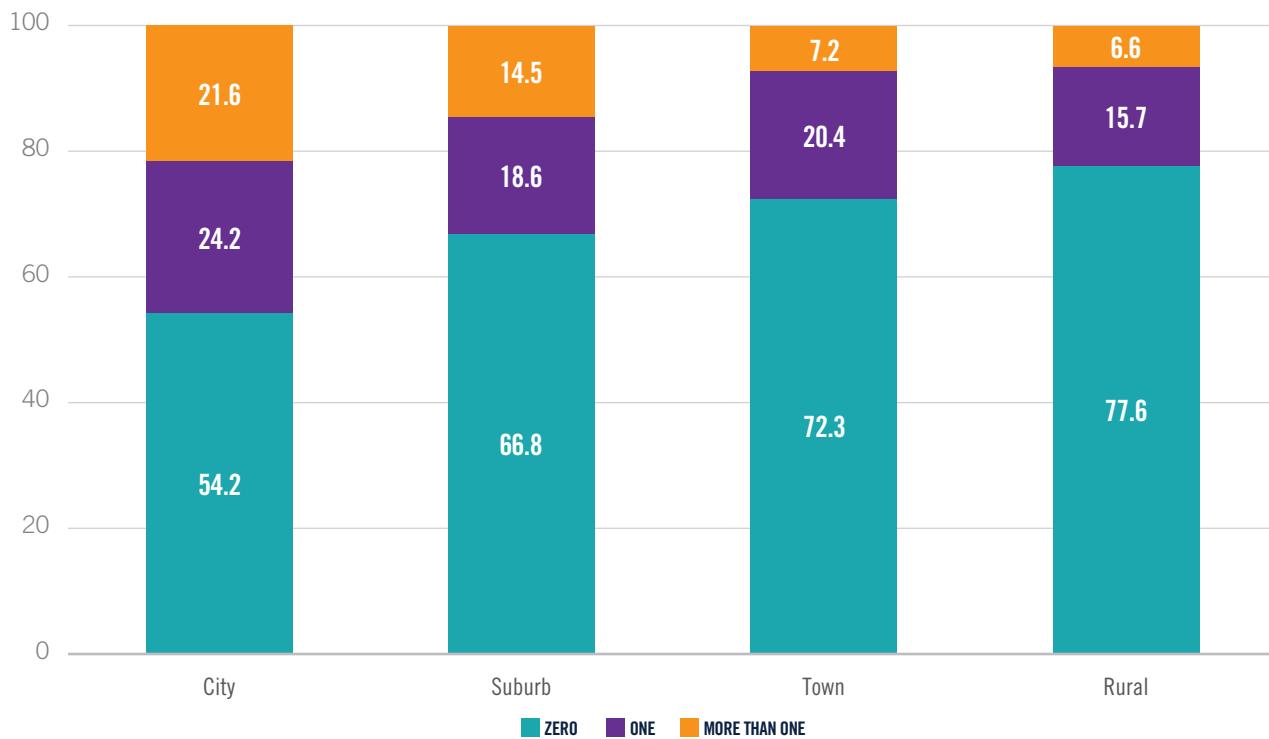
coaches and curriculum supervisors in their schools. According to the Schools and Staffing Survey, rural schools are much less likely to have additional staff to support teachers and their professional growth, with over 75 percent having no instructional support staff of any kind.⁴²

The lack of additional staff supports emerged in East and West Tennessee listening sessions as well. One rural principal noted that neighboring districts received funding for instructional supervisor positions, while they received none due to their smaller school size. We also found that rural districts ask classroom teachers to take on interventionist roles for students in need, in large part due to limited funding for instructional support personnel. Often, these coaching positions can provide real-time support for teachers,

CHART 16

NUMBER OF FULL-TIME INSTRUCTIONAL COORDINATORS AND SUPERVISORS

Source: U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, Schools and Staffing Survey (SASS), 2011-12



strengthen the rigor and quality of their practice, and have a strong effect on teacher satisfaction and student achievement. Onsite job-embedded instructional coaching, whether through the provision of additional teacher resources or instructional coordinators, can improve classroom instruction and increase teacher effectiveness.⁴³ This inequity creates an unintended disadvantage for Tennessee's rural students and teachers alike.

Our listening tour provided the opportunity to dive deeper into how rural school personnel and students experienced educator recruitment and under-resourced staff positions. Three themes emerged related to school staffing in rural areas (see Table 3).

