

# ISSUE BRIEF

## Beyond City Limits: Expanding Public Charter Schools in Rural America



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### BACKGROUND

Rural students comprise a vital segment of the American public education system. Presently, one in four public school enrollees – over 11 million children – attend rural schools in the U.S.<sup>1</sup> Rural enrollment is trending upward at a faster rate than other locales. From 2006 to 2009, enrollment in rural public schools increased by almost one million students, marking an 8 percent rise, while enrollment trends in urban and suburban schools were flat.<sup>2</sup>

The educational needs of rural communities are often overshadowed by the concerns of urban communities, yet the data suggest many rural communities are experiencing equally, if not more severe, problems. A 2010 study found that one-fifth of the nation's lowest-performing high schools – also known as “dropout factories” – are in rural areas.<sup>3</sup> Compared to their peers in other locales, rural

students generally have lower expectations for educational advancement and are less likely to enroll in college or complete a bachelor's degree.<sup>4</sup> Substance abuse, teen pregnancy and homelessness are as common, if not more so, for rural teens as for their urban peers.<sup>5</sup>

This issue brief explores how public charter schools can meet the educational needs of rural communities. In the following sections we describe the common challenges faced in rural public education, depict the current landscape of rural charter schools, and discuss some key hurdles that must be overcome in order to launch a successful rural charter school. Additionally, we highlight some innovative approaches that charter schools have used to achieve success in rural communities and offer policy recommendations for achieving charter school quality and scale in rural communities.<sup>6</sup>



## 10 FACTS ON RURAL EDUCATION IN THE U.S.

1. There are more than 11 million students enrolled in rural public schools, which is 25 percent of all public school enrollees.<sup>7</sup>
2. One-third of the nation's public schools and more than one-half of all school districts are classified by the U.S. Department of Education as rural.<sup>8</sup>
3. Rural school enrollment in the U.S. is rising. Between 2006 and 2009, rural enrollment grew by eight percent, while enrollment trends in non-rural schools were stagnant.<sup>9</sup>
4. More than half of all rural students in the U.S. are concentrated in just 11 states.<sup>10</sup> North Carolina has the largest population of rural students, followed by Texas, Georgia, Ohio, and Virginia.<sup>11</sup>
5. The five states with the highest percentage of rural students are Maine, Vermont, South Dakota, North Carolina and Mississippi.<sup>12</sup>
6. Rural families typically have fewer public and private schooling options than their counterparts in urban and suburban communities; 82 percent of rural students attend assigned (non-charter) public schools, compared to 64 percent of city students and 75 percent of suburban students.<sup>13</sup>
7. The demographic characteristics of rural students vary by region. Eighty percent of rural minority students reside in the Southeast and Southwest.<sup>14</sup>
8. The average graduation rate of rural high schools hovers around 75 percent, which is on par with suburban high schools and significantly higher than city high schools.<sup>15</sup>
9. The college enrollment rate in rural areas (27 percent) is lower than the rate in cities (37 percent), suburban areas (37 percent), or towns (32 percent).<sup>16</sup>
10. Adults in rural areas are less likely to have earned a bachelor's degree or higher than adults in cities and suburbs. In 2004, 21 percent of adults ages 25-34 attained a bachelor's degree or higher, compared to 34 percent of adults in cities and suburbs.<sup>17</sup>

## COMMON CHALLENGES IN RURAL PUBLIC EDUCATION

All rural public schools - charter and traditional - face common challenges. Some of these challenges include: budgets, course offerings, recruitment, special education resources, and transportation.

### BUDGETARY CONSTRAINTS

Rural schools often struggle to maintain fiscal solvency due to revenue shortfalls and high operating costs. In some cases, limited property and commercial tax bases in rural communities contribute few local dollars to public schools. Some argue that rural schools do not receive their fair share of federal aid due to elements of the Title 1 funding formula that favor larger school districts and wealthier states.<sup>18</sup> Rural schools typically must spend more on a per-pupil basis in order to provide a comprehensive curriculum and other necessary services because their low enrollment levels yield few economies of scale.<sup>19</sup>

### ADVANCED AND SPECIALIZED CURRICULAR OFFERINGS

Due to budgetary constraints and staffing challenges, some rural schools are unable to provide advanced and specialized coursework, particularly at the high school level. On average, rural high schools offer fewer Advanced Placement (AP) courses and advanced mathematics courses than non-rural schools.<sup>20</sup>

### TEACHER AND PRINCIPAL RECRUITMENT

Attracting high-quality teachers and principals has been a noted difficulty for many rural school districts. Rural school leaders cite proximity to higher paying districts, geographic isolation, and low salaries as the greatest challenges to teacher recruitment.<sup>21</sup> Additionally, substandard housing makes the low cost of living in rural areas (touted as a justification for the lower wages of rural teachers) a poor recruiting incentive.<sup>22</sup> As a result of these deterrents, rural schools are often staffed by teachers with subpar academic credentials.<sup>23</sup>

