

CHARTER SCHOOLS IN RURAL AREAS



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For many, public charter schools call to mind the challenges and opportunities of urban education. But around the country, a small and growing number of charter schools are serving rural communities. Charter schools in rural communities face many of the same challenges as those in urban ones, but often with fewer resources and community services due to smaller populations and geographic isolation. Yet in many rural areas, schools serve as community hubs and may play an even larger role in the overall wellbeing of the community.

Charter schools play a vital role in meeting the educational needs of students in rural communities across the county. Some charter schools open to fill gaps in a community's existing public school options or to offer specific academic programs that were not previously available, such as career and technical education. Some schools may be designed to meet the specific cultural and language needs of the community, such as those serving Native students. Other charter schools meet needs by providing education at a location and frequency that is helpful to students who travel great distances to attend school. This paper will explore the current landscape of rural charter schools, dig into some challenges and bright spots, and highlight charter schools making a difference in their rural communities.

Current landscape of rural charter schools

As of the 2020-2021 school year, 836 charter schools are serving more than 320,000 students in rural areas across the United States. Rural charter schools make up 11.2% of all charter schools and serve 9.9% of all charter school students.ⁱ While charter schools make up a small proportion of all rural schools, the number of schools and students served continues to grow. Since the 2009-2010 school year, the number of rural charter schools has grown from 785 to 836, and the number of students they serve has grown from 251,507 to 321,441.ⁱⁱ Virtual schools are excluded from all analyses in this report.

While the number of charter schools and students in rural communities has continued to grow over the years, these schools have not grown as quickly as charter schools in other locales. In 2009-2010, rural charter schools made up 16% of all charter schools, compared to 11.2% in 2020-2021. Similarly, in 2009-2010, 15.5% of all charter school students were in rural areas, compared to just 9.9% in 2020-2021. This slower rate of growth may be due to a variety of factors. Some of the country's most rural states lack charter school laws, and there are challenges inherent in launching and operating a new school in a rural area. Less-dense rural populations also limit the growth of individual schools. In addition, significant federal resources have been invested in the expansion of Charter Management Organizations (CMOs) during the same time period. CMOs are



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largely concentrated in urban areas, which could explain how rural charter schools now make up a smaller proportion of charter schools even though enrollment has grown. While comprehensive data on student academic achievement in rural charter schools isn't available, recent research offers some bright spots. For example, a 2019 study of Idaho charter schools conducted by the Center for Research on Education Outcomes (CREDO) at Stanford University found that charter school performance was stronger in rural areas, where students performed better than their peers in district-operated rural schools in both math and reading.ⁱⁱⁱ Similarly, a new report on performance in Alabama's emerging charter school sector found that students in rural charter schools outperformed their peers in surrounding schools. In English Language Arts, charter school students outperformed their district school peers by between 18 and 47 percentage points; in math by between 16 and 41 points; and in science by 40 points.^{iv}

Table 1 compares district and charter school enrollment across geographic 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 subcategories are significant because the needs of rural schools and communities differ based on their proximity to an urban center that can provide economic and cultural opportunities. Rural schools are more likely to face greater challenges in staffing, transportation, and connecting their students to cultural, academic, and economic opportunities. The table shows that the majority of charter school students live in cities, compared to less than a third of students who attend district-operated schools. Conversely, the proportion of students in rural district-operated schools is more than double that of charter schools.

Defining Rural

The National Center for Education Statistics has three categories of rural:

Rural fringe: territory that is less than or equal to 5 miles from an urbanized area

Rural distant: territory that is 5-25 miles from an urban center

Rural remote: territory that is more than 25 miles from an urban center^v

Table 1
Student enrollment
2020-2021

	Total Student Enrollment	City	Suburb	Town	Rural Total	Rural Sub-Categories		
						Rural Fringe	Rural Distant	Rural Remote
District-Operated Schools	45,520,179	28.3%	39.9%	11.3%	20.4%	12.5%	5.8%	2.1%
Charter Schools	3,237,492	57.4%	29.2%	3.4%	9.9%	7.9%	1.7%	0.3%