TABLE 3

WHAT WE HEARD	
Rural schools are uniquely affected by teacher shortages.	<p><i>"There is a cycle...we can't attract people from the city. Nothing here but a Dollar General. [It's hard] when you have two or three candidates to choose from."</i> – Elementary Principal, East Tennessee</p> <p><i>"Now it's harder to find teachers with credentials....We used to previously have waiting lists of elementary people. We're not seeing elementary certified graduates in the numbers that we [need]."</i> – District Personnel, Middle Tennessee</p>
When it comes to educator recruitment, many rural communities feel they lack incentives to offer.	<p><i>"Does a 24 year old want to move to a cow farm...? No, unless their family's here."</i> – District Personnel, Middle Tennessee</p> <p><i>"...highly effective teachers are not coming [here]."</i> – High School Teacher, Middle Tennessee</p> <p><i>"You only get so many candidates that come to you."</i> – Elementary School Principal, East Tennessee</p> <p><i>"All the qualified teachers are going where they can get paid more."</i> – Elementary School Personnel, Middle Tennessee</p>
Teacher shortages – and the push to fill these vacancies – have real implications for schools, staff and students.	<p><i>"It's hard for a student to work with a new teacher. Kind of, if you have a new teacher, there's not a lot of respect with them right away."</i> – West Tennessee student</p> <p><i>[on having to grant teachers emergency permits due to shortage] "But there's a big difference in somebody that comes from a teacher prep program versus somebody with no educational coursework. I've seen it in every single instance. And that affects for that year 25 kids...and then when that person gets enrolled in a program that's not just going to...that knowledge and that skill set just doesn't "boom" show up, so how many kids does that affect? And then you've got the other teachers in that team trying to help trying to support which ultimately takes away from the attention that they're able to provide their group of kids."</i> – Middle Tennessee</p>



SPOTLIGHT

The Colorado General Assembly, SB19-003: Educator Loan Forgiveness Program⁴⁴

Passed by the Colorado General Assembly in the spring of 2019, the new law repays up to \$5,000 of qualified educational loans for five years for teachers and other school personnel employed in hard-to-fill positions due to geography and content area. The state's department of education is tasked with annually identifying the content shortages that qualify for the program, and provide an annual report to the general assembly with the information. The funds are subject to appropriation, and the department will develop policies and procedures to define “qualified educational loans.”

PAVING THE ROAD TO EQUITY IN RURAL TENNESSEE

If you exit I-40 in West Tennessee and head south, you will pass through Hardeman County, Tennessee, and by Bolivar Middle School. From the exterior, the school resembles dozens of other older buildings commonly found in rural communities. But once you're through its doors, a visitor to Bolivar will find signs celebrating the "Level 5 Growth" that students achieved on the state's assessments. You will also see a diverse student body filling the hallways, and talented teachers observing one another and offering instructional feedback. Farther to the north, Henry County Schools can demonstrate that being small is an asset when it comes to school-community relationships with their English Learners' families.

While one in three students in Tennessee may attend a rural school, the reality is that each community in Tennessee is distinct. There are vast contrasts between and among rural communities across our state. "Rural" is not a monolith but a compilation of hundreds of unique communities and circumstances.

Because of their small sizes, the unique needs of rural education are often obscured by their urban and suburban counterparts. We seek to draw attention to these needs in order to help all rural students expand their horizons and reach their potential.

Countless rural schools in Tennessee are defying the odds, and many of these school districts provide hope and pathways for students, countering the narrative of limited prosperity and opportunity in their communities. But there is work still to do, and the road between rural, suburban and urban schooling is not yet fully paved. Every data point in our *Lay of the Land* report represents actual students and teachers with their own stories, struggles and dreams. Tennessee has demonstrated the collective will and ability to take on ambitious reforms that have redefined who we are as a state. We must do so again on behalf of the rural students across Tennessee.

RECOMMENDATIONS

SCHOOL FUNDING

1. Revise the Basic Education Program to address specific student and school need.

Tennessee should revise the Basic Education Program and fund schools based on the unique needs of their students and programs. The funding formula can provide a flat rate of funding to all schools, and then add additional premiums for schools based on the number of low-income students, or those with a disability or learning English, or those attending rural schools.

