

JANUARY 2014

A New Frontier:

UTILIZING CHARTER SCHOOLING TO STRENGTHEN RURAL EDUCATION

Andy Smarick



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First in the series from



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THE RURAL EDUCATION REFORM POLICY BRIEF SERIES

Public schools in rural communities enroll 11 million students, representing 25 percent of public school enrollment nationwide. Rural students are more likely than their peers in any other geography to live in poverty. Only 27 percent of rural high school graduates go on to college. Just one in five rural adults has earned a bachelor's degree.¹

Yet the challenges faced by rural students and their teachers have received scant attention from national education leaders.

Part of the problem is perspective. Most researchers, policy experts, and journalists are based in metropolitan areas, and they tend to view poverty, community challenges, and troubled schools as a uniquely urban phenomenon.

Another part of the challenge is the fact that rural communities defy generalization. William O'Hara, from the University of New Hampshire's Carsey Institute, which does policy research on rural education, crisply captures this point. Rural communities include "hollows in the Appalachian Mountains, former sharecroppers' shacks in the Mississippi Delta, desolate Indian reservations on the Great Plains, and emerging *colonia* along the Rio Grande."²

Because of these factors and others, many policymakers at all levels of government have remarkably limited exposure to the day-to-day issues facing rural schools, much less a clear understanding of what policies and practices are likeliest to help them improve. With generous support from the Boise, Idaho-based J.A. and Kathryn Albertson Foundation, Bellwether Education Partners and the Rural Opportunities Consortium of Idaho (ROCI) Task Force will study and report on a wide array of issues affecting rural communities and their schools, including migration, technology, educator effectiveness, community development, rural politics, and more.

This report, the first in the series, is designed to show how rural charter schools can succeed, with a particular focus on the public policies that serve to either inhibit or strengthen them.

The author would like to thank Juliet Squire for her major contributions to this paper, particularly her helpful thought-partnership on the most challenging issues, and Ellie Craig for her valuable research and editorial assistance. Also Jim Griffin, Bryan Hassel, Paul Hill, Sara Mead, Greg Richmond, Andy Rotherham, Terry Ryan, Nelson Smith, Todd Ziebarth, and the team at the J.A. and Kathryn Albertson Foundation reviewed and commented on early drafts of this paper. Their advice improved it immeasurably; their efforts are greatly appreciated. All remaining shortcomings are the responsibility of the author alone.

FOREWORD

Most of the energy, money, and talent directed at school reform over the past twenty-five years has been aimed at the needs of low income urban students. The needs of rural students have gone largely unnoticed and are seldom discussed.

My colleagues and I at the J.A. and Kathryn Albertson Foundation applaud the many efforts across the country to improve public education for needy youngsters attending troubled big-city schools. We've been impressed by the fantastic work done by charter management organizations like KIPP, Uncommon Schools, Aspire Schools, YES Prep, and many others in cities such as New York, Chicago, Houston, Indianapolis, and Los Angeles. We've admired human capital organizations such as Teach for America, The New Teacher Project, New Leaders, and 4.0 Schools, and we aspire to get these groups and others like them more engaged in rural states like Idaho.

We believe, however, that it is time to reimagine the possibilities of rural education in America. This is why we launched the Rural Opportunities Consortium of Idaho (ROCI) in August 2013. ROCI brings together some of the nation's best thinkers to conduct research and identify innovations, programs, and models to address the challenges of rural schooling. This effort will inform a national body of work on rural education and explore the options for enhancing the educational attainment and economic competitiveness of Idahoans and residents of other rural states.

Charter schools are an important part of the rural reform landscape. When done well, they can show how it might be possible to transform schooling in communities across the country. We have seen firsthand how innovative high performing charter schools make a positive difference in the lives of children in rural Idaho communities like Carmen, Rathdrum, and Sandpoint. The charters in these communities not only deliver academic results for their children but are also sources of community pride and engagement. They are in fact powerful avatars for how student learning can be significantly

improved when schools operate alongside strong values, caring adults, and trusting relationships not only across individual schools but an entire community.

Because of the success we've seen among rural charters in Idaho, we wanted to learn more about the issues and challenges affecting rural charters nationwide. We also wanted to share ideas and recommendations for how rural states like Idaho could support charters and even craft public policies to help expand and grow high quality rural charters in the communities that want them. This is the reason the first in a series of papers on rural education is focused on charter schools. Charters have the potential to serve as a hotbed of innovation for rural education in America.

We couldn't think of anyone better to help us in this effort than Andy Smarick. Andy not only is a first-rate thinker, researcher, and author; he also has experience working with charter schools in various capacities. He served as deputy commissioner of the New Jersey Department of Education, where he worked on all manner of education issues, including charter school authorization and policy. He served as deputy assistant secretary at the U.S. Department of Education and at the White House Domestic Policy Council, and helped found the National Alliance for Public Charter Schools, where he then served as chief operating officer. Andy also helped launch a college preparatory charter school for underserved boys and girls in Annapolis, Maryland.

Andy does an excellent job in this paper of making the case for how charter schools can lead to more student-centered approaches for children living in rural and even remote communities. He also identifies the challenges facing charters and their ability to open, grow, and thrive in less populated parts of the country. He sheds light on the fact that rural students are at a significant disadvantage due to factors beyond their control—distance from services, state caps and prohibitions against charters, shortages of highly effective teachers, transportation and facilities challenges, and even federal policies that inadvertently raise roadblocks.

Rural education is indeed the next frontier in American school reform. This report provides important insights and guidance into how charter schools can serve as the Lewis and Clark of rural school reform. It maps out where we need to go and even how to get there, but it is up to state policymakers, community leaders, educators, and parents in individual states to get the work done.

Jamie MacMillan

Executive Director, J.A. and Kathryn Albertson Foundation

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Student achievement results in our nation’s most remote areas look very similar to those in our inner cities—heartbreakingly low. Yet while urban families increasingly have access to a variety of school options, including charter schools, many rural families have just a single school option. There are a mere 785 charter schools across rural America. Just 111 of them serve students in remote rural areas.

It is a common belief that chartering simply doesn’t mesh well with rural communities. To be sure, there are challenges associated with charter schooling in rural areas. But there are also numerous examples of rural charter schools that have done great things for students while also benefiting the larger community. There are many reasons to believe that if chartering is done smartly, it can help even more rural areas.

Policymakers at all levels of government should better understand the opportunities and challenges of rural charter schools. In this report, we examine the policies and practices in five states—Arkansas, Colorado, Georgia, Idaho, and Ohio—to learn how rural charter schooling is working in a variety of contexts. We then identify four key policy recommendations for states with significant rural populations:

- State leaders should design flexible policies that enable communities, districts, state officials, and school operators to jointly determine when and where charter schools might be a useful reform strategy. Too many states have put in place policies that explicitly or implicitly limit the growth of charter schools in rural areas.

- Many rural areas struggle to recruit and retain highly effective educators. The accountability-autonomy bargain of charter schooling offers new opportunities to solve this problem. Policies should provide charter schools with additional flexibility related to teacher and administrator credentialing—either through school-wide waivers from certification requirements or flexible but rigorous alternative routes to certification.
- Policymakers should ensure that rural charter schools have equitable access to funding, including funding for transportation and facilities. Policies should enable rural charter schools to access unutilized and underutilized public assets, including school buildings, municipal facilities, and land.
- Policies should allow rural charter schools to pilot innovative uses of technology, both to bridge the distance between students and their schools and to increase students' access to highly effective teachers.

