



ISSUE BRIEF: Rural Students

Defining the Rural Student Population

Texas is home to more than 900,000 rural students in K-12 education. This number grows by 30,000 each year. Of all schools in Texas, 37.1 percent are considered to be in rural areas.¹ Rural Texas students come from varied backgrounds. Approximately 44 percent of rural students are minorities, 47 percent of rural students are eligible for free and reduced lunches, and 19 percent are Title I eligible.² Additionally, 43 percent of the rural student population is considered low income compared to 56 percent of the urban student population.³

What is “rural”?

Currently, the Texas Education Agency (TEA) and the Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board (THECB) have differing definitions of ‘rural.’ TEA defines a district as rural if it has either “(a) an enrollment between 300 and the median district enrollment for the state and an enrollment growth rate over the past five years of less than 20 percent; or (b) an enrollment of less than 300 students.”⁴ The THECB, however, defines a district as rural if it is not located in a Metropolitan Statistical Area (MSA), which is a geographic unit used to “gather statistics in metropolitan areas of the United States.”⁵ Furthermore, national data sets use different standards, and the U.S. Census Bureau utilizes yet another definition, making it nearly impossible to synthesize data sets from multiple sources. Therefore, a common or standard definition of rural across contexts is needed.

Barriers to Rural Student Postsecondary Success

Researcher Andrew Koricich found 64 percent of rural students nationwide pursue postsecondary education compared to nearly 70 percent of their urban peers.⁶ Although rural students aspire to enroll in and complete postsecondary credentials, they often face unique barriers and challenges. This issue brief focuses on three unique barriers to rural student success: geographic location, teacher retention, and broadband access.

¹ <http://tea.texas.gov/acctres/analyze/1415/gloss1415.html#Rural>

² http://www.ruraledu.org/user_uploads/file/2013-14-Why-Rural-Matters.pdf

³ Southern Education Foundation. “A New Majority: Low Income Students in the South.” 2013. Appendix 2.

⁴ Texas Education Agency. “District Type Glossary of Terms, 2014-15.” <<http://tea.texas.gov/acctres/analyze/1415/gloss1415.html#Rural>>, Accessed January 24, 2017

⁵ Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board. “Glossary of Terms,” <<http://www.thecb.state.tx.us/reports/PDF/1316.PDF>>, Accessed January 24, 2017

⁶ <http://www.aera.net/Portals/38/Newsroom%20-%20Recent%20Research/The%20Effects%20of%20Rurality%20on%20College%20Access%20and%20Choice.pdf>



Geographic Location

Distance and transportation can be a barrier for many rural students, limiting their access to postsecondary education. Students often have to travel large distances to get to institutions of higher education, which can be discouraging. For example, in West Texas, the average distance from a high school to the nearest university is approximately 39 miles with a maximum distance of 141 miles. In non-rural areas, the average distance to the nearest university is 24 miles with a maximum distance of 78 miles.⁷ Distance is a challenge at all levels of education; some areas of the state require one-hour or longer bus rides for K-12 students to attend school.⁸ In a recent study, the Urban Institute described ‘choice deserts,’ an area where there is only a single program available to students. Though conducted in Virginia, this study is applicable to the large state of Texas with its vast rural areas. To combat such deserts, the authors recommend that policymakers pay close attention to the geographic variation in the availability of different programs and expand needed programs in underserved areas.⁹

Teacher Retention

Teacher retention is a serious issue in rural schools. Unfortunately, rural areas are often not attractive locations for teachers.¹⁰ A persistent issue in rural schools is out-of-field teaching. Many teachers are required to teach subjects in which they are not proficient due to course need. Limited teacher proficiency may negatively impact courses, especially those in the STEM fields. Due to lack of teacher recruitment and retention, rigorous courses are less likely to be offered in smaller, isolated school districts. Thus, it is imperative that rural districts are able to attract and retain high quality teachers.¹¹ A teacher just one standard deviation above the average effectiveness standard can have a substantial impact on the lifetime earnings of students.¹² To combat the issues rural schools face, some education stakeholders have suggested providing financial incentives for education majors and graduates to return to teach in rural areas.¹³ Teacher retention plays a key role in preparing all students, rural students included, for a postsecondary education.

Broadband Access

Finally, students who make it to postsecondary education may be hindered by challenges such as limited broadband access. Many rural universities and community colleges are either wired for and/or offer wireless broadband access to students on campus; however, students may not have the same access at home. Modem connections offer impractical solutions and often do not provide sufficient bandwidth for students to access or stream distance education online classes.¹⁴ Though there has been great emphasis placed on outfitting campuses with broadband services, creating access is not always enough. Broadband service must not only be set up but also actively used and integrated into daily life on and around campuses. Examples of such programs do exist. In South Texas Independent School District, Wi-Fi has been installed on school and regional transport buses so that students can take advantage of long commutes to and from school.