2. Consider Student-Based Budgeting at the district level.

Currently, many school districts in Tennessee disperse federal, state and local funding to their schools based on student characteristics and need. This student-based budgeting formula has the potential to address inequity across and within schools, and should be expanded to all districts across the state.

ENGLISH LEARNERS

3. Consider requiring Educator Preparation Programs that receive public dollars to mandate coursework that focuses on English Learners.

Policymakers and administrators must embrace policies that prepare all teachers to address the needs of ELs. The State Board of Education should consider mandating teacher preparation programs to require teacher candidates to take at least three credit hours that focus on language acquisition and literacy development for English Learners. Upon adoption of the regulation, teacher preparation programs should be given time to develop and align program requirements successfully.

4. Provide an English Learner instructional specialist in each of the regional CORE offices of the Tennessee Department of Education.

Rural ESL teachers are isolated geographically but also professionally, and they have few opportunities to receive training and learn together. The Tennessee Department of Education should place one EL coordinator in each CORE office in order to provide ongoing professional development and support to teachers, staff and administrators.

EARLY POSTSECONDARY OPPORTUNITIES

5. Invest in (1) focused regionalized councils and (2) local higher education centers to promote postsecondary pathways.

The Office of the Governor, policymakers and industry leaders should invest in expanding the work of Tennessee Pathways, the Tennessee Chamber of Commerce, and other workforce boards to form *regionalized councils* that focus on EPSO expansion for secondary schools within specific regions. The councils, composed of high school administrators and counselors, higher education professionals, and regional industry leaders, will collaborate to determine workforce needs and expand EPSO options for students in Tennessee. The council may also appropriate funds to address staffing, student and building needs to address the costs associated with EPSO expansion.

To address the role of higher education proximity in providing EPSOs, the Office of the Governor and lawmakers should expand the work of the Tennessee Higher Education Commission, the Tennessee Board of Regents and other industry partners in creating higher education centers. Centers would serve as a “pop-up” center in more isolated communities, where multiple higher education institutions – from technical colleges to universities – may convene to provide degree-bearing coursework for students in a geographically accessible manner.

6. Set district-wide goals for enrolling students in a variety Early Postsecondary Opportunities courses.

Districts must set goals for expanding access to EPSO courses by student group, and develop strategies to ensure every graduate transitions through a pathway that provides college credit and/or industry certifications.

STRONG EDUCATORS

7. Provide a financial incentive to teacher candidates to teach in schools experiencing geographic and/or content-specific teacher shortages.

State lawmakers should consider legislation to provide financial incentives – whether in the form of loan forgiveness or undergraduate education scholarships – for teacher candidates who agree to teach in areas with shortages of instructors, either by geography and content area. Similar to Colorado’s model, the Tennessee Department of Education should determine Tennessee’s most critical shortage areas.

8. Develop partnerships with state leaders, foundations, local educator preparation programs and other stakeholders to provide additional incentives and adequate preparation for teacher candidates needed in rural districts.

Rural districts and partners should seek collaborative opportunities to provide signing bonuses and additional financial incentives for new teacher candidates. Incentives may include underwriting the costs of additional teaching certifications or endorsements for an EPSO course or ESL instruction, as well as residential stipends.

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METHODOLOGICAL APPENDIX

PART I.

For quantitative analysis of the Tennessee Department of Education Report Card's data, measurements were filtered through the locale codes found on Table A. Within each locale code, geographies may be divided into sub-locales. Definitions of the sub-locales are provided below Table A.

TABLE A

LOCALE CODE	DESCRIPTION
City	<i>Territory inside an Urbanized Area and inside a Principal City, with a population spanning from 100,000 to 250,000 or more.</i>
Suburban	<i>Territory inside a Principal City and outside an Urbanized Area, with a population spanning from 100,000 to 250,000 or more.</i>
Town	<i>Territory inside an Urban Cluster that is less than or equal to 10 miles from an Urbanized Area OR territory inside an Urban Cluster that is 10 to 35 or more miles from an Urbanized Area.</i>
Rural	<i>Census-defined rural territories that are from 5 to 25 or more miles from an Urbanized Area, and territory that is less than 2.5 miles to more than 10 miles from an Urban Cluster.</i>

NCES Sub-Locale Descriptions:

CITY

- City – Large (11): Territory inside an Urbanized Area and inside a Principal City with population of 250,000 or more.
- City – Midsize (12): Territory inside an Urbanized Area and inside a Principal City with population less than 250,000 and greater than or equal to 100,000.
- City – Small (13): Territory inside an Urbanized Area and inside a Principal City with population less than 100,000.

