Policy Brief

Sharing Relatively Good News: Rural Return-to-School More Frequent and Equitable than Cities and Suburbs

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The Covid-19 pandemic has disrupted schooling around the world and education leaders have been forced to respond nimbly and creatively to complex and pressing public health imperatives (Das et al., 2020). Over the past 18 months, and despite myriad challenges, American public schools have continued to serve their students in a variety of formats. Some schools have operated exclusively online, via synchronous meeting platforms such as Zoom (Tomasik et al., 2020), while others could not provide consistent synchronous online learning due to limited internet access. As the pandemic wore on, some schools returned to offering in-person instruction, navigating mask mandates, contact-tracing efforts, and staff and student absences for self-isolation. Political tensions around masks and vaccine skepticism have layered further complications onto the constantly changing landscape of federal, state, and district policies and guidelines. All these factors have created a wide variety of localized approaches.

To develop a picture of this patchwork landscape and in response to an Executive Order from President Biden (Exec. Order No. 14000, 2021) the Institution of Education Sciences (IES) developed a survey for school administrators to complete monthly from February-June 2021 and have been reporting aggregated findings on a publicly available dashboard (Institute of Education Sciences, 2021). Administrators reported on how and to whom their schools delivered different instructional modes: remotely, in-person, and hybrid.

One goal of this survey was to document how schools were serving various vulnerable subgroups among student populations. Journalists, policymakers, and education leaders have highlighted unequal distributions of rates of reopening for in-person schooling and access to online education that disadvantage some ethno-racial and socioeconomic groups, particularly in cities (Binkley, 2021; Darling-Hammond et al., 2020). By the end of the 2020-2021 school year, students who were White increasingly returned to in-person classes, but students of color were still more frequently attending school online from a distance (Dorn et al., 2020). Similar disparities were observed between lower and higher-income schools (Esquivel et al., 2020). School leaders have also struggled to serve students with identified disabilities (U.S. Government Accountability Office, 2020).

As rural education researchers, we were interested in the extent to which rural schools might or might not follow similar patterns. We examined IES's first two months of survey data to determine (a) if any differences existed in how rural schools were delivering instruction as compared to schools in other geographic locales and (b) how they were serving subgroups within those rural schools. Overall, we found schools in rural communities and small towns tending to provide more in-person instruction and doing so more equitably than schools in cities and suburbs.

Among several topics that IES's (2021) survey addressed, we were interested in the:

1. frequency of schools making any of three instructional modes available to their students: remote, in-person, and hybrid;
2. proportions of students and student subgroups receiving in-person instruction;
3. daily average hours of synchronous remote instruction, when employed; and
4. student groups that school leaders reported as prioritizing for in-person instruction.

IES categorized schools in its sample by characteristics such as geographic locale, ethno-racial composition, and aggregated achievement on state assessments. IES's dashboard enabled us to subdivide data by the National Center for Education Statistics' four major locale codes (city, suburb, town, rural), we were able to determine the instructional modes that schools in those locales were offering. Second, to examine how well schools served student subgroups, we were able to differentiate schools' overall percentages of students learning in-person, at least part-time, per geographic locale from the corresponding percentages among each of the following student subgroups:

- students who identify as White,
- students who are economically disadvantaged,
- English-language learners, and
- students with identified disabilities.

These data indicate that schools in rural areas and towns seemed to serve students with in-person instruction more frequently than schools in cities and suburbs—2-to-8 times more frequently, depending upon the IES metric we examined—and more proportionally for subgroups.

A common public misconception characterizes rural communities as primarily White (Tieken, 2017). Although such demographics may describe certain areas, many rural communities offer high degrees of diversity; students of color are the majority in many rural areas. According to the Rural School and Community Trust (Showalter et al., 2017):

> Nationally, 25.2% of rural students identify with a race other than White. The range among states is very large—from 3.7% in Rhode Island to 85.6% in New Mexico […] in four states, the majority of students in rural districts identify as non-White: New Mexico (85.6%), Alaska (63.9%), Arizona (58.5%), and California (57.5%). (p. 17)

The IES data we examined show rural schools to have served students of color with in-person instruction more proportionally than schools in cities and suburbs. Reflecting concerns among journalists and education leaders, city schools provided in-person instruction to students who identified as White at much higher rates than for students of color. We found similar disparities (though less extremely) in suburbs. By contrast, in rural areas and towns, such disparities were either considerably smaller or instead favored students of color, though by small margins.

Among school-aged children in rural areas, 15.4% live in poverty (Showalter et al., 2019). Although poverty rates certainly vary by region, the Carsey Institute found persistent child poverty to be more prevalent in rural areas (Schaefer et al., 2016). Additionally, homelessness among rural students is growing faster than the national rate (Institute for Children, Poverty and Homelessness, 2019). The IES data we analyzed show that schools in cities and suburbs were serving students from economically disadvantaged families with in-person instruction disproportionately when compared to students at higher income levels. Rural schools, on the other hand, were providing in-person instruction to students from economically disadvantaged families more proportionately than students from wealthier backgrounds.

Similar patterns exist among English-language learners, to whom rural schools were more frequently providing in-person instruction. While English-language learners make up a smaller enrollment percentage in rural (4.1%) than urban schools (14.7%), the rural proportion has been increasing and 1-in-10, English-language learners live rurally (National Center for Education Statistics, 2016; 2020).

Students with identified disabilities account for 13.8% of the rural student population, and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) found developmental disabilities to be more prevalent in rural than urban populations. The CDC also found that even before the pandemic, rural students with developmental disabilities less commonly received special education services (Zablotsky & Black, 2020). Interestingly, the IES survey data indicate that despite schools in all locales historically struggling to provide instructional services to students with disabilities, all schools during the pandemic were providing in-person instruction to those students as or more readily than to their general student population.