INTRODUCTION

The typical suburban middle class or affluent family is able to exercise school choice. The parents can relocate to a neighborhood served by a public school that meets their preferences and needs, or they can pay for their children to attend a private school. For a variety of reasons including income and employment, these options are often unavailable to many urban and rural families.

But urban families increasingly have access to a variety of school options, including charter schools. Since its advent in 1991, charter schooling has been predominantly rooted in our cities. As of 2011, 56 percent of American charter schools (2,923 out of 5,228) operated in urban communities.³ The charter school movement has allowed for more innovation and entrepreneurialism in public education; freed educators from long-standing policies, practices, habits, and beliefs that too often tied their hands; allowed for a degree of customization that district schools had not been able to achieve; and spawned networks of effective schools that are expanding and replicating across the country.

Rural families, however, too often have just a single school option. The 2011-12 federal Schools and Staffing Survey indicated that 74 percent of students in urban schools had the option of enrolling in another nearby school but that only 21 percent of rural students had that same ability.⁴ That percentage is even smaller for students in remote rural areas. Underserved city kids have greatly benefited from the options provided by charter schools, but disadvantaged rural kids seldom have access to this same opportunity.

As of 2009–10, there were a mere 785 rural charter schools across America, representing just 16 percent of the national charter schools sector, and most of these schools were located in “rural-fringe” communities, just outside of more populated areas.⁵ But about 1.2 million

students live in “rural-remote” communities, those areas farthest away from larger towns and cities.⁶ Just 111 charter schools across the country are in these areas (and 11 of these are online or “virtual” charter schools).⁷

Underserved city kids have greatly benefited from the options provided by charter schools, but disadvantaged rural kids seldom have access to this same opportunity.

It has been said that chartering simply doesn’t mesh well with rural communities. Following the launch of the federal Race to the Top grant competition in 2009, states with large rural populations objected to the preference given to states with charter schools. “Charter schools just don’t work for us,” South Dakota State Senator Sandy Jerstad said in 2009.⁸ Around the same time, Montana’s state superintendent of education, Denise Juneau, wrote to Secretary of Education Arne Duncan, “Montana’s rural context and economic status has made it challenging for many communities and the state to support the public schools we currently have,

much less encourage the duplication of infrastructure a charter school would mean in most communities.”⁹

There are too few counterexamples to such views, because charter management organizations, groups that run networks of charter schools, have rarely sought to translate their urban models to rural communities. Just 7 percent of rural charter schools are operated by a charter management organization.¹⁰ Of rural-remote charter schools, only 2 percent are.¹¹

It is clear that rural and urban communities face different challenges, and the prevailing view is that chartering is far better suited to addressing the needs of cities. It’s time to reconsider this view. After all, Maine and Vermont, both predominantly rural states, began leveraging school choice to meet community needs 140 years ago.¹²

We know that chartering can be a useful tool for rural families that want access to high quality schools. The question is, what should policymakers do to enable more charter schools to help drive improvement in rural education while strengthening rural communities? What constraints and opportunities should educators and policymakers bear in mind?

We believe these issues are worth exploring for at least three reasons: First, children have very different interests and needs, so providing a range of education options can help families match their children’s needs with schools that fit. Second, when a public school is persistently underperforming and turnaround efforts haven’t worked, charter schools may be a useful restart button for parents and district leaders.

Third, the growing number of district consolidation efforts, a short supply of teachers, and lengthy student commutes compel us to investigate whether the most remote communities might benefit from the innovative solutions made possible by charter schooling. In particular, when small communities may not be able to sustain a diverse array of schools to meet individual student needs and interests, technology can enable a level of personalization that meets students where they are—providing extra time and support to students who are struggling, translating materials for students learning English, and continuing to challenge those students who are ready to move ahead. Charter schools are in an advantageous position to explore these new instructional models.

In this report, we aim to address these issues by capturing lessons from a broad range of rural communities. We focus on five states with significant rural populations: Arkansas, Colorado, Georgia, Idaho, and Ohio.

These states have diverse rural and charter landscapes. For example, 44 percent of Arkansas's population is rural, compared with 29 percent in Idaho and 14 percent in Colorado.¹³ The average geographic district size in Ohio is sixty-seven square miles, but in Idaho it is 662 square miles.¹⁴ While Colorado's charter school law was ranked by the National Alliance of Public Charter Schools as the fifth-strongest in the nation in January 2014, Idaho's was ranked twentieth, Georgia's twenty-second, Ohio's twenty-eighth, and Arkansas's twenty-ninth.¹⁵ However, rural poverty rates are relatively similar across all five states, ranging from 15 percent in Colorado to 22 percent in Arkansas.¹⁶

Based on our research, three policy areas help illuminate the unique challenges in rural communities and can significantly enhance the potential for positive contributions by charter schooling in rural America: charter school caps, human capital, and funding.

RECOMMENDATIONS

PUBLIC POLICY PRIORITIES FOR SUPPORTING RURAL CHARTER SCHOOLING

Charter School Caps

- Pass charter school laws in the eight states that still don't have them—all of which have significant rural populations.
- Remove all statewide charter school caps.
- End policies that give preference to charters in nonrural areas and thereby indirectly hinder rural charter expansion.
- Develop policies that acknowledge the challenge of opening and operating rural charter schools but that allow charter operators, school districts, and state officials to consider where and when charter schools might be a useful reform strategy.

Human Capital

- Allow rural charter schools to receive school-wide exemptions from teacher certification requirements through processes that balance autonomy and accountability.
- Create alternate routes into the teaching profession, with high but flexible standards for entry.
- Allow diverse alternate route providers, including Teach for America and high performing rural charter schools.
- Create checkpoints to ensure that new and unproven alternate routes are certifying teachers with high potential for success in the classroom.
- Develop policies that allow charter schools to leverage technology to access high-quality online instruction.

Funding

- Provide charter schools with equitable funds, including funding for facilities and transportation.
- Create statewide grant programs to finance charter school facilities and ensure programs address the particular needs of rural charters.
- Make vacant or underutilized publicly held facilities available to rural charter schools.
- Create partnerships with rural charter schools to implement innovations in digital learning and ensure policies are informed by practice.

WHAT IS “RURAL”?

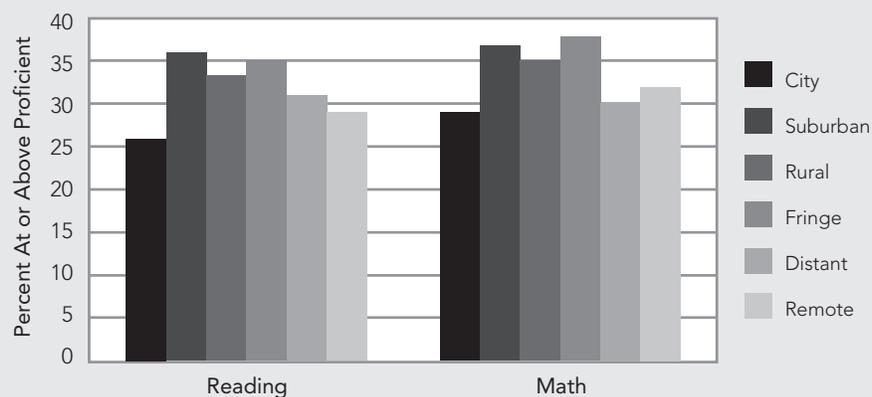
The U.S. Census Bureau defines rural as areas outside of an urban locale (population of fifty thousand or more) or urban cluster (population of 2,500 or more).¹⁷ The National Center for Education Statistics further disaggregates the category into rural-fringe, rural-distant, and rural-remote. Rural-fringe communities are those that are fewer than five miles from an urban area or fewer than 2.5 miles from an urban cluster. At the other end of the spectrum, rural-remote communities are more than twenty-five miles from an urban area or more than ten miles from an urban cluster.¹⁸ Unfortunately, discussions of rural education generally combine all three subcategories, thereby losing sight of the many important differences within the expansive rural category.