Table 2
Schools
2020-2021

	Total Number of Schools	City	Suburb	Town	Rural Total	Rural Sub-Categories		
						Rural Fringe	Rural Distant	Rural Remote
District-Operated Schools	92,248	25.0%	32.0%	13.7%	29.3%	11.9%	10.7%	6.7%
Charter Schools	7,458	58.2%	25.0%	5.6%	11.2%	7.3%	2.6%	1.2%



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Table 3. State data, 2020-2021

State	% of students in charter schools	# of students in charter schools	% of charter students in rural charter schools	# of students in rural charter schools	% of all public students in rural public schools	# of students in rural public schools	Total Public School Enrollment
AK	5.8%	7,405	7.2%	530	28.6%	36,387	127,286
AL	0.3%	1,984	26.2%	519	39.9%	288,712	722,903
AR	6.0%	28,346	20.0%	5,657	36.2%	170,984	472,460
AZ	19.0%	204,461	10.9%	22,244	11.7%	126,127	1,076,545
CA	10.2%	595,477	8.6%	51,448	6.5%	382,179	5,857,326
CO	13.9%	120,924	13.1%	15,896	15.6%	134,953	867,320
CT	2.2%	10,936	0.8%	85	11.4%	56,621	497,411
DC	44.3%	39,311	0.0%	0	0.0%	0	88,699
DE	12.2%	16,902	16.6%	2,808	21.2%	29,267	138,092
FL	12.4%	339,026	12.1%	41,134	13.2%	359,348	2,726,677
GA	3.3%	56,990	16.7%	9,545	28.9%	494,969	1,711,496
HI	6.6%	11,698	44.7%	5,226	10.4%	18,259	175,914
IA	0.02%	123	64.2%	79	35.4%	176,351	497,668
ID	7.1%	20,543	30.5%	6,258	32.3%	93,043	287,883
IL	3.3%	62,334	0.4%	237	11.0%	207,917	1,885,706
IN	4.1%	41,678	5.3%	2,213	28.8%	294,972	1,024,645
KS	0.1%	407	80.3%	327	29.9%	141,078	471,376
KY**	-	-	-	-	37.7%	247,638	656,240
LA	12.0%	81,460	11.0%	8,985	28.1%	191,022	680,455
MA	5.3%	48,578	2.1%	1,037	8.9%	80,524	908,008
MD	2.7%	23,653	1.6%	376	13.7%	120,611	882,554
ME	1.1%	1,774	45.9%	815	53.5%	89,267	166,789
MI	9.6%	131,079	10.5%	13,781	21.2%	290,368	1,371,499
MN	6.9%	59,346	12.7%	7,563	23.0%	198,133	863,208
MO	2.9%	25,269	0.0%	0	27.9%	245,041	878,097
MS	0.6%	2,674	0.0%	0	48.1%	213,975	444,731
MT*	-	-	-	-	37.6%	54,679	145,329
NC	8.1%	120,649	27.8%	33,491	37.2%	557,069	1,495,897
ND*	-	-	-	-	45.0%	53,051	117,983
NE*	-	-	-	-	28.8%	93,470	324,776
NH	2.4%	4,059	16.7%	677	34.9%	58,430	167,480
NJ	4.3%	57,486	3.0%	1,711	7.8%	104,363	1,342,172
NM	8.2%	26,119	12.8%	3,356	26.7%	85,652	320,447
NV	12.1%	57,479	13.2%	7,589	8.0%	38,044	476,131
NY	6.6%	170,509	0.4%	746	11.1%	285,842	2,578,888
OH	5.0%	80,105	0.3%	268	23.8%	380,901	1,603,561
OK	2.3%	14,726	6.0%	883	32.6%	204,325	627,702
OR	5.7%	30,178	47.8%	14,433	15.5%	81,968	527,602
PA	6.7%	108,275	2.0%	2,190	18.6%	301,241	1,623,049
RI	7.5%	10,302	9.8%	1,012	10.0%	13,761	137,164
SC	4.9%	36,914	20.4%	7,543	34.5%	260,593	756,167
SD*	-	-	-	-	45.2%	65,242	144,287
TN	4.6%	44,741	1.9%	831	30.7%	300,417	979,758
TX	7.9%	423,222	7.6%	32,205	19.7%	1,052,259	5,344,772
UT	11.4%	75,910	17.4%	13,209	14.2%	95,179	668,621
VA	0.1%	1,266	27.3%	346	25.3%	317,238	1,251,627
VT*	-	-	-	-	55.0%	43,258	78,661
WA	0.3%	3,614	0.0%	0	12.6%	135,252	1,074,485
WI	4.7%	38,383	10.2%	3,916	23.7%	193,919	818,023
WV**	-	-	-	-	42.9%	108,877	253,930
WY	0.7%	609	44.7%	272	32.8%	30,483	93,022

*States with no charter school law

**States with new charter school laws

In highlighted states, more than 25% of charter school students are in rural areas.