Likely due to greater broadband internet access, the IES data show schools in cities and suburbs to vastly outstrip schools in rural areas and towns regarding the offering of synchronous, remote instruction. Comparing hour counts among schools that did offer remote instruction, schools in cities and suburbs more closely approximated a full day's worth of instruction than rural and town schools in by wide margins, nearly double the frequency by some IES metrics. Broadband internet access is not a new concern for rural areas (Whitacre et al., 2014) and has been correctly highlighted as a crucial resource amid the pandemic, and one that presents a distinct disadvantage for rural schools in comparison to peer institutions in other geographic locales (Lai & Widmar, 2021). As much as 37% of the U.S. rural student population lacks adequate connectivity (Chandra et al., 2020). In rural areas, broadband internet can be unevenly distributed, prohibitively expensive, or simply unavailable (Yarrow, 2021).

Rural school leaders might simply have had no choice but to bring children back into school buildings in order to offer anything but asynchronous learning. In Spring 2020, one of the authors of this study worked with state leaders to develop guidance for districts in which a considerable proportion of students did not have internet access (Oregon Department of Education, 2020). The challenge of continuing to offer education and connection in rural and remote settings via offline formats was (and remains) consequential. Bus drivers delivered packets and learning kits along with lunches. Schools loaned cellular data hotspots and laptops and set up Wi-Fi hubs and printing stations. Local radio and television stations broadcast lessons and messages from schools. Teachers made phone calls and even outdoor visits to children's homes. Across the country, rural communities from the Navajo Nation (Fonseca, 2021) to Mississippi (Wright, 2021) depended upon similar strategies.

Another factor that may have allowed rural schools to offer more in-person instruction is that they typically have smaller student bodies and class sizes, so the logistics of social distancing and contact tracing might be more manageable in rural places. Whatever the reasons, rural schools seem to have been able to provide more in-person instruction and to offer a more equitable experience for their students than schools in other settings, according to IES data.

The survey also asked school administrators to report how they *prioritized* education for the following subgroups: English-language learners, students with identified disabilities, students experiencing homelessness, and students without home internet access. Administrators of rural and town schools reported that they prioritized all the above subgroups more so than their peers in city and suburban schools.

There are, of course, some caveats to our findings from the IES survey. First, its dataset represents a small snapshot with no historical comparison. Second, IES allowed a limited time for administrators to respond to the survey, likely leading to uneven geographical representation and producing data that we characterize as somewhat, but not entirely, representative of the U.S. population. Third, IES categorizes schools using the National Center for Education Statistics urban-centric geographic locale codes, the most commonly used classification system in U.S. education research, but one that has been criticized for its potential to homogenize rural community characteristics (Longhurst, 2021; Thier et al., 2021). In this system, "rural" can mean either extremely remote communities or those on fringes of cities or suburbs—Alaskan island fly-in communities or just beyond New Jersey suburbs. IES' survey data relied on an application of this system that Thier et al. (2020) called the "superimposed quartiles" because it distinguishes only among cities, suburbs, towns, and rural areas. Fourth, IES's national dataset did not facilitate exploration of any potential state or regional differences. It would be interesting to know if, for example, rural schools in the Northeastern U.S.—which were more proximal to early Covid-19 hotspots—responded to the pandemic differently than rural schools in Southern states, where spikes in infection rates occurred later (American Journal of Managed Care, 2021). Such knowledge is especially important as we have begun to see regionalized spikes in infection rates due to uneven vaccine uptake. Interregional differences have led federal officials and even governors with large rural populations (e.g., Kay Ivey in Alabama) to characterize the recent challenge as 'a pandemic of the unvaccinated' (Avery, 2021).

A long history of handwringing has framed rural schools as problems to be solved (Biddle & Azano, 2016). Rural education scholars have noted that literature frequently describes rural schools as inefficient, obsolete, and providing sub-par service (Roberts & Cuervo, 2015; Theobald & Wood, 2010). The data we analyzed from IES's survey provide a counterpoint to those deficit perspectives. During the Covid-19 pandemic, rural schools seem to have been able to offer more in-person instruction and do so more equitably, especially regarding students of color. If we assume that in-person instruction is inherently better for students than remote or hybrid alternatives, schools in rural communities seemed to be providing better educational opportunities during the Covid-19 pandemic. Of course, "better" is a contestable position given educational, social, and medical/public health (and certainly political) arguments both for and against in-person instruction during the pandemic. We also make no assumptions about the quality of either in-person or distance instruction nor do we claim that in-person instruction is universally better for all students under all conditions. However, schools in rural areas and towns seemed to place greater priority on in-person instruction for a host of at-risk subgroups.

These findings should encourage rural school leaders and perhaps provide their peers in cities and suburbs with inspiration for more equitable instructional approaches during the current pandemic (and more frighteningly, the possibility of future ones). The preliminary successes we see in the IES data may be at risk, however, in communities with low vaccination rates (Kafanov et al., 2021) and if variant-driven spikes in positive cases threaten the continuation and/or expansion of in-person schooling. As we write, U.S. children younger than 12 remain ineligible for Covid-19 vaccines. No matter how high the vaccination rate in any region, schools will be the least vaccinated places in any community for some months to come. Lessons learned during the past two school years will need to inform the work of public schools for the foreseeable future. At a minimum, our findings suggest that school leaders in towns and rural areas have probably developed promising practices for navigating pandemic-related challenges, which they can clarify and share with one another, as well as their peers in cities and suburbs. In the most optimistic sense, such collaboration could stabilize, or even bolster, students' and schools' educational trajectories and perhaps simultaneously boost community health.

Authors' Note: Additional information about method and tables have been appended at the journal's website.

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