### SPECIAL EDUCATION RESOURCES

With high overhead ratios and disproportionate fixed costs, rural schools often struggle to find room in their budgets for the specialized instructors and

equipment that special needs students require.<sup>24</sup> Due to severe shortages, rural schools sometimes must resort to using under-qualified teachers to lead special education classes.<sup>25</sup> Studies have reported turnover in rural special education positions to be as high as 100 percent every three to five years.<sup>26</sup>

### TRANSPORTATION

Transportation costs, both as a share of total expenditures and in sheer dollar amount, are far greater for rural districts<sup>27</sup> than urban and suburban districts. Costs are endured not only by schools, but by the families who must send their children to schools in different towns many miles from their homes. Studies have shown that lengthy commutes and bus rides adversely affect test scores, discourage extracurricular involvement, and lead to sleep deprivation.<sup>28</sup>







## THE CURRENT LANDSCAPE OF RURAL CHARTER SCHOOLS

Notwithstanding the challenges inherent in rural education, there has still been a strong demand for, and growing supply of charter schools in rural areas.

### CHARTER SCHOOL ENROLLMENT IN RURAL AREAS

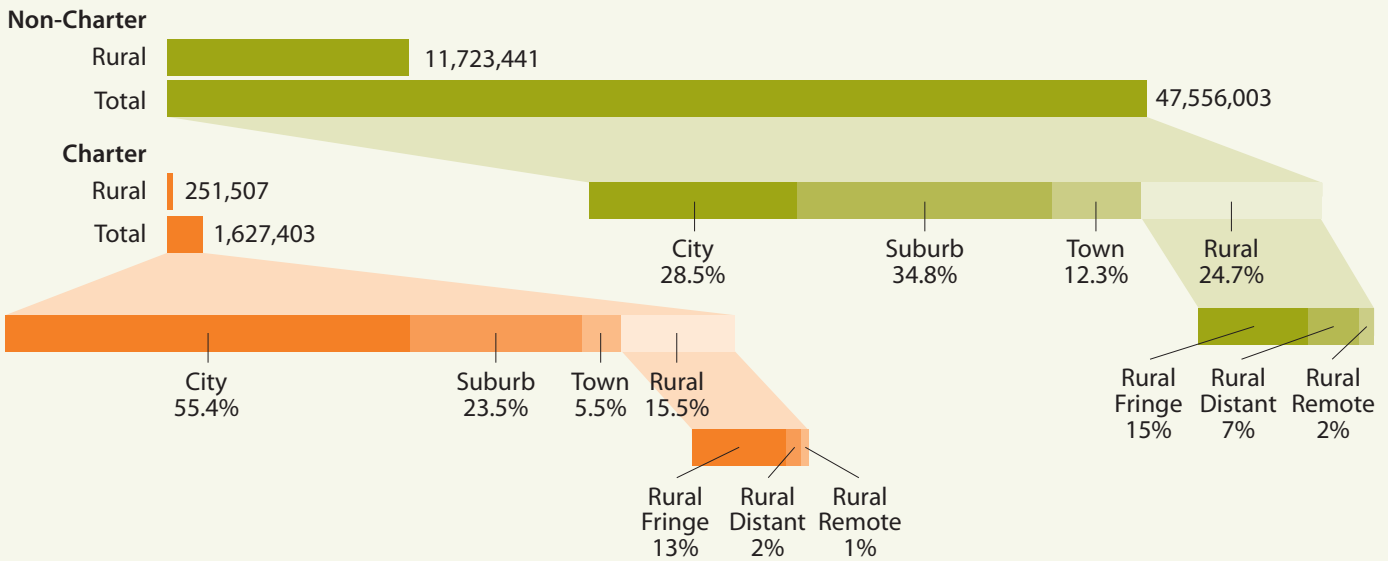
In 2009-10, there were 785 rural charter schools in operation, comprising 16 percent of all charter schools nationwide (as compared to 30,848 non-charter rural schools, comprising 33 percent of all non-charter schools nationwide). These rural charter schools enrolled more than a quarter-million students. Fifteen percent of the charter school students attend rural schools, compared to 25 percent of non-charter students attending rural schools.

Figure 1 presents the full picture of data about charter school and non-charter school enrollment in rural areas, including the percentage of students and schools within each of the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) rural subcategories of fringe, distant, and remote. These latter distinctions are especially important because the needs of a rural school will depend heavily on its proximity to urban centers. Schools on the rural fringe have easier access to the economic resources, cultural institutions, and talent pools available in their neighboring cities, while schools in distant and remote locales need to be more self-reliant and creative in their efforts to deliver high quality education.<sup>29</sup> Note that the majority of rural schools are categorized as rural-fringe. Some of these schools may draw heavily upon students who reside in surrounding suburbs rather than the rural communities where the schools are physically located.