For example—among a sample of all public school students nationwide—scores on the 2011 National Assessment of Educational Progress shows proficiency rates of rural students falling somewhere between those of urban and suburban students. Twenty-nine percent of all urban eighth graders and 37 percent of all suburban eighth graders were proficient in math on the 2011 NAEP, compared with 35 percent of rural eighth graders. Twenty-six percent of all urban eighth graders and 36 percent of all suburban eighth graders were proficient in reading, compared with 33 percent of rural eighth graders.¹⁹

But when the data are disaggregated by fringe-, distant-, and remote-rural students, significant variation emerges. Proficiency rates among rural-fringe students resemble or exceed those of suburban areas. The 1.2 million students in rural-remote schools, however, post proficiency rates of 32 percent in math and 29 percent in reading, closer to urban scores.²⁰

Household income tracks the same way. The percentage of students who qualify for free or reduced-price lunch in rural-fringe communities is approximately 33 percent, virtually the same as in suburban areas (32 percent). But in rural-remote communities, 50 percent of students qualify, almost identical to the rate in urban communities (53 percent).²¹

2011 EIGHTH GRADE NAEP SCORES BY LOCATION



CHARTER SCHOOL CAPS

Charter schooling is not a silver bullet or a quick fix for the challenges facing rural education. But charter schools can do good things for rural students and their communities. They can preserve and rejuvenate the areas they serve and provide a great education to many students.

Some state policies limit the growth of charter schools in general and of rural charter schools in particular. Many such provisions fail to recognize charter schools' potential to help meet a community's unique needs.

The bluntest instrument for inhibiting rural charter schools is a lack of any law authorizing charter schools. Montana, North Dakota, South Dakota, Nebraska, West Virginia, Kentucky, Alabama, and Vermont are the only states remaining without a charter school law.²² According to the 2010 census, seven of these eight states are among the top ten for percentage of population living in rural areas (see Figure 1).²³

The five states studied for this report—Arkansas, Colorado, Georgia, Idaho, and Ohio—all have charter school laws and policies that ostensibly allow both for opening new charter schools and for converting existing schools into charters. Three of the five states—Colorado, Georgia, and Idaho—do not have statewide caps; while Arkansas and Ohio both have caps, neither cap is currently constraining growth.²⁵

A closer look unearths an even wider range of limits on charter growth in rural areas. For instance, Idaho's charter school law states, "No whole school district may be converted to a charter district or any configuration which includes all schools as public charter schools."²⁶

FIGURE 1

America's Most Rural States and Charter Schools²⁴

Rank by percent rural	State	Percent of population in rural areas	Number of charter schools	Number of rural charter schools
1	Maine	61	0	0
2	Vermont	61	0	0
3	West Virginia	51	0	0
4	Mississippi	51	0	0
5	Montana	44	0	0
6	Arkansas	44	30	8
7	South Dakota	43	0	0
8	Kentucky	42	0	0
9	Alabama	41	0	0
10	North Dakota	40	0	0

Note: Number of charter schools/rural charter schools refers to the 2010–11 school year. Maine and Mississippi have since passed charter laws.

This amounts to an absolute prohibition against charter school conversions in the sixteen of Idaho's 115 school districts that operate just one school. Most of these districts are in the most remote areas of the state.²⁷ It also casts doubt on whether a newly created charter could be started in any of these districts; the specter of parents choosing the charter school over the district school, thereby threatening the district school's future, could preclude the charter's approval.

This might prevent a rural community from maintaining a local charter school when a state-led district consolidation effort is under way—similar to what took place in Paradox Valley, Colorado. When its local district school was closed in 1999, the Paradox Valley community founded the Paradox Valley Charter School to prevent its students from enduring long commutes to the nearest district-run school, and to maintain the community's history and culture.

“During the 2010–11 school year,” according to the National Association of Public Charter Schools, “Paradox served 54 students ranging from pre-kindergarten to eighth grade, with nearly seventy percent of Paradox students eligible for free or reduced-price lunch.”²⁸ The charter school has outperformed the local district and state proficiency averages for the past three years in reading, and for two of the past three years in math.²⁹

In Ohio, the charter school law prioritizes start-up charter schools in urban areas and limits charters to “challenged districts.” This includes Lucas County (Toledo and surrounding areas), home of the state’s original charter school pilot program, the “big eight” urban districts (among them, Cleveland, Columbus, and Dayton), districts rated by the state’s accountability program as “academic watch” or “academic emergency,” or a school district rated in the bottom 5 percent for performance in the state. Altogether, this list includes just forty of 615 school districts.³⁰

Of the 293 rural school districts in Ohio, only five are designated as “challenged” and are therefore eligible locations for charter schools.³¹ The legislative intent behind these geographic restrictions may have been to prioritize school options for students in the lowest performing urban districts. Its effect, however, is to limit the public school options available to rural families.

Policymakers should remove explicit caps and other, indirect limiting mechanisms and instead establish frameworks that provide the flexibility and discretion necessary to make case-by-case decisions on how charter schooling can be used to help rural families and communities.

This law might prevent the opening of superb charter schools like those operated by the Knowledge Is Power Program (KIPP) in Helena and Blytheville, Arkansas. Located in the Mississippi Delta, the first school opened with sixty-five students in fifth grade, and now four KIPP Delta schools serve 1,200 students in grades K–12, posting proficiency rates that are quickly closing the achievement gap.³² KIPP Delta has become a force in revitalizing the community. It constructed the first new building in the downtown area in decades and now enrolls some students who voluntarily commute an hour each way to attend its schools.³³

Other states have provisions that limit rural charter schools through other means. Maine’s relatively new law constrains charter school growth by limiting enrollment to “5% to 10% of the resident school district’s students per grade level in each of the first three years that a school is open.”³⁴ This

disproportionately inhibits the creation of rural charter schools: if the district has a small student population, the 5 to 10 percent limit could preclude a charter school from enrolling enough students to become financially viable.

Oklahoma's law prevents charter schools from opening unless the district has an average daily enrollment of at least five thousand students and is located in a county of at least five hundred thousand. It also states, "An entire school district may not become a charter school site."³⁵

Wyoming's statute explicitly states, "No charter shall be granted under this article if it is determined that its sole purpose is to avoid consolidation or closure of any school or district."³⁶ These provisions disproportionately affect rural districts with small student populations, as rural districts are the most likely to face consolidation, which can have a profoundly negative impact on a community.

These restrictions could have prevented the opening of the Upper Carmen Charter School in Idaho. Carmen, Idaho, is a rural community, and its charter school, founded by a husband and wife team, serves eighty-six students in grades K–8. With a staff of 5.75 full-time teachers and 2.25 aides, students are taught in groups of approximately 30 students in grade ranges of K–3, 4–5, and 6–8.