In bolded states, charter schools serve the same proportion or more of rural students as students statewide.



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Charter schools and district-operated schools across geographic areas, 2020-2021

There are charter schools in rural areas around the country, but they are more prevalent in a few states. In 10 states, more than 25% of charter school students are in rural charter schools: Alabama, Hawaii, Iowa, Idaho, Kansas, Maine, North Carolina, Oregon, Virginia, and Wyoming. Some of these states, however, have very small charter school populations. California, Texas, and Florida have the largest numbers of rural charter schools.^{vi} Meanwhile, Hawaii has the highest proportion of rural charter schools located in states with more than 20 charter schools: almost half of all charter schools in Hawaii are rural.^{vii}

Notably, several of the states with the highest percentage of public school enrollment in rural schools are states without charter school laws or with very small charter school sectors. Of the top ten states with the highest proportion of public school students in rural schools, four have no charter school law (Vermont, South Dakota, North Dakota, and Montana) and another two (West Virginia and Kentucky) have very recent laws. Kentucky has no charter schools yet and West Virginia very few.

Table 4 shows that in nine states, charter schools serve the same or higher proportion of rural students as students statewide. Some of these are states with very small charter school sectors. Hawaii stands out as the state with the most significant proportion of charter school students in rural areas: almost 29% of rural students in Hawaii attend charter schools, compared to just over 6% of students statewide.

Table 4.
States where charter schools serve the same proportion or more of rural students as students statewide

State	% of rural students in charter schools	% of students in charter school
HI	28.6%	6.6%
NV	19.9%	12.1%
OR	17.6%	5.7%
UT	13.9%	11.4%
CA	13.5%	10.2%
WY	0.9%	0.7%
KS	0.2%	0.1%
VA	0.1%	0.1%
IA	0.04%	0.02%



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Table 5
Characteristics of rural vs.
nonrural charter schools, 2020-2021

	Nonrural charter schools	Rural charter schools	Rural Sub-Categories		
			Fringe	Distant	Remote
Size					
Avg. enrollment	440	384	469	274	118
Grade configuration					
Primary	7%	3%	3%	4%	2%
Middle	10%	6%	7%	5%	4%
High	19%	11%	12%	12%	9%
Combined grades	64%	80%	79%	80%	84%
Student characteristics					
Free/reduced price lunch	63%	43%	41%	49%	62%
White	24%	55%	52%	67%	65%
Black	28%	10%	11%	6%	5%
Hispanic	39%	24%	26%	16%	13%
American Indian	1%	1%	1%	3%	8%
Asian	5%	3%	4%	1%	1%
Two or more races	4%	5%	5%	6%	5%
Pacific Islanders and Native Hawaiian	0.3%	1%	1%	0.4%	4%
Management type					
CMO	29%	11%	14%	4%	4%
EMO	9%	6%	8%	4%	0%
Freestanding	62%	83%	78%	93%	96%
No. schools	6,622	836	547	197	92

Characteristics of rural charter schools

Characteristics of rural charter schools reflect the demographics and needs of small, rural communities. On average, charter schools in rural areas have smaller student populations than charter schools in other locales, with even smaller average enrollments in rural distant and rural remote settings. This makes sense given the lower population density. Similarly, rural charter schools are more likely to combine multiple grade level configurations in the same school—80% of rural charter schools do this, compared to 64% of nonrural charter schools. This is even more prevalent in rural remote areas.

Rural areas have grown much more racially diverse in recent years, but the rural population is still predominantly White, so it follows that rural charter schools serve a significantly higher proportion of White students than do nonrural charter schools. In fact, 55% of rural charter school students are White, compared to just 24% in nonrural charter schools. Rural charter schools also serve proportionately fewer students eligible for free



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and reduced-price lunch; however, in more rural areas the rate is markedly higher. In rural remote areas, 62% of charter school students are eligible for free and reduced-price lunch compared to 63% in nonrural areas.