SUBURBAN

- Suburban – Large (21): Territory outside a Principal City and inside an Urbanized Area with population of 250,000 or more.
- Suburban – Midsize (22): Territory outside a Principal City and inside an Urbanized Area with population less than 250,000 and greater than or equal to 100,000.
- Suburban – Small (23): Territory outside a Principal City and inside an Urbanized Area with population less than 100,000.

TOWN

- Town – Fringe (31): Territory inside an Urban Cluster that is less than or equal to 10 miles from an Urbanized Area.
- Town – Distant (32): Territory inside an Urban Cluster that is more than 10 miles and less than or equal to 35 miles from an Urbanized Area.
- Town – Remote (33): Territory inside an Urban Cluster that is more than 35 miles from an Urbanized Area.

RURAL

- Rural – Fringe (41): Census-defined rural territory that is less than or equal to 5 miles from an Urbanized Area, as well as rural territory that is less than or equal to 2.5 miles from an Urban Cluster.
- Rural – Distant (42): Census-defined rural territory that is more than 5 miles but less than or equal to 25 miles from an Urbanized Area, as well as rural territory that is more than 2.5 miles but less than or equal to 10 miles from an Urban Cluster.
- Rural – Remote (43): Census-defined rural territory that is more than 25 miles from an Urbanized Area and also more than 10 miles from an Urban Cluster.

For the purpose of this report, rural schools fall predominantly into the **rural locale codes**. However, it is important to highlight that many **town locales** are located at considerable distance from an urban core, and the school and student outcomes analyzed under this category have importance for the interpretation of these findings, and future findings.

PART II.

A qualitative listening tour took place during the spring of 2019, with visits to select schools across West, Middle and East Tennessee. School sessions took a variety of formats, from one-on-one interviews to focus groups with strictly principals, or a mixture of principals

and teachers. Conversations were recorded, transcribed and coded between multiple staff members to enhance reliable interpretations of findings. Below is a guide that served to facilitate conversations in each school session on the listening tour.

FACILITATED CONVERSATION

Topic	Rural Education in Tennessee.
Rational Aim	To better understand the experience of school personnel and students in rural communities.
Experiential Aim	To make participants feel heard, validated and eager to share.

Objective Questions:

- What do you think of first when I say the word “rural”?
- What do you think of first when I say the word “principal,” “EPSO,” “teacher” or “EL”?
- When you think about “rural schools” in Tennessee, what do you see?

Reflective Questions:

- What is working well in your rural school? What isn’t?
- What seems the most critical for rural education?
- What is most exciting about working or attending a rural school?
- What has made you feel appreciated as a school leader? What has not?
- What are the defining characteristics of students in “rural” schools? How do you define yourself as a “rural student”?

Interpretive Questions:

- What appears to be the key issue in your school?
- What options do you have to connect with other educators?
- What insights are beginning to emerge around...[topics emerging around “key issues” questions]?
- What are the implications of...[based on what emerges in conversation]
 - › limitations in school funding?
 - › experiencing short-staff when it comes to a specific positions [i.e., interventionists; instructional coordinators]?
 - › not being able to offer as competitive salaries for new teacher hires compared to urban/suburban districts?
 - › having a limited number of [AP courses, dual enrollment courses]?
 - › professional/school/community isolation?
 - » For parents? Families? Student aspirations?
 - › limited school funding for school performance?
 - › [other themes emerging, appropriate probes]?
- What distinguishes helpful state policy/support from less helpful state policy/support for your schools?
- What other things do we need to consider?

Decisional Questions:

- Who needs to hear what was said in this conversation today?
- When we do this process again in other schools, what would you have us change?
- What are the actions that we need to take in order to solve some of these issues in Tennessee?
- What are the actions we as an organization need to take as we consider rural education policy advocacy?

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About the Tennessee Educational Equity Coalition

The Tennessee Educational Equity Coalition is a group of diverse civil rights and education advocacy organizations that have built a shared policy agenda to address chronic disparities in achievement and opportunities for students of color in the state of Tennessee.

The Coalition was formed in the spring of 2016 and is convened by Conexión Américas, a long-standing Nashville-based nonprofit serving the Latino community.