Terry Ryan, president of the Idaho Charter School Network, writes, "In 2012–13 the school was rated a stellar five out of five stars by the Idaho Department of Education's school-rating system. In fact, Upper Carmen's performance was ranked by the state fifty-seventh out of approximately 700 Idaho schools in 2013."³⁷

But it is also true that chartering can cause challenges. Charter schools can place very real financial pressure on small districts. With diseconomies of scale and high transportation costs, rural districts often find themselves strapped for cash. In a community of one thousand students, even a small charter school enrolling two hundred students would have a substantial and immediate effect on the district's budget.

At the same time, rural communities are small and often tightly knit; the local school is woven into that fabric. If unfamiliar with a community's history and character and unresponsive to its needs and concerns, a charter school could begin to fray that fabric. Policymakers should be mindful of such issues.

However, while the policies outlined above limit rural charter schools in different ways, each one is far too crude an instrument for determining the potential of a rural charter school to address the unmet needs of students.

Policymakers should remove explicit caps and other, indirect limiting mechanisms and instead establish frameworks that provide the flexibility and discretion necessary to make case-by-case decisions on how charter schooling can be used to help rural families and communities.

One key policy could be the creation of a high quality, single purpose, statewide charter authorizer. This would limit the ability of a district to reflexively deny all charter applications submitted to it, opening the door to experimentation. If the authorizing body were properly designed, it could ensure, through smart, prudent practices, that charters wouldn't cause undue harm to districts.

For example, the board of directors of the authorizer should be balanced, including members knowledgeable about and receptive to chartering as well as one or more former rural district superintendents who would be sensitive to the concerns of potential host districts. The charter school law could also require the state department of education to provide a financial impact analysis of each charter applicant on its host district. It could even require as part of the application the signatures of a certain percentage of district parents interested in enrolling their children in the school, and an explanation of how the school would strengthen the community across a number of domains, such as college-going rates and future economic development.

The law might also require that a charter's initial contract renewal pay special attention to the school's impact on the district, including a financial analysis as well as an examination of trends in enrollment and parent satisfaction. This evaluation would help the authorizer determine the school's influence on the community. If the statute also required each charter school to have a statewide open enrollment policy, it would make charters broadly accessible to interested families and also help mitigate a charter school's impact on any one district by allowing it to draw students from a wider area.

The statute, or the authorizer's application process, might also encourage the charter to minimize any detrimental impact on the district—for example, by agreeing to limit its enrollment or grades served or to provide only certain courses, thereby allowing students to take some classes in the charter while remaining in the district school for others. While most existing charter laws would need to be amended to allow for this last option, such a change might assuage the concerns of rural districts as well as allow for collaboration and shared services to meet the needs of at-risk student populations, such as those with disabilities, English language learners, and low-income students.

Another option would be for the state to help finance charters established in remote rural areas. In sparsely populated locations with very few schools, a district's loss of students to a charter could

have a significant financial impact on the district's budget.

A charter law could require the state to provide transitional "impact aid" to rural-remote districts that approve a new charter school or that have funds withheld when a statewide authorizer approves a charter school that subsequently enrolls some of the district's former students. The amount of impact aid might equal 90 percent of the district's lost funding in the charter school's first year, 65 percent during its second, and 35 percent during its third.

Finally, there may be instances when a district would *want* to create a charter school. For example, if certain state laws and regulations made running a school as a charter more conducive

Charter schooling has the potential to help address the challenges of rural education, but it must adapt and respond to the unique circumstances of different communities and their financial and political realities.

to improved student learning and/or more efficient, a district might choose to convert one or more of its schools to charter status. If faced with consolidating a school in a rural community, a district might give the community the option of opening a charter school in its place. If a district decided that an online or blended approach would help improve student learning and reduce costs, it might utilize the charter law to implement such innovations.

Even though a district might wish to use the charter law in these ways, it may not have the expertise and capacity required to be a quality authorizer. So the local board of education might benefit from a statute that allows the district to authorize a new school and then delegate the monitoring role to a statewide agency. In the case of converting an existing school, the local school board might serve as the school's governing board and enter into a performance contract with a statewide authorizer.

Charter schooling has the potential to help address the challenges of rural education, but it must adapt and respond to the unique circumstances of different communities and their financial and political realities. Rather than prohibit or discourage rural charter schools altogether, policymakers should consider statutes that allow room for these decisions to be informed by the context of rural communities.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- Pass charter school laws in remaining eight states with significant rural populations.
- Remove statewide charter school caps.
- End policies that give preference to charters in nonrural areas, thereby indirectly hindering rural charter expansion.
- Develop policies that acknowledge the challenge of opening and operating rural charter schools, but that allow charter operators, school districts, and state officials to consider where and when charter schools might be a useful reform strategy.
- Require charter schools to have statewide open enrollment policies.

STATE URBANICITY AND CHARTER SCHOOL LAWS

Though charter schooling wasn't created exclusively for cities, urban areas quickly embraced the idea, and have used it to create thousands of schools. Whether intentional or not, state governments have crafted charter laws that reflect their urbanicity.

As Figure 2 shows, every state that earned an "A" from the Center for Education Reform has one of America's fifty largest cities; six of the eight states without charter laws do *not* have one of America's fifty largest cities. When CER's letter grades are translated into a four-point scale, charter laws in states with one of the fifty largest cities average nearly a full grade point higher than those without one of those cities.

FIGURE 2

States with and without Large Cities and Charter School Law Strength

Ranked by the National Alliance for Public Charter Schools and the Center for Education Reform

States w/ at least one of U.S. 50 largest cities	NAPCS Rank	CER Letter Grade	States w/o one of U.S. 50 largest cities	NAPCS Rank	CER Letter Grade
Minnesota	1	A	Maine	4	C
Indiana	2	A	Mississippi	14	F
Louisiana	3	C	South Carolina	15	B
Colorado	5	B	Delaware	17	C
Washington	6	C	Idaho	20	B
New York	7	B	Hawaii	21	C
Florida	8	B	Utah	25	B
California	9	B	Missouri	26	B
District of Columbia	10	A	Arkansas	29	D
Massachusetts	11	C	New Hampshire	30	D
New Mexico	12	C	New Jersey	32	C
Nevada	13	C	Connecticut	33	D
Arizona	16	B	Rhode Island	34	D
Michigan	18	A	Wyoming	37	D
North Carolina	19	C	Alaska	40	D
Georgia	22	C	Iowa	41	F
Texas	23	C	Alabama	No law	No law
Pennsylvania	24	C	Montana	No law	No law
Oregon	27	C	North Dakota	No law	No law
Ohio	28	C	South Dakota	No law	No law
Illinois	31	C	Vermont	No law	No law
Tennessee	35	C	West Virginia	No law	No law
Oklahoma	36	C			
Wisconsin	38	C			
Virginia	39	F			
Kansas	42	F			
Maryland	43	D			
Kentucky	No law	No law			
Nebraska	No law	No law			

STATE URBANICITY AND CHARTER SCHOOL LAWS *(continued)*

Just as telling is the status of charter laws in the nation’s most rural states. As shown in Figure 3, seven of the nation’s ten most rural states have no charter school law. Arkansas and Mississippi have laws earning a D and F from CER, respectively. Maine, whose charter law was passed in 2011, is the only predominantly rural state with a relatively strong charter law; NAPCS rates it as the nation’s fourth-strongest even though it includes a provision limiting the enrollment of a rural charter during its first three years of operation.

