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**Why Rural Matters:**

**Conclusions and Implications**

Excerpted from *Why Rural Matters 2013-2014*

Over 9.7 million students are enrolled in rural school districts, more than 20 percent of all public school students in the United States. More than two in five of those rural students live in poverty, more than one in four is a child of color, and one in eight has changed residence in the previous 12 months.

The scale and the scope of rural education in the United States continue to grow. We have reported increases in the total rural student population in the past five editions of *Why Rural Matters*, with growth rates that exceed those of non-rural districts as measured by both short-term and longer range trends. The trend continues, with total rural student enrollment increasing by 136,884 students from 2008-09 to 2009-10 while non-rural student enrollment decreased by 54,162. In terms of absolute numbers, these enrollment shifts are relatively small, of course; as part of a longer trajectory, however, they attest to the continued and expanding salience of rural education for the nation’s public education system as a whole.

Moreover, the demographic characteristics of the rural student population continue to shift, with rural schools becoming increasingly diverse and serving larger populations of students that schools have historically not served effectively (i.e., the students for whom performance is described in terms of achievement gaps). The percentage of rural students eligible for free or reduced priced meals increased from 41.0% to 46.6% from 2008-09 to 2010-11 (an increase of nearly 603,000 students). Likewise, the percentage of rural minority students increased over that same time period by 127,151 (a 5.1% increase). Less dramatic but still noteworthy, the percentage of rural students qualifying for special education services increased from 12.1% to 12.8% (an increase of nearly 85,000 students).

These trends should make it increasingly difficult for policy makers to ignore the challenges faced by rural schools and the students they serve, or what those challenges mean to state and national goals of improving achievement and narrowing achievement gaps between advantaged and disadvantaged groups.

Still, the invisibility of rural education persists in many states. Many rural students are largely invisible to state policy makers because they live in states where education policy is dominated by highly visible urban problems. Consider this. In 16 states, one-third or more of all public school students are enrolled in rural school districts. On the other hand, more than half of all rural students live in just 11 states. Only four states (Alabama, Georgia, North Carolina and Tennessee) are in both of these categories, however (i.e., in a state with large proportional and absolute rural student enrollments). The majority of rural students attend school in a state where they constitute less than 28% of the public school enrollment, and one in three are in states where they constitute less than 20%.

**The Bottom Line**

Growth in rural school enrollment continues to outpace non-rural enrollment growth in the United States, and rural schools continue to grow more complex with increasing rates of poverty, diversity, and students with special needs. These trends, while widespread, are most intense in the South, Southwest, and parts of Appalachia. Moreover, they are trends that have proven consistent throughout the report series and irrespective of changes in the specific indicators used.

Rural education is frustrating to those who wish it would conform to the oversimplifications that have long held sway in the discourse of policymakers and the public in general. Those oversimplifications do not stand in the face of the mounting evidence that rural education is becoming a bigger and even more complex part of our national educational landscape. As that evidence mounts, it is becoming impossible to ignore the national relevance of these students, families, schools and communities.

Source: Johnson, J., Showalter, D., Klein, R., & Lester, C. (2014). *Why rural matters: The condition of rural education in the 50 states*. Washington, D.C.: Rural School and Community Trust. Retrieved from <http://www.ruraledu.org/user_uploads/file/2013-14-Why-Rural-Matters.pdf>