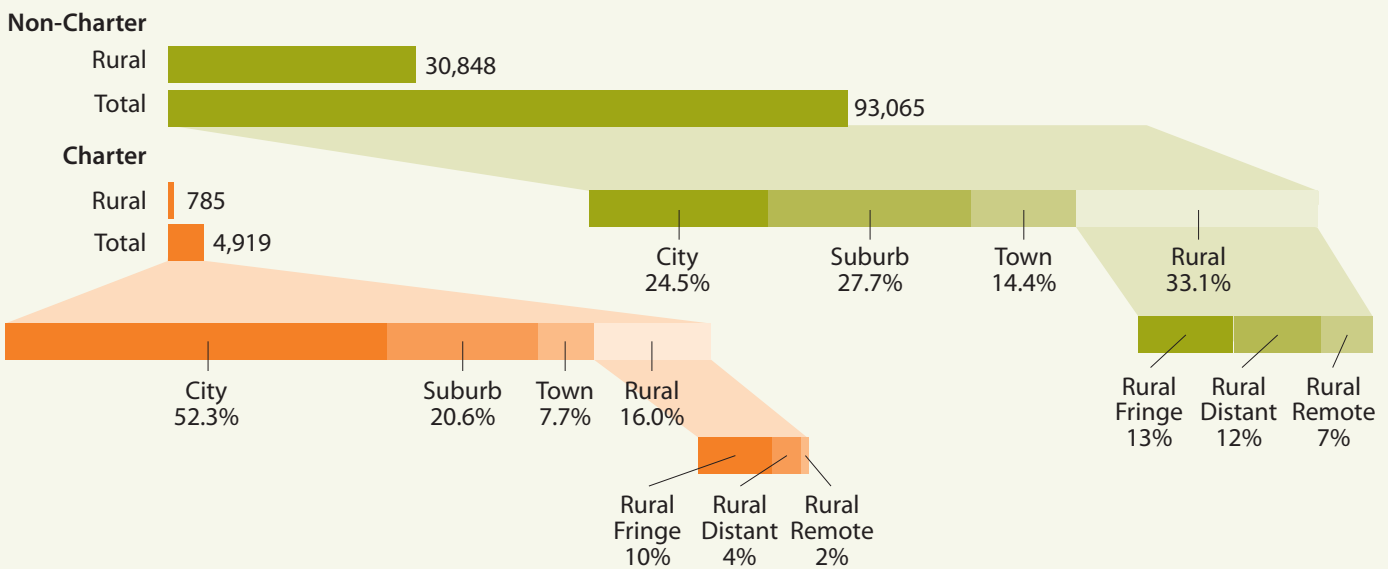


**Figure 1: Charter Schools and Non-Charter Schools in Rural Areas, 2009-2010**

## Student Enrollment



## Schools



Source: National Alliance for Public Charter Schools. (2011). Public charter schools dashboard. Washington, DC: Author. Retrieved October 21st, 2011 from <http://dashboard.publiccharters.org/dashboard/students/page/locale/year/2010>; National Center for Education Statistics. Common Core of Data 2009-10.



Many of the states that do not have charter school laws are highly rural. In fact, seven states that fall within the top 10 in terms of the proportion of public students attending rural schools have not enacted charter school laws. The most extreme case of this rural-charter disparity is found in Vermont, where 57 percent of public school students attend rural schools.

**Table 1: State Data, 2009-2010**

	Pct. of students in charter schools	No. of students in charter schools	Pct. of charter students in rural schools	No. of charter students in rural schools	Pct. of all public students in rural schools	No. of students in rural public schools	Total public school enrollment
AK	4%	5,365	21%	1,131	38%	50,204	131,661
AL	-	-	-	-	47%	355,077	748,836
AR	2%	8,641	27%	2,307	42%	201,474	480,559
AZ	11%	115,137	14%	16,694	24%	256,029	1,076,230
CA	5%	317,422	16%	52,103	10%	632,565	6,177,037
CO	8%	66,826	30%	19,750	23%	192,473	831,906
CT	1%	5,215	2%	80	14%	78,842	563,801
DC	38%	27,660	0%	0	0%	0	72,711
DE	7%	9,173	18%	1,689	25%	30,803	124,809
FL	5%	137,788	27%	37,272	19%	510,084	2,634,522
GA	3%	45,703	30%	13,526	36%	604,868	1,667,685
HI	4%	7,869	50%	3,949	12%	22,440	180,196
IA	0%	854	69%	588	37%	178,845	482,123
ID	5%	14,582	30%	4,385	35%	97,475	276,299
IL	2%	35,836	2%	746	14%	302,007	2,096,541
IN	2%	18,610	4%	745	32%	333,439	1,046,661
KS	1%	5,250	62%	3,238	34%	160,153	469,293
KY	-	-	-	-	43%	293,216	676,286
LA	5%	31,549	10%	3,152	31%	210,775	690,741
MA	3%	27,393	10%	2,634	12%	113,093	957,053
MD	1%	11,167	4%	448	18%	151,551	848,412
ME	-	-	-	-	57%	104,213	184,232
MI	7%	111,495	12%	12,805	24%	382,904	1,618,043
MN	4%	35,375	14%	5,085	29%	243,452	836,936
MO	2%	18,418	0%	0	33%	300,941	916,984