FIGURE 3
Rural States and Charter School Laws

10 Most Rural U.S. States	NAPCS Rank	CER Letter Grade
Maine	4	C
Mississippi	14	F
Arkansas	29	D
Vermont	No law	No law
West Virginia	No law	No law
Montana	No law	No law
South Dakota	No law	No law
Kentucky	No law	No law
Alabama	No law	No law
North Dakota	No law	No law

HUMAN CAPITAL

If charter schools are to be a viable reform strategy in rural communities, we must help support their success. One of the most significant challenges for all rural schools is recruiting and retaining teachers.

Scholar David Stuit writes in a recent study for the National Alliance for Public Charter Schools, “Rural school leaders cite proximity to higher paying districts, geographic isolation, and low salaries as the greatest challenges to teacher recruitment. 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.”³⁸

Policymakers would do well to consider how constraints on human capital can be addressed in order to help rural charter schools succeed, and what lessons might be learned from their experience. First, reducing barriers to entry in this field could expand the pool of teaching candidates. Second, technology can be leveraged to provide greater access to high quality instruction.

REDUCING BARRIERS TO ENTRY

Rural-fringe geographies, within commuting distance from a nearby urban area, struggle to compete with nearby suburbs for high-quality teachers. Charter schools in these areas are in an opportune position to develop a creative autonomy-accountability bargain related to teacher certification.

Recent research suggests that teacher certification requirements are not a strong predictor of a teacher's ability to improve student achievement.³⁹ Some national experts on teacher effectiveness have responded by advocating for higher standards for those entering the teaching profession. Higher minimum GPAs, better Praxis scores, and longer student-teaching placements may help ensure that only the most promising candidates make it into the classroom.⁴⁰

Others have responded with proposals to open the profession further. Chester E. Finn Jr. and Marci Kanstoroom have proposed that “boosting teacher quality involves easing back on regulations, devolving personnel decisions to individual schools, and then holding those schools accountable for producing results as gauged by their pupils’ academic achievement.”⁴¹ But such proposals have been offered for decades without much interest from state legislatures.

In rural areas, higher barriers to entry further constrain an already limited supply of teachers and could prevent schools from using local talent to fill staffing positions.

The unique characteristics of rural charter schools offer an opportunity to consider these issues in a new light. By excluding the least promising teacher candidates, more rigorous certification standards could theoretically lead to a more effective teaching corps in geographies with an excess supply of candidates.

Unfortunately, more burdensome requirements could serve as a disincentive for individuals with experience in another field contemplating a second career in education.⁴² This is likely to have a disproportionately negative impact in rural areas, where teacher candidates are such a scarce resource. In rural areas, higher barriers to entry further constrain an already limited

supply of teachers and could prevent schools from using local talent to fill staffing positions.

Charter schools—and the “grand bargain” between autonomy and accountability on which they are based—could help square this circle.

Smart flexibility in teacher certification requirements would allow rural charter schools to hire teachers who possess subject matter expertise and other important skills but lack a background in teaching. Supplemented with a strong accountability framework, policymakers would have levers at their disposal to ensure charter schools use this flexibility responsibly.

Two strategies for balancing autonomy and accountability deserve consideration: school-wide waivers from teacher certification requirements and alternate routes to certification.

Exemptions from Teacher Certification

Of the forty-two states with charter school laws, only Arizona, Oklahoma, and Louisiana completely exempt charter schools from the state’s teacher certification requirements. Neither Ohio nor Idaho allows for any waivers from teacher certification requirements (though Ohio regulations allow an uncertified individual to teach up to twelve hours per week). Arkansas, Colorado, and Georgia all provide fairly streamlined processes for requesting school-wide waivers from teacher certification requirements.⁴³

Colorado’s waiver process has several characteristics that, if deployed strategically, could help foster the growth of high quality rural charter schools. In Colorado, each charter school may submit a teacher certification waiver request to its authorizer and then to the Colorado Department of Education for final approval. While the process appears to be fairly perfunctory, with virtually every request granted, it includes three procedural checkpoints that theoretically could be used to balance the flexibility charter schools need in order to pursue creative staffing solutions with appropriate accountability to ensure this freedom is used wisely.

First, authorizers have discretion in granting waiver requests. This could allow them to grant waivers based on the strength of an application or an applicant’s past experience operating successful charter schools.

Second, each charter school must submit a “Rationale and Replacement Plan” describing the reason for the request and how the school will implement effective human capital practices that meet the intent of the law. This could help authorizers and the state department of education ensure that the flexibility is being used for the intended purpose.

Third, all waivers last only as long as the school’s charter contract. At each renewal, the authorizer could revoke the certification waiver if the school is not performing adequately. The school could then submit a new waiver request after it completes a period of proven effectiveness.⁴⁴

Rural charter schools could benefit enormously from these types of exemptions, which help address persistent teacher shortages while providing high levels of accountability. Procedural checkpoints could help ensure that specific freedoms and accountabilities are negotiated between a school and its authorizer on an individual basis.

Alternate Routes to Certification

Alternative route programs provide talented individuals a smoother path into teaching, and they have been shown to produce results comparable to traditional preparation paths. While rural states such as Montana, Nebraska, South Dakota, and Wyoming have some of the weakest

alternate routes in the country, Arkansas’s alternate route program has two features that might greatly benefit rural charter schools.⁴⁶

First, Arkansas’s alternate routes create a high but flexible standard for potential candidates. Candidates must prove subject matter competency to be eligible for an alternate route, but they can do so by passing an assessment, rather than possessing a major or minor in the subject they wish to teach.⁴⁷ Alternate routes must be sufficiently flexible to attract candidates with varied backgrounds and sufficiently rigorous to ensure candidates possess the necessary skills to be successful in the classroom. Arkansas’s method attempts to accomplish both these goals, creating a viable pipeline of nontraditional candidates for rural charter schools.

Second, Teach for America receives a special dispensation for rules governing alternate routes.⁴⁸ Under these guidelines, rural charter schools can partner with Teach for America, which has national recruitment and placement operations across the country.⁴⁹ This has proved immensely useful to the KIPP Delta schools in rural Arkansas.⁵⁰

Rural charter schools in Arkansas could benefit even more, however, if the state ventured beyond a Teach for America–specific carve-out and allowed high performing rural charter schools to launch their own certification programs, like High Tech High has done in San Diego and Yes Prep has done in Houston. A grow-your-own approach could help rural charter schools, especially those in remote areas, recruit nontraditional candidates; it could also help retain teachers, by making program eligibility contingent upon a commitment to spend five years at the school.

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Similar to existing alternate routes, new and unproved school-based certification programs would require front-end standards for potential candidates. Whether through the charter authorization process or a program accreditation process, school-based programs would also require thoughtful measures of accountability to ensure they are producing teachers with the ability to be successful in the classroom.

LEVERAGING TECHNOLOGY

Lowering the barriers to entering the teaching profession may work in rural-fringe communities, which have some access to talent pools in nearby suburban and urban communities. This strategy might even help a bit in rural-remote communities, where some local expertise may be going untapped.