Rural charter school demographics also highlight the role charter schools can play in serving Native students. In rural remote areas, charter schools serve significantly more Native students: 8% of rural remote charter school students are American Indian compared to 1% of nonrural charter school students, and 4% of rural remote charter school students are of Pacific Island or Native Hawaiian descent compared to just 0.3% of nonrural charter school students. This is most likely because of the subset of charter schools that provide cultural immersion opportunities to students living on tribal land or land managed by the Bureau of Indian Affairs.^{viii}

Challenges and opportunities

In addition to the challenges faced by most public schools, rural charter schools must overcome other barriers related to serving small and remote communities. They can also leverage flexibility and innovation to have an outsize impact on the children and communities they serve.

Challenges

- Opening or growing a charter school in a rural community with limited resources may present significant operational challenges. These could include finding an appropriate school building, transportation for students, human capital, resources to provide a range of course offerings, internet connectivity, and organizing athletics.
- Opening a new school in a small community can be disruptive. Compared to a school in a more densely populated area, a rural charter school may have a more significant impact on existing schools given the smaller and more dispersed populations of students they serve.

Opportunities

- Charter schools can open to fill gaps in existing educational offerings in rural communities. For example, a charter high school could open in a community without one, where students previously had to travel to another community to attend high school.
- Rural charter schools can offer cultural and language immersion and support Native sovereignty in education. A high number of cultural and language immersion schools are located in rural areas. In fact, 30% of all cultural schools are rural while just 11% of all charter schools are.^{ix} This is largely driven by charter schools designed to serve American Indian, Alaskan Native, and Native Hawaiian populations. Especially in rural remote areas, charter schools serve significantly more Native



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students. For tribal communities that bear the weight of generations of historical trauma, local control over their schools is critical. Charter schools can offer communities a different type of local control as well as the opportunity to preserve their languages and cultures.

- Charter schools may also bring innovative school models to communities that historically only had access to traditional public schools. These models could include one-room schoolhouses, Montessori schools, project-based learning, blended learning, STEM, classical, and language or cultural immersion.
- A disproportionate number of alternative schools are located in rural areas: 24% of alternative charter schools are in rural areas, while just 11% of charter schools are rural.^x These could include schools for students involved with the juvenile justice system, in foster care, experiencing homelessness, or who are pregnant or parenting. Alternative rural charter schools can provide wraparound services and support social-emotional learning to put students on track for graduation.
- Rural charter schools face significant financial and logistical obstacles to accessing appropriate school facilities. But a program overseen by the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) to finance essential community facilities (such as charter school buildings) offers significant opportunities. Through the USDA Rural Development's Community Facilities Direct Loan and Grant Program and the Guaranteed Loan Program, nearly 100 charter schools have received more than \$570 million in financing since 2008.^{xi} However, this USDA funding is unevenly distributed around the country. To support broader access to this key funding source, the Charter School Facility Center at the National Alliance teamed up with Momentum Strategy & Research to strengthen rural charter schools' access to facilities and financing through the [Schoolhouse Network](#), which provides free resources and subsidized technical assistance.
- The Charter Schools Program (CSP) is the only dedicated source of federal funding to support the growth, expansion, and replication of high-quality public charter schools around the country. According to the most recent available data from the U.S. Department of Education, at least 250 rural charter schools have received funding through the CSP. That's 30% of all rural charter schools. Rural charter schools can apply for funding through a subgrant from an existing [State Entity grant](#) or, in states without current funding, schools can apply directly for a [Developer Grant](#).



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CMOs in rural areas

Just 11% of rural charter schools are associated with a Charter Management Organization (CMO), compared to 29% of nonrural charter schools. Some rural schools are part of small, homegrown CMOs, but in many other cases, high-quality CMOs are expanding beyond their traditionally urban settings. Despite their limited number, some CMOs, have brought innovative programming and educational opportunities to rural communities. Examples include KIPP Delta in Arkansas and IDEA in Texas.