**Table 1: State Data, 2009-2010 (continued)**

	Pct. of students in charter schools	No. of students in charter schools	Pct. of charter students in rural schools	No. of charter students in rural schools	Pct. of all public students in rural schools	No. of students in rural public schools	Total public school enrollment
MS	-	-	-	-	51%	251,359	492,481
MT	-	-	-	-	38%	53,974	141,807
NC	3%	38,808	33%	12,821	47%	691,426	1,477,354
ND	-	-	-	-	44%	42,034	95,073
NE	-	-	-	-	31%	90,481	295,368
NH	0%	816	49%	401	37%	73,698	197,140
NJ	2%	21,729	2%	541	10%	141,937	1,387,096
NM	4%	13,090	20%	2,680	28%	94,183	332,584
NV	3%	12,646	5%	659	20%	86,825	428,947
NY	2%	44,523	5%	2,257	13%	364,725	2,766,052
OH	5%	92,568	10%	9,044	27%	467,440	1,762,315
OK	1%	6,315	7%	450	35%	231,093	654,802
OR	3%	18,461	43%	7,918	18%	98,891	553,846
PA	4%	79,535	2%	2,013	22%	394,982	1,761,860
RI	2%	3,452	10%	331	13%	18,156	143,674
SC	2%	13,032	7%	946	45%	322,214	723,142
SD	-	-	-	-	47%	57,825	123,709
TN	1%	5,156	4%	199	40%	386,147	972,549
TX	3%	149,070	8%	11,731	24%	1,140,796	4,850,003
UT	6%	34,166	39%	13,439	17%	97,326	582,793
VA	0%	179	0%	0	31%	387,554	1,245,285
VT	-	-	-	-	57%	51,982	91,239
WA	-	-	-	-	17%	181,017	1,035,347
WI	4%	36,268	10%	3,489	28%	243,543	872,321
WV	-	-	-	-	47%	132,630	282,661
WY	0%	261	100%	261	33%	29,225	88,152

Source: National Alliance for Public Charter Schools. (2011). Public charter schools dashboard. Washington, DC: Author. Retrieved October 21st, 2011 from <http://dashboard.publiccharters.org/dashboard/students/page/locale/year/2010>; National Center for Education Statistics. Common Core of Data 2009-10.

## DIFFERENCES ACROSS STATES

Rural charter school presence varies widely across states. There are a number of states with charter sectors that are disproportionately rural, many of which are in the west. For example, while 34 percent of all Kansas public school students attend rural schools, Kansas's rural charter schools enroll 62 percent of the total charter student population (see Table 1).

Many of the states that do not have charter school laws are highly rural. In fact, seven states that fall within the top 10 in terms of the proportion of public students attending rural schools have not enacted charter school laws. The most extreme case of this rural-charter disparity is found in Vermont, where 57 percent of public school students attend rural schools.

Of the states with charter school laws, but without rural charter schools, charters are restricted to Kansas City and St. Louis in Missouri, Virginia and Mississippi are hindered by the nation's weakest charter laws, and Maine possesses a charter law in its infancy (passed as of only June 2011).<sup>30</sup>



**Table 2: Characteristics of Rural vs. Non-Rural Charter Schools, 2009-2010**

	Non-Rural Charter Schools	Rural Charter Schools	Rural Charter Sub-Categories <sup>31</sup>		
			Fringe	Distant	Remote
<b>Size</b>					
Avg. Enrollment	333	315	408	175	117
Pupil-Teacher Ratio	20.3	18.6	20.2	15.7	15.7
<b>Grade Configuration</b>					
Primary	45%	44%	45%	44%	34%
Middle	11%	7%	8%	4%	6%
High	25%	22%	20%	23%	29%
Combined Grades	19%	27%	25%	29%	31%
<b>Student Characteristics</b>					
Free/Reduced Price Lunch	55%	34%	34%	33%	45%
White	32%	62%	60%	70%	73%
Black	33%	11%	12%	6%	3%
Hispanic	27%	19%	19%	11%	8%
Am. Indian	4%	5%	4%	8%	11%
Asian	3%	3%	4%	4%	2%
<b>Management Type</b>					
CMO	17%	7%	9%	7%	2%
EMO	13%	11%	16%	4%	3%
Freestanding	70%	81%	75%	89%	95%
No. Schools	3,964	785	493	181	111