But the reality of rural-remote communities is that recruiting teachers from elsewhere is extraordinarily difficult, and there may not be sufficient capacity locally to fill teaching roles, even with flexibility in certification. In these cases, technology might provide a valuable tool for rural charter schools.

Consider a school model that the Clayton Christensen Institute for Disruptive Innovation calls “enriched virtual.” Students spend some time attending classes at a brick and mortar school building and some time learning remotely through online instruction.⁵¹ In a “flex” model, students attend a brick and mortar school, but most of the instruction is provided online.⁵²

These models might provide charter schools with the flexibility to creatively staff their schools with certified teachers onsite and online, supplemented by other staff for counseling, supervision, and other student needs that require face-to-face interactions.

A remote-rural charter school might not want a fully online instructional program, which depends so heavily on parental supervision for younger students and on self-direction and discipline among older students. Instead, its students might attend a brick and mortar building where a cadre of proctors or counselors provides supervision, and teachers provide synchronous online instruction (whereby the teacher and the student interact in real time over the Internet). This school design would have the benefit of hiring locally for classroom proctors and face-to-face interaction with adults in the local community, while leveraging online instruction with high quality virtual teachers.

Two human capital policies would help ensure the success of this model. First, state policymakers should guarantee reciprocity in teacher certification, meaning an efficient and streamlined process for certified teachers from one state seeking to earn credentials in another state. A recent report from the International Association for K–12 Online Learning concluded, “Mutual understandings and reciprocity across states so that teaching certificates and/or background checks can be accepted from one state to another would significantly assist the ability to place teachers in virtual programs from across the nation.”⁵³

Second, state policymakers should ensure teachers can serve as the “teacher of record” in more than one district, so that multiple charter schools (or district schools) can share online teachers. This may be particularly important for small rural charter schools, where an online teacher could conceivably teach one period of calculus in four different charter schools in the same day. Policymakers should consider how a “teacher of record” is defined in state law and ensure that unclear or outdated definitions do not inadvertently restrict teachers’ ability to serve as the teacher of record across multiple schools and campuses.⁵⁴

Digital Learning Now, a digital education policy group based in Washington, DC, grades states on their digital learning policies. Of the five states studied here, the organization gives four of them grades at or below a “D+.” Georgia receives a “B.” However, all of the states score well on their policies around quality instruction, including the policies for reciprocity and teachers of record.⁵⁵

Online learning is playing an increasing role in rural education, and access to top notch teachers is just one way innovations in technology can help. As discussed in the next section, technology also has a great deal of potential for rural charter schools challenged by the time and cost of transporting students between home and school.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- Allow rural charter schools to receive school-wide exemptions from teacher certification requirements through processes that balance autonomy and accountability.
- Create alternate routes with high but flexible standards for entry.
- Allow diverse alternate route providers including Teach for America and grow-your-own programs at high performing rural charter schools.
- Create checkpoints to ensure that new and unproved alternate routes are certifying teachers with high potential for success in the classroom.
- Develop policies that allow charter schools to leverage technology to access high quality online instruction.

EFFECTS OF FEDERAL POLICY ON RURAL CHARTER SCHOOLS

National School Lunch Program

Though created to support children in poverty, the federal requirements for participation in the National School Lunch Program significantly disadvantage small rural charter schools. Overall in rural areas, 55 percent of eligible students opt out of participation.⁵⁶ In Idaho, a number of charters do not participate in the National School Lunch Program, including the Upper Carmen Charter School, discussed earlier.⁵⁷ More than 65 percent of charter schools in Idaho lack the kitchen facilities required for participation in the program, meaning they must opt out.⁵⁸ A lack of proper facilities as well as burdensome record keeping and reporting requirements prevent rural schools from fully benefitting from this federal program.

The federal government has attempted to reduce the administrative burden on schools. Provisions in the law reduce the frequency of certifying eligibility and the “Community Eligibility Option” allows schools to substitute social service-based indicators for traditional income-based eligibility.⁵⁹ The benefits of these provisions are still unclear; the first is proving cost effective only for schools with 75 percent or more program eligibility, and the Community Eligibility Option was first implemented nationwide only in the 2013–14 school year.⁶⁰

Title I Funding Formula.

Funding for Title I is distributed through several grant programs, including the Targeted Grant formula, which disadvantages small districts. Under Targeted Grants, districts with higher numbers of eligible students are given a higher weight than those with higher percentages of eligible students.⁶¹ If District A had 360 students eligible for Title I, representing 30 percent of the student body, it would receive less funding than District B, with thirty-six thousand eligible students representing 3 percent of the student body.⁶² In 2010, Title I Targeted Grants provided more funding per pupil to urban districts than to rural districts in all but six states.⁶³

Federal Funding for Rural Schools.

While targeted to help meet the needs of rural communities, rural charter schools face two distinct challenges when applying for federal funding through competitive grant programs such as the U.S. Department of Agriculture Community Facilities Grants and Loans Program or the Rural Low-Income Schools Program. First, a charter school must be its own Local Education Agency (LEA) in order to apply for these programs. Rural charters that exist as part of a district under some state laws are eligible to receive funding only if the district itself applies.⁶⁴ Second, schools with small budgets, whether charter, rural, or both, do not have the same time, energy, and funding to dedicate to the application process for competitive federal grants. Rural charter schools have benefited from these programs, but too often find that they lack independent access to supplemental funding and that many competitive grants are focused on size and scale.

CHARTER SCHOOL FUNDING

Policymakers who recognize the potential for charter schools to be a positive force in rural education must also consider a number of financial issues, including the fact that many rural districts face funding challenges of their own.⁶⁵ Policymakers should address the inequitable funding that stymies potentially successful charter schools from opening and operating, while being sensitive to the profound effect even a single charter school can have on a district.

Charter schools across the country operate, on average, with 19.2 percent less funding than their traditional district peers.⁶⁶ Funding varies between states, but Colorado's charter schools receive an average of 16 percent less than district schools while Georgia's and Idaho's charters typically receive about three out of every four dollars their district counterparts receive.⁶⁷

Rural schools face financial challenges of their own. With lower average enrollments, they encounter diseconomies of scale as they attempt to spread the cost of facilities, transportation, administration, and instruction over a smaller revenue stream.⁶⁸

Adequate funding is absolutely essential for rural charter schools to deliver on their potential.

When you combine these two sets of challenges, the financial constraints on rural charter schools become clear. Adequate funding is absolutely essential for rural charter schools to deliver on their potential.

Funding inequality between district schools and charter schools is mostly due to charters' limited access to local funding.⁶⁹ A district is able to levy taxes to raise local revenue, but most states exclude charter schools from receiving these funds.⁷⁰

In Colorado, district-authorized charter schools can legally propose a special tax levy, but many are dependent on the local district to submit it on their behalf.⁷¹ Nationwide, rural schools receive approximately 40 percent of their funding from local sources.⁷² Charter schools generally have too little access to these funds.

To provide rural charter schools with equitable, adequate funding, states should ensure that charters are able to access local sources of revenue and that funding truly follows each student to the school of his or her choice.

Too few charter schools receive financial support for transportation or facilities, and these issues must also be addressed.