⁷ The Bush School of Government and Public Service. (2014). *Postsecondary Completion in Rural Texas: A Statewide Overview*. College Station, TX: Shuyu Chen et al.

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ Blagg, Kristin and Chingos Matthew M. (2016). *Choice Deserts: How Geography Limits the Potential Impact of Earnings Data on Higher Education*. Urban Institute.

¹⁰ The Bush School of Government and Public Service. (2014). *Postsecondary Completion in Rural Texas: A Statewide Overview*. College Station, TX: Shuyu Chen et al.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² Batelle for Kids. (2016). *Generating Opportunity and Prosperity*:

¹³ The Bush School of Government and Public Service. (2014). *Postsecondary Completion in Rural Texas: A Statewide Overview*. College Station, TX: Shuyu Chen et al.

¹⁴ Strover, S. (2003). *The prospects for broadband deployment in rural America*. *Government Information Quarterly*, 20(2), 95-106.



This also helps when personal broadband access may be limited at home.¹⁵ To improve rural students' postsecondary opportunities, these programs should be expanded throughout the state.

Brain Drain

Rural areas in the United States face a unique issue, known as rural brain drain. Two distinct groups of students often emerge—those who leave and those who stay in the rural area after high school graduation. High-achieving students are cultivated and groomed by their teachers to leave after high school graduation. Students who stay are often those who did not receive a postsecondary credential, and thus, they have less earning potential, limiting the rural region's economic growth. This can be solved by building better linkages between high school and postsecondary education, specifically by blending existing opportunities and regional economic goals.¹⁶

Promoting Rural Student Success

Greater Texas Foundation is strongly committed to postsecondary preparation, access, persistence, and completion. In identifying issue areas to focus on, Greater Texas Foundation supports solutions in postsecondary transitions, rigor and alignment in math, transfer pathways, and *improving the success of rural students*. We believe in using our roles to support regional-level work in rural areas to improve the success of students.¹⁷

This focus is apparent in our work. We support projects such as the Center for Community College Student Engagement at the University of Texas at Austin's program *Texas Small and Rural Colleges Working Together* focused on the development of data-informed institutional improvement for a consortium of small and rural colleges.¹⁸ Greater Texas Foundation also supports the work of rural students in STEM fields through a grant to Educate Texas's Texas Regional STEM Degree Accelerator program, which empowers local institutions of higher education to collaborate and design strategies that accelerate the number of students who graduate with STEM degrees within their own regions and across Texas. Greater Texas Foundation supports rural west Texas partners in this work.¹⁹ Additionally, Greater Texas Foundation supports the Lee College Dual Credit Institute, which allows rural high school students to access and complete a postsecondary credential prior to high school graduation by offering stackable credentials, cohort enrollment, block scheduling to maximize academic transfer courses, and clearing pathways into the workforce.²⁰

Greater Texas Foundation also supports the work of Texas faculty members through its GTF Fellows program. For example, GTF Faculty Fellow Dr. Brittany Hott developed *Project DREAM: Developing Rural Educators' Algebra Methods* to conduct research which focuses on supporting teachers working with students from diverse backgrounds in rural east Texas.²¹

¹⁵ Cramer, J. "WiFi on School Buses: Rolling Study Hall Trend?" 2013. CradlePoint 3G/4G Network Solutions. Accessed February 2, 2017.

¹⁶ <http://www.chronicle.com/article/The-Rural-Brain-Drain/48425/>

¹⁷ <http://www.greatertexasfoundation.org/grant-announcement-texas-small-and-rural-colleges-working-together/>

¹⁸ <http://www.greatertexasfoundation.org/university-of-texas-at-austin-21/>

¹⁹ <http://www.greatertexasfoundation.org/communities-foundation-of-texas-inc-12/>

²⁰ <http://www.greatertexasfoundation.org/GTF15/leecollege.html>

²¹ http://www.greatertexasfoundation.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/07/Hott_Abstract.pdf



Recommendations

- Continue to study rural student populations and help enrich the existing data.
- Adopt a state-wide definition for rural.
- Implement teacher recruitment and retention strategies.
- Pay close attention to the geographic variation in the availability of higher education programs and take efforts to expand needed programs in underserved areas.
- Expand broadband internet access.
- Build better linkages between K-12 and postsecondary education for rural students.
- Map existing opportunities onto regional economic goals.

Conclusion

In its *60x30TX* plan, the Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board has set a goal for 60 percent of the 25- to 34-year old Texas population to hold a certificate or degree by 2030.²² With more than 900,000 rural students in Texas, there is great potential in these students to enroll in and complete postsecondary credentials. However, challenges in broadband access, geographic location and teacher retention exist, contributing to a “brain drain” in rural areas. For Texas to remain competitive on a national and international level, rural students must not be left behind.

²² <http://www.theccb.state.tx.us/index.cfm?objectid=5033056A-A8AF-0900-DE0514355F026A7F>