Source: National Alliance for Public Charter Schools. (2011). Public charter schools dashboard. Washington, DC: Author. Retrieved October 21st, 2011 from <http://dashboard.publiccharters.org/dashboard/schools/page/mgmt/year/2010>; National Center for Education Statistics. Common Core of Data 2009-10.

## CHARACTERISTICS OF RURAL CHARTER SCHOOLS

As shown in Table 2, rural charter schools tend to have lower enrollments and smaller class sizes than non-rural charter schools. Enrollment levels and per-pupil ratios are higher in rural fringe charter schools than distant and remote charters, suggesting that the financial challenges faced by distant and remote schools may be greater due to more difficulty finding economies of scale. Rural charter schools are more likely than non-rural charters to have combined grade configurations (e.g., K-8, K-12), presumably as a means to control facilities and administrative costs.<sup>32</sup>

Mirroring the demographics of the rural communities they serve, rural charter schools enroll fewer minority students than non-rural charters. A notable exception is the American Indian population, which is more concentrated in rural charters than in non-rural charters, particularly for those in distant and remote locales. Rural charter schools also have lower free and reduced-price lunch (FRL) rates than non-rural charter schools, with FRL rates highest in schools located furthest from metropolitan areas, a trend which holds in the non-charter sector as well.

The vast majority of rural charter schools are independently operated. In 2009-10, 81 percent of rural charter schools were freestanding, while 12 and seven percent were operated by for-profit education management organizations (EMO) and non-profit charter management organizations (CMO), respectively. By comparison, 69 percent of non-rural charter schools were freestanding, 13 percent are run by EMOs, and 17 percent partnered with CMOs.<sup>33</sup>



## CHALLENGES TO ACHIEVING QUALITY AND SCALE IN RURAL COMMUNITIES

Launching and operating a successful rural charter school is challenging work. Therefore, it is important to identify some of the hurdles that charter schools must clear in order to flourish within rural communities.

### COMMUNITY SUPPORT

Garnering support for a new charter school can be a daunting task in tight-knit rural communities, where many of the prominent citizens are either school district employees or board members. Rural charter school founders sometimes face resistance from policymakers and district officials who view charter schools as counterproductive to their past efforts to find efficiencies through school and district consolidation. Charter school founders must be willing to challenge the educational establishment and convince their friends and neighbors of the need for a new public school option. Building community support requires an organized campaign to educate community residents on charter schools and communicate their unique value proposition.<sup>34</sup>

### APPLICATION & START-UP COSTS

The charter school application process is highly competitive in many states, and drafting a winning proposal takes considerable time, resources, and expertise. The technical and legal intricacies of the charter application process can scare off prospective rural charter school operators who are not able to tap into the charter support organizations and experts available in big cities. Attorneys' fees and other start-up costs associated with securing a facility and recruiting teachers and students can also discourage rural charter start-ups.

### FACILITIES

Securing adequate facilities is particularly challenging for rural charter school founders. While urban charter schools may be able to lease or purchase unused public or parochial school buildings to house students, these assets are typically not available in rural communities.<sup>35</sup> Consequently, the only option may be to construct a new building, which requires a sizeable financial investment.

### BOARD MEMBER RECRUITMENT

With fewer residents in rural areas holding postsecondary degrees than in urban areas, rural charter schools often struggle to recruit board members with the expertise and wherewithal that is required to effectively govern a school.<sup>36</sup> Qualified board members are often hesitant to serve out of fear they will be ostracized by those who support the traditional public school establishment.

### STAFFING

Recruiting and retaining effective teachers and school leaders is a well-documented struggle for all rural schools. Rural charter schools struggle to recruit recent college graduates because their communities do not offer the same rich cultural and social opportunities available in big cities. Charter schools also have difficulty recruiting talent from within the local school district because teachers fear that if the charter school closes they will not be welcomed back by their former employers.

### FUNDING

Charter schools are significantly underfunded relative to other public schools—receiving, on average, over \$2,000 less per pupil than comparable district schools.<sup>37</sup> Small rural charters are particularly affected by this funding disparity because they must spend more per-pupil to cover their fixed costs.