FACILITIES

One of the greatest problems faced by rural charter schools is their need to spend operating funds on facilities, whether in the form of rent, lease, construction, or rehabilitation. Most states provide zero or insufficient financial assistance to charters for facilities acquisition and maintenance. Many charter schools instead rely on operating funds and private philanthropy and often must settle for temporary and/or inadequate facilities. In Colorado, charter schools spend an average of \$480 per student of operating revenue on facilities costs. In Idaho, charter schools spend approximately \$550, while Georgia charter schools spend \$631. Even then, charter facilities are considerably smaller than district facilities and often lack adequate gym space and kitchen facilities.⁷³

While more acute for rural charter schools, the lack of adequate facilities plagues charter schools in all geographies. States have low-hanging fruit if they hope to benefit rural, suburban, and urban charter schools. First, states could enact policies that would allow charters to finance their facilities at more favorable rates. In Idaho, for instance, charter schools can access tax-exempt debt through the Idaho Housing and Finance Association.⁷⁴ Colorado law provides a mechanism for limited credit enhancement for eligible, highly rated bond transactions for charter schools by using the state's Moral Obligation Program to back up to \$400 million in debt. This policy significantly reduces the borrowing costs for charters. Though the ability to borrow for capital projects is helpful, it only delays the issue: charters eventually need to pay back the debt, and they are still provided insufficient, inequitable operating dollars.

Second, states could provide charters with a funding stream specifically to support facilities. Colorado law provides a per pupil charter facilities funding program. For fiscal year 2013, the state appropriated \$6 million in capital construction funds to qualified charter schools on a per pupil basis. Beginning in 2014, Idaho will provide a \$1.4 million fund for charter school

facilities, providing each charter school with “20 percent of the money spent, per pupil, on bond issues and levies that pay for traditional public school buildings.”⁷⁵ Unfortunately, this legislation amounts to approximately \$115 per charter school student in year one—far short of the average \$550 per student charter schools currently spend on facilities—and maxes out at just 50 percent of what districts receive from bonds and levies.⁷⁶

Both policies are small steps in the right direction for charter schooling. But further action is required to make rural charter schools a truly viable reform strategy.

Colorado has probably had the greatest success supporting charter school facilities. Established in 2008, Colorado’s Building Excellent Schools Today (BEST) leverages revenue from the state lottery and more than \$60 million annually in revenue from the School Trust Lands to support schools’ capital expenses.⁷⁷ Colorado law also created the Charter School Matching Moneys Loan Program, which provides state loans to qualified schools (that is, investment-grade schools) to meet any required matches under BEST.

According to its 2012 legislative report, the program had made 159 investments, as well as grant payments of nearly \$315 million. Many of these awards have been to charter schools.⁷⁸ Because the grant award process prioritizes schools in poor areas and those in the worst facilities, the program has been a boon for rural charter schools in Colorado.

Another promising policy that could be adapted to meet the needs of rural charter schools is making available for charter use vacant or underutilized public facilities. A 2012 survey of charter schools found that just 25 percent occupied a building owned by a district; an additional 5 percent occupied buildings owned by the state or another governmental entity.⁷⁹ While no comparable data exists on *rural* charter schools’ access to public facilities, anecdotal accounts suggest that the numbers are even lower. Yet public facilities—district, municipal, or state—are financed by taxpayer dollars and, when underutilized, should be available to all public schools, including charters.

Under current law, a district in Idaho may provide charter schools with “surplus, district-owned property,” but it is under no obligation to do so. In comparison, Georgia requires districts to make unused facilities available to charters at no lease cost, but only to charters authorized locally. Arkansas law gives charter schools the “right of first refusal” to rent an unused public school building in its district at fair market value, but “the district is not required to lease to an open enrollment charter school if an offer higher than fair market value is offered by an[other] entity.” The Ohio statute is, generally, the strongest. It requires a district to lease and sell unused buildings to charter schools at or below the appraised market value.⁸⁰

State policymakers should make a broader spectrum of vacant public assets available to rural charter schools.

These policies should be adjusted in two important ways. First, for the benefit of all charter schools, state policymakers should clarify laws to ensure vacant facilities are made available as intended. Second, for rural communities where vacant school buildings are bound to be less common, state policymakers should make a broader spectrum of vacant public assets available to rural charter schools.

For many states with extant policies, revisions are necessary to ensure they are implemented as intended. In Ohio, the general counsel to the Columbus School District stated in regard to charter requests for facilities access, “The district is under no obligation to accept any of the bids. . . . If it rejects all bids, the district can enter into a contract sale at a negotiated price with any buyer.”⁸¹

In Georgia, districts have also largely avoided leasing facilities to local charters. According to a report from the Georgia Charter Schools Association, “through the 2010–2011 school years . . . only 25 percent of charter schools have been able to gain access to unused space.”⁸²

Despite the intentions of state policymakers, districts have proved adept at circumventing legislative intent and refusing charter school use of vacant district facilities. The instinct for self-preservation may lead rural districts to resist these policies and inhibit a charter school’s ability to operate. In other cases, districts may save money by offloading vacant buildings and their associated costs. Either way, a charter school’s impact on a rural district’s finances should be examined carefully prior to charter approval and not left to fester in disputes over available facilities.

In addition, state policymakers can broaden the range of vacant public assets available. Rural communities in the five states studied here have, on average, grown in recent decades.⁸³ Existing school facilities may already be at full capacity, and vacant school buildings may be few and far between. As such, vacant or underutilized municipal buildings or publicly owned lots could be made available.

In Idaho, for instance, the Department of Lands has put four buildings up for auction in rural communities in recent years—one previously used by the Department of Health and Welfare and three previously used by the Department of Fish and Game.⁸⁴ The Arkansas Department of Lands had numerous properties forfeited to the state for failure to pay real estate taxes. Many are located in rural communities.⁸⁵ States may also consider making state-held land available for a land lease or similar arrangements to allow rural charter schools to build new structures.

TRANSPORTATION

Rural schools face significant challenges in transporting children between their homes and their schools. Aimee Howley and Craig Howley of Ohio University found, “Rural schoolchildren were more likely than their suburban counterparts to have bus rides of 30 minutes or longer. Their rides also tended to be more arduous, traversing poorer roads and more hilly or mountainous terrain than those experienced by suburban students.”⁸⁶

A 2001 study found that 85 percent of rural students had one-way bus rides of more than 30 minutes; one in four had one-way bus rides of more than 60 minutes.⁸⁷ In a 2000 study of transportation costs in rural areas, Kieran Killeen and John Sipple of Cornell University found that rural districts spend twice what urban districts spend per pupil on transportation.⁸⁸ In 2011, districts enrolling fewer than three thousand students spent \$602 per pupil on transportation; districts enrolling more than fifty thousand students spent \$431 per pupil.⁸⁹ Both time and cost create enormous challenges for rural charter schools.

There are three primary avenues for addressing this challenge. The first is for state statutes to provide equitable operating funding to charter schools so that they may independently arrange for transportation. The second is to require that local districts provide equal transportation to the charter schools within their boundaries. These options have the potential to reduce costs for charters and ensure that students in rural charter schools have equitable access to transportation to and from school. A third avenue is to leverage technology to provide virtual instruction to students, reducing the cost and time required for transportation by bringing instruction to a student’s home.