The first IDEA Public School grew out of an after-school program in 1998. Since then, the network has grown to educate nearly 70,000 students in Texas, Louisiana, and Florida.^{xii} As of the 2020-2021 school year, this included 18 schools located in rural areas all over Texas. Collectively, those schools served more than 12,000 students, the vast majority of whom were Hispanic and from low-income backgrounds. These schools provide rural students with significant academic opportunities. A 2017 CREDO study, for example, identified IDEA as one of the highest performing charter networks in the country, with students gaining the equivalent of 80 extra days of learning in math and 74 extra days in reading.^{xiii} More recently, 13 IDEA college preparatory schools, including two in rural areas, were ranked in the top 1% of most challenging high schools in the country by the Jay Mathews Challenge Index High School Rankings.^{xiv}

School Profiles

- **Glacial Hills Elementary School (Starbuck, Minn.)**—Glacial Hills Elementary School was opened in 2007 by local families and community members just two years after the town’s district-run elementary school was closed due to declining enrollment. The loss of their elementary school felt like a death knell for the small town. Starbuck is a “rural remote” community with just 1,200 residents, and without its own elementary school, Starbuck students were forced to travel 30 minutes by bus to the next town to attend school. When Glacial Hills Elementary school opened, it offered new hope to families and the local community. Today, students at the charter school outperform state and previous school-district averages. Operating a school independent of the district presents challenges, including navigating the relationship with the surrounding school district, maintaining enrollment, and retaining staff. But 15 years after it opened, Glacial Hills is still there offering hope to the community.^{xv}
- **Crossroad Academy Charter School (Quincy, Fla.)**—Crossroad Academy Charter School is located in Quincy, Fla., a small town on the larger end of the rural spectrum, located just over 20 miles from Florida’s capital city of Tallahassee. Crossroad Academy was born out of the Juvenile Crossroad Connection, a juvenile diversion program designed to help keep kids out of the juvenile justice system. In the early 1990s, this program evolved into an alternative education program for middle school students. Just two years after Florida passed its charter school law,



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Crossroad Academy was approved to operate as a charter school. Over the past two decades, Crossroad Academy has continued to grow and expand to a full PreK-12 model that delivers rigorous academics as well as athletics and extracurriculars. Although it began as an alternative program, Crossroad Academy now serves as an option for all students in the community. During the 2019-2020 school year, 66% of Crossroad students were Black, 30% were Hispanic, and 84% of students were eligible for free and reduced-price lunch. According to the most recently available data, Crossroad students outperform their peers in the surrounding school district and statewide in both math and reading. In its early years, Crossroad presented something of a threat to its authorizing school district, which was grappling with declining enrollment. Ultimately, the district decided to authorize Crossroad, largely because it proposed to serve some of the highest-need students from the district. Over the years, the relationship with the district has improved. Crossroad is a prime example of a charter school that naturally evolved to meet the needs of the surrounding community and increase access to a high-quality education.^{xvi}

Notes

- ⁱ Xu, Y. (2022, December 6). Where Are Charter Schools Located. Retrieved from National Alliance for Public Charter Schools: <https://data.publiccharters.org/digest/charter-school-data-digest/where-are-charter-schools-located/>.
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- ⁱⁱⁱ Center for Research on Education Outcomes (CREDO) (2019). Charter School Performance in Idaho 2019. Stanford, CA: Stanford University. Retrieved from <https://credo.stanford.edu/reports/item/charter-school-impacts-in-idaho-2/>.
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- ^{vii} Ibid.



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- ^{xi} Griffin, J., & Quisenberry, B. (February 2020). USDA Financing of Rural Charter Schools. Washington, D.C.: Charter School Facility Center at the National Alliance for Public Charter Schools. Retrieved from <https://facilitycenter.publiccharters.org/resource/industry-metrics-charter-schools-and-usda-financing>.
- ^{xii} IDEA Public Schools (2022). History of IDEA Public Schools. Retrieved from IDEA Public Schools: <https://ideapublicschools.org/our-story/history/>.
- ^{xiii} Center for Research on Education Outcomes (CREDO) (2017). Charter Management Organizations. Stanford University. Stanford, CA: Center for Research on Education Outcomes. Retrieved from https://credo.stanford.edu/wp-content/uploads/2021/08/cmo_final.pdf.
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- ^{xv} Bellwether Education Partners (n/d). Glacial Hills Elementary School. Retrieved from Local Roots Take the Lead: Lessons from Rural Charter Schools: <https://www.ruralcharterschools.org/ghes>.
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