### AUTHORIZER CAPACITY

Small rural school districts often lack the resources to authorize charter schools and provide effective oversight.<sup>38</sup> While large urban school districts are able to leverage their extensive central office resources, small rural districts may have to rely on the existing capacity of a two- or three-person staff that is already stretched thin. Some rural school districts are not receptive to new charter school proposals because of the costs associated with building a charter oversight system from scratch to support the oversight of a single school.

### STRATEGIES OF SUCCESSFUL RURAL CHARTER SCHOOLS

Charter schools across the country are using creative approaches to overcome the challenges of rural education and meet the needs of rural families. We have identified four compelling strategies for finding success in rural communities. We profile rural charter schools that have used each of these strategies to deliver high quality education to their students and renewed pride to their communities.

### TAPPING INTO THE ASSETS OF THE LOCAL COMMUNITY

Rural charter schools are able to capitalize on their autonomy by crafting academic programs that integrate with their communities in unique and mutually beneficial ways. Partnerships with local businesses and community organizations enable rural charter schools to tap into an array of resources to support teaching and learning both in and outside the classroom. These partnerships can also help expose students to different employment opportunities in their hometowns and prepare students to meet the specific workforce needs of local industries.

### Walton Rural Life Center

The Walton Rural Life Center (WRLC), founded in 2007, is one of the few public schools to fully integrate agriculture into its curriculum. Principal Natise Vogt was initially skeptical about an agriculture-based program, but with the prodding of her superintendent she came around to the idea and has since become its biggest champion. “It made sense because of where we are,” Vogt says about launching the hands-on, project-based program in the small farming town of Walton, KS.<sup>39</sup> With the support of local farmers, WRLC’s 135 K-5 students reinforce skills learned in the classroom to a variety of real-world situations. Vogt mentions the school’s successful chicken coop operation, a project that requires students to apply math, science, writing, and even business concepts in order to produce, market, and sell eggs.

WRLC’s approach has led to academic success. In 2010, 97 percent of their students tested at or above grade level in math and 94 percent tested at or above grade level in reading. This accomplishment earned the school the Governor’s Achievement award, which designates WRLC as within the top 5 percent of schools in Kansas. Taking the lead from both Walton students and the Walton community, Vogt and the Walton Rural Life Center have created an education that is nationally recognized and locally inspired.<sup>40</sup>

### LEVERAGING TECHNOLOGY

Rural charter schools have been at the forefront in utilizing technology to deliver excellent and cost-effective academic programs. Many rural charter schools use e-learning tools and other technologies to provide advanced and specialized coursework that cannot be offered on-site due to staffing and budget challenges. Virtual charter schools provide rural students with the option of

learning independently from home, which is particularly attractive for those who must endure long bus rides to attend their closest public school.

## Julian Charter School

Julian Charter School (JCS) leverages technology to provide a rich K-12 curriculum to students throughout San Diego, Riverside, and Orange counties, including more than 150 rural students. JCS's academic program centers on personalized virtual learning, but students are able to supplement their home-based learning by visiting one of JCS's Learning Centers, which provide classroom instruction and one-on-one tutoring. This model is appealing to rural families because it provides multiple pathways for their children to access a college preparatory curriculum, taught by credentialed teachers, without requiring lengthy daily commutes. JCS's executive director Jennifer Cauzza is emphatic about their school's ability to meet the needs of rural families in California. "That's what makes it work," Cauzza said in reference to the variety of learning options offered by JCS.<sup>41</sup>

The level of individualization offered by JCS has been integral in helping students find academic success. This is evidenced by the school's Academic Performance Index (API) scores, which are used in California to measure schools' annual performance. JCS's annual composite API scores regularly exceed those of most California schools with similar characteristics. In 2010, JCS's API growth index scores for socioeconomically disadvantaged and disabled students outpaced the state averages for those subgroups.<sup>42</sup> JCS's virtual learning model expands our notion of the traditional classroom, and as a result, opens the door to academic success for a wide variety of students.

## RESTORING THE PUBLIC SCHOOL FOR THE COMMUNITY

School closings due to consolidation have left many rural communities without a central gathering place and have forced many families to send their children to schools that are both geographically and culturally distant. The charter model gives rural families an opportunity to reclaim their local public school and provide students with a locally-influenced education that is close to home.

## Paradox Valley School

As a result of its declining population, Paradox Valley, Colorado saw its local district school close in 1999, forcing students to endure nearly three hour commutes to attend the next nearest school. In response, the local community founded the Paradox Valley Charter School that same year to not only address logistical issues brought on by consolidation, but also to take a stance toward preserving its distinctive rural culture. During the 2010-2011 school year, Paradox served 54 students ranging from pre-kindergarten to eighth grade, with nearly 70 percent of Paradox students eligible for free or reduced-priced lunch (FRL).