In Georgia, local districts can share services and funding, but they are under no obligation to do so. The law states, “Where feasible and services are provided, funds for transportation, food-service programs, and construction projects shall also be distributed to the local charter schools.”⁹⁰ As Meagan Batdorff writes in a study for Ball State University, “The law’s language for the distribution of local revenues to start-up charter schools still leaves problematic room for interpretation. For one, a clear definition of ‘local’ revenues is not provided and since the law states that local districts will distribute capital funds ‘where feasible,’ it is our assumption that local revenues are not inclusive of capital or debt service. The local funding streams also are not included in the state’s accounting system of local revenues.”⁹¹ Given the enormous cost of busing students across long distances in rural communities, this creates a significant financial burden for charter schools.

In Ohio, statute requires districts to provide transportation for all charter school students, but carves out an exception for students who live more than thirty minutes away from their schools. Ohio districts can also refuse to provide transportation if they deem it “impractical.”⁹² In these cases, students receive a voucher of minimal value to use toward paying their own way.⁹³ This exception is more likely to affect students enrolled in rural charter schools than in urban charter schools—another key example of a subtle policy that has the clear effect of disadvantaging the growth of rural charters.

In Idaho, the state provides limited transportation funding to charter schools. Eligibility for transportation funding is limited to students who live more than 1.5 miles and fewer than fifteen miles from school.⁹⁴ The charter school must provide the state with documentation of the students’ eligibility, and the state reimburses the school for just 60 percent of the estimated amount. Since reimbursement is not made until July for the previous school year, charter schools that must front the cost during the school year face a major cash flow challenge. This is especially troubling for new charters, which also confront a wide array of start-up costs.⁹⁵

Transportation is a huge cost for rural schools, both charter and district. Policies that place limits on the ability of charter school students to access school transportation inhibit the development of new rural charter schools. Charter schools can also work creatively to address the issue. The Upper Carmen Charter School, in Idaho, has established centralized pick-up and drop-off points where parents and school busses meet each other halfway, dividing travel costs and time between the two.⁹⁶

Rural schools across the country have pioneered innovative approaches for how technology can help bridge the distances between students, teachers, and school.

TECHNOLOGY

Technology can also be a crucial tool for reducing the need, and cost, for transportation. In 2008, nearly six in ten rural districts enrolled students in online courses, compared with 37 percent of urban districts.⁹⁷ Rural schools across the country have pioneered innovative approaches for how technology can help bridge the distances between students, teachers, and school.

In Arkansas, for instance, the Hector School District has equipped one bus to serve as a mobile classroom. According to the Center for Digital Education, “With computer screens mounted to the ceiling, earphone jacks, and wireless Internet access,” students can use their commute time to complete homework assignments, listen to virtual lectures, or videoconference with their teachers.⁹⁸ In Idaho, 38

school districts and nine charter schools implemented a four-day week in 2013.⁹⁹ Digital instruction could provide a valuable supplement for districts exploring this option.

Another example is the Idaho Distance Education Academy (I-DEA). The Whitepine Joint School District in Idaho is the only district in the state to have chartered a statewide virtual school, originally founded as a way to recruit home-school students back to the public system. I-DEA now

Blended learning, through which students receive some instruction online and some in a brick and mortar building, provides rural schools with real challenges but also with valuable opportunities.

serves 825 students in grades K–12. The school enrolls students from across the state and complements its virtual environment with three brick and mortar education resource centers.

Most of the school’s teachers are based at these centers, where students can go for science labs, testing, and a small number of face-to-face courses. The charter school earned five stars on the Idaho Department of Education’s ranking system. Tom Vander Ark writes that, in high school grades, “Almost 80% of I-DEA students graduate with at least one college course and around 20% complete an associate’s degree with their high school diploma.”¹⁰⁰ After several years of modest growth, the school has met Adequate Yearly Progress targets

for the past two years and is part of an elite cohort of schools testing strategies to boost college enrollment as part of the Albertson Foundation’s “Go-On School” project.

Blended learning, through which students receive some instruction online and some in a brick and mortar building, provides rural schools with real challenges but also with valuable opportunities—flexible learning schedules, greater access to course content, and potential cost savings in transportation. The current partnership between forty-seven Idaho schools and the online Khan Academy (funded by the Albertson Foundation and managed by Northwest Nazarene University) is exploring how blended learning personalizes instruction to meet the specific needs of each student.¹⁰¹ As discussed in the previous section, blended schools can also create unique benefits by providing access to high-quality online teachers.

Rural charter schools are in an opportune position to tackle these challenges and pioneer new solutions. Proponents of digital education will readily acknowledge that it is much more complex than submitting a purchase order for student iPads. It requires carefully staged implementation, thoughtful support for teachers, frequent feedback from stakeholders, and clear expectations and timelines for achieving results. Charter schools have the flexibility to try new approaches and the independence to break from old habits. They can be essential thought partners in identifying the most promising innovations in technology and erecting a policy framework informed by practice.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- Provide charter schools with equitable funds, including funding for facilities and transportation.
- Enact policies that would allow charters to finance their facilities at more favorable rates.
- Provide robust funding streams specifically to support charter school facilities.
- Create state-wide grant programs similar to Colorado's BEST, but provide preference and weighting in favor of rural charter schools.
- Make vacant or underutilized publicly held facilities and assets of all kinds available to charter schools.
- Either provide equitable transportation funding for charter schools or require districts to provide equitable transportation to charter school students.
- Support rural charter schools in pioneering innovations in how technology can bridge the time and space between home and school.
- Leverage the autonomy and independence of charter schools to identify best practices and inform digital learning policy.

FIVE KEY TAKEAWAYS FOR POLICYMAKERS

REPLACE BARRIERS TO GROWTH WITH SMART, FLEXIBLE POLICIES

Charter school growth is limited in rural states and in rural districts. The eight states that have yet to pass charter school legislation each have significant rural populations that could benefit from high quality school options. Many states also have indirect limits on charter school growth in rural areas. These barriers hinder charter schools' ability to help address challenges in rural education. Instead of limiting the growth of rural charter schools through stringent policies and practices, policymakers should amend laws and regulations so charter schools can be successful in the right places at the right times. Smart practices by authorizers can then balance the needs and interests of districts and charters so communities and kids can benefit.

PROVIDE FLEXIBILITY FROM TEACHER CERTIFICATION RULES

Policymakers should provide increased flexibility to rural charter schools regarding teacher certification. Human capital is one of the greatest challenges facing rural schools, and charters are in a unique position to tap nontraditional candidates while still being accountable for student outcomes. Waivers from teacher certification requirements and alternate certification routes must allow charter schools and their oversight agencies to negotiate a balance between autonomy and accountability.

PROVIDE FAIR FUNDING

Charter schools receive inequitable funding, and rural schools face a range of financial challenges, so the burdens felt by rural charters can be overwhelming. State policymakers should ensure that rural charters receive equitable, adequate operational dollars and funding for facilities and transportation.

MAKE FACILITIES ACCESSIBLE

Policies must be designed to close loopholes that allow districts to sidestep sharing facilities with charters. Underutilized public assets—in the form of district facilities, municipal buildings, or other structures—should be made available to charters in rural communities. Charter schools are public schools, and policymakers should ensure they have the right of first refusal for public spaces.

LEVERAGE TECHNOLOGY

Technology can alleviate the burden of long commutes on charter school budgets and student time and also allow charters to staff schools creatively with online teachers. By leveraging technology to provide blended learning experiences, charter schools can augment student access to course content, and increase the amount of student time and school resources spent on teaching and learning. Rural charter schools can help pioneer new innovations in digital learning and be valuable thought partners in ensuring that digital learning policies are informed by practice.

ENDNOTES

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