Paradox Valley sees itself as "a place where the community and the school work together for the literacy and vitality of our rural culture," benefitting from, not being hindered by, the small Paradox Valley community.<sup>43</sup> This approach has resulted in success for Paradox students, as the school has consistently reached its adequate yearly progress (AYP) accountability benchmarks.<sup>44</sup> Satisfying a demonstrated practical need, striving toward preserving local control and culture, and most importantly, providing an excellent education for its students, the Paradox Valley Charter School stands as a premiere example of rural charter education.







## FINDING SUPPLEMENTAL FUNDING STREAMS

Potential rural charter school operators may need to hunt down external funding in order to offset their start-up costs, secure adequate facilities, and counter per-pupil funding disparities. Many successful rural charter schools proactively seek grants from foundations, corporations, and individual donors. Additionally, they tap into more than 100 different federal programs that target funds for rural development and/or charter schools.<sup>45</sup>

### KIPP Delta

KIPP Delta, a network of three charter schools in Helena-West Helena that serves more than 400 students, has been exceptional in garnering resources in support of its educational program. KIPP Delta was the first school in Arkansas to tap into the Rural Development Community Facilities support program, a U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) program designed to aid rural communities in developing local projects. Additionally, the USDA program has

issued over \$2 million in guaranteed loans to KIPP Delta to help develop its facilities.<sup>46</sup> KIPP Delta has also sought out the support of the Bentonville, Arkansas-based Walton Family Foundation, a prominent supporter of education reform initiatives both in Arkansas and across the nation. KIPP Delta schools have used Walton Family Foundation grants to finance busing, kitchens, and other projects.<sup>47</sup>

These resources have helped KIPP Delta achieve excellent academic results for their students, of whom more than 80 percent are eligible for free or reduced-price lunch. All three schools have consistently met AYP benchmarks and boast proficiency rates in literacy and math that exceed those of surrounding schools.<sup>48</sup>

## RECOMMENDATIONS

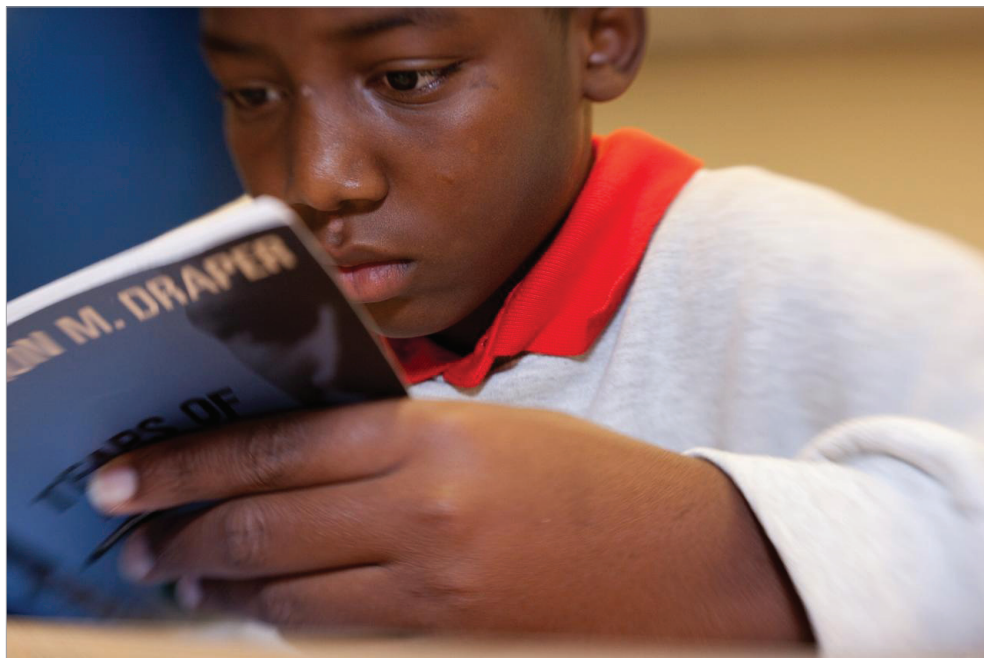
There are a number of ways in which policymakers and charter support organizations can help expand high quality charter schools in rural communities. For policymakers, equitable funding for charter schools must be at the forefront. The further development of

rural charter schools is contingent upon policymakers setting a level playing field that is conducive to growth. State charter support organizations are instrumental in making sure that rural communities are well-informed on the potential benefits of charter schools. Additionally, they must help connect rural charter school operators with the resources necessary to launch and maintain high quality programs.

### FOR STATE POLICYMAKERS

There are a number of specific actions policymakers can take to increase the likelihood of creating successful rural charter schools in their state.

- **Pass charter laws in rural states:** Many of the most rural states in the country, including Vermont, Montana, West Virginia, and Kentucky, still do not have charter school laws in place. Rural families should not be denied the right to public school choice.
- **Remove charter school caps:** For states that do have charter laws, caps on the number of charter schools that can be opened can create unnecessary competition between charter operators. With a finite number of charters to award, authorizers may deprioritize rural applicants in favor of providing charters to address the more visible needs of urban communities.
- **Provide flexibility for online public education:** One of the most innovative solutions to providing cost-effective education to rural communities has been virtual and blended learning. Limitations in infrastructure and policy prevent online education from being successfully implemented in rural charter schools. Many rural communities are un-served or underserved by broadband providers, and several states still don't allow virtual charter schools. Policymakers must provide access to broadband providers,



explicitly allow virtual charter schools, and ensure that virtual and blended learning programs are properly funded and held to the same standards of accountability as other programs.

- **Ensure transparency and equitable access to facilities:** Unused school facilities are rare in rural areas. When facilities are available, school district political agendas may prevent potential charter operators from purchasing them. Unused facilities are public assets, and as such, access to them should be fair and open.
- **Improve charter school funding parity:** Funding disparities are detrimental to charter schools in all locales. For rural charter schools that do not benefit from economies of scale, it is even more essential that they receive the proper amounts of funding that are required to successfully operate their schools.
- **Support research on the academic performance of rural charter schools:** A review of the research literature on charter schools revealed few rigorous research findings on the academic performance of rural charter schools.<sup>49</sup> State policymakers can help fill this gap by mandating that their respective departments of education disaggregate state test score data and school accountability results by geographic locale. This would allow educational leaders, policymakers, and researchers to monitor the performance of rural charter schools and their district school counterparts.

### FOR CHARTER SUPPORT ORGANIZATIONS

There are a number of specific activities state-based charter support organizations (CSOs) can undertake to improve educational outcomes in rural areas through the creation and expansion

of high-quality charter schools. CSOs have been active and effective partners in advancing policy and providing support for charter schools in their states. Policymakers can work with CSOs to advance legislation and ensure that new charter schools are set up for success.

- **Provide targeted support to potential rural charter school operators:** Establishing a charter school is not simple. Thus potential rural school operators would benefit greatly from technical and financial resources that CSOs can provide to assist them in navigating the start-up process and regulatory environment.
- **Identify alternative facilities:** In addition to advocating for access to unused public buildings, CSOs can provide examples of how alternative spaces, including strip malls and closed department stores can be made suitable for a charter school. Successful charter schools from around the country have employed creative facilities strategies. CSOs can share their knowledge of alternative, cost-efficient facilities uses with potential new operators.
- **Engage in communications and marketing efforts to clear up misconceptions about charter schools:** Many rural communities are still largely unfamiliar with the charter model, adding to local resistance toward potential operators. Targeted communications that disseminate information about the charter model within rural communities will go far in garnering support for charter schools.
- **Develop standardized authorizer practices and shared resources:** Small, rural school districts often lack the capacity and infrastructure to effectively oversee their charter schools. Authorizers should be encouraged to share best practices

*For policymakers, equitable funding for charter schools must be at the forefront. The further development of rural charter schools is contingent upon policymakers setting a level playing field that is conducive to growth*





*Charter schools can provide options for improving rural education. The autonomy provided through the charter model can be leveraged to increase the use of technology and distance learning, take advantage of non-traditional funding streams, and give local communities a greater role in defining how to best educate their children. New and innovative approaches are clearly necessary to change the academic outcomes in all areas of this country.*

in order for both charter school administration and teachers to run their schools effectively.

- **Develop new talent pipelines:** By developing strategic partnerships with universities as well as non-traditional teacher certification programs such as Teach For America, rural charter schools can encourage and facilitate the placement of high-quality teachers and school leader candidates in their schools.<sup>50</sup>

## CONCLUSION

The educational needs of all students in rural areas are not being met. Although one in four students in public schools attend rural schools and one in five of the nation's lowest performing schools are in rural areas, this country has not responded with the focus required to ensure rural schools are high performing.

Charter schools can provide options for improving rural education. The autonomy provided through the charter model can be leveraged to increase the use of technology and distance learning, take advantage of non-traditional funding

streams, and give local communities a greater role in defining how to best educate their children. New and innovative approaches are clearly necessary to change the academic outcomes in all areas of this country. Charter schools provide a mechanism to support such innovation and have employed a wide range of educational approaches, with proven academic success. Public charter schools should be considered by rural communities as an education option for its students.

Both policymakers and charter advocates can play a role in expanding the number of charter schools in rural areas. For policymakers, ensuring charter schools receive appropriate funding and facility support is key. For CSOs, helping communities understand the value of charter schools, and helping operators find talent and useable space is critical. Collectively, both groups can provide meaningful public school options for more families.

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