



## REL Appalachia Ask-A-REL Response

Rural  
November 2017

### Question:

What are the effects of declining enrollment in rural schools on school services, particularly those with the majority of students eligible for free or reduced price lunch (FRPL)? To what extent are there strategies to address the impacts?

### Response:

Thank you for your request to our REL Reference Desk regarding evidence-based information about declining enrollment in rural schools. Ask-A-REL is a collaborative reference desk service provided by the 10 Regional Educational Laboratories (RELS) that, by design, functions much in the same way as a technical reference library. Ask-A-REL provides references, referrals, and brief responses in the form of citations in response to questions about available education research.

Following an established REL Appalachia research protocol, we searched for research reports and descriptive study articles on declining enrollment in rural schools. We focused on identifying resources that specifically addressed the effect of declining enrollment on the provision of school services in rural schools and strategies to address the effect. The sources included ERIC and other federally funded databases and organizations, research institutions, academic research databases, and general Internet search engines. For more details, please see the methods section at the end of this document.

The research team did not evaluate the quality of the resources provided in this response; we offer them only for your reference. Also, the search included the most commonly used research databases and search engines to produce the references presented here, but the references are not necessarily comprehensive, and other relevant references and resources may exist.

### References

- Allen, D. M., & Sloan, J. E. (2005, April). *Adequacy-based funding for small, isolated schools: An approach for Maine*. Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the New England Educational Research Organization, Northampton, MA. Retrieved from <https://eric.ed.gov/?id=ED509454>

*From the abstract:* "How to adequately fund small schools is becoming a pressing issue in Maine due to numerous factors, including state and federal accountability laws and declining enrollments. The following were among the challenges facing small rural schools: (a) attracting and retaining qualified teachers, (b) attracting and retaining qualified specialty teachers such as music teachers, nurses, science teachers, special education personnel, (c) less visible but increased proportions of students living in poverty, (d) availability of trained special education staff for severe, low-incidence disabilities, and (e) cost of living adjustments that further exacerbate the problem of attracting and retaining high quality teachers. Determining the extent to which these and other potential issues exist in Maine and identifying potential solutions are crucial. Among potential solutions that have been major topics of discussion in Maine are the use of technology and distance education opportunities, participation in regional efforts, and additional funding changes. This paper describes one piece of this complex equation: a funding adjustment for small, geographically isolated schools.

Casto, H. G., Steinhauer, A., & Pollock, P. M. (2012). Potential synergy: Rural school districts and international student programs. *Rural Educator*, 34(1). Retrieved from <http://eric.ed.gov/?id=EJ999835>

*From the abstract:* "Many rural school districts face declining enrollments. A few districts have taken the unusual path of recruiting international students in order to boost their enrollments. This study examines a community using this strategy and the resulting financial, academic, and social situations for the school, community, and students, both local and international. The program has two goals: to increase both enrollment and diversity in the school. The benefits and challenges are discussed in light of the social and academic spheres of the school experience. The future of the program is considered, especially in connection to community fears of school closure or consolidation. Issues of professional development for teachers and programming for students are described. Recommendations for districts considering an international student program are included. This work contributes to a better understanding of the potential synergy between schools and communities."

Center for Rural Policy and Development. (2009). *A region apart: A look at challenges and strategies for rural K–12 schools*. St. Peter, MN: Center for Rural Policy Development. Retrieved from <https://eric.ed.gov/?id=ED544313>

*From the abstract:* "When this research report was first conceived, the current economic crisis was only just on the verge of revealing its full extent. Economic crisis or no economic crisis, over the years funding for PK–12 education has been a constant struggle. While all schools continue to face difficulties, for various reasons rural schools have different and unique sets of hurdles to overcome, largely due to factors not faced by most urban and suburban schools: declining enrollment, an aging taxpayer base, and distance. The intent of this research is to present solutions, or at the very least, recommendations for changes that could be made to help maintain and improve student achievement while not increasing cost. The research presented in this report will hopefully present ideas that legislators and

administrators can use to perhaps reshuffle funds without having to increase them, or alter practices that could make life more efficient and practical for everyone involved.”

Flower, R. (2010). *Closing small rural schools*. Southfield, MI: Education Partnerships, Inc.  
Retrieved from <https://eric.ed.gov/?id=ED538325>

*From the abstract:* “As school districts face declining enrollment and stable or reduced funding they look for ways to contain costs and continue to provide a quality educational experience. In many states ‘a new wave of consolidation...may be at hand’ (Kysilko, 2003). The research cites advantage for both consolidation and for maintaining small schools. The challenge of consolidation is how to reap the system wide benefits—cost savings, improved levels of efficiency, and more specialized use of human resources—while retaining the advantages—improved academic achievement, personalization of the learning environment, and a sense of community—offered by smaller schools and/or districts.”

Howley, A., Rhodes, M., & Beall, J. (2009). Challenges facing rural schools: Implications for gifted students. *Journal for the Education of the Gifted*, 32(4), 515–536. Retrieved from <https://eric.ed.gov/?id=EJ849550>

*From the abstract:* “In this paper, we discuss the implications for gifted students of challenges facing rural schools. We explore four challenges with particular relevance to rural schools: (a) declining population, (b) persistent poverty, (c) changing demographics, and (d) ongoing accountability requirements. Recommendations positioned to address these challenges include providing special instruction using distance education, making use of broad definitions of giftedness, making use of various acceleration strategies, and encouraging talented students to plan for meaningful careers in their home communities.”

Johnson, J., Malhoit, G., & Shope, S. (2012). Rural-specific concerns and strategies in the budget process. *School Business Affairs*, 78(3), 24–26. Retrieved from <https://eric.ed.gov/?id=EJ981973>

*From the abstract:* “Nationally, rural students represent about a quarter of all students attending public school; nearly a third of all schools are located in rural areas. Those rural schools and students have a number of unique characteristics and needs. For example, the smaller size of many rural schools and districts can sometimes lead to per-pupil expenditures that are higher than those of larger urban and suburban schools. Higher costs—in some cases, merely the perception of higher costs—are also the result of distance or isolation, high rates of poverty, lack of a social service infrastructure, and higher utility costs. Complicating the issue, small rural school districts frequently have a low or declining tax base. As a result, they must often operate with limited local funding for education. School employees, parents, students, and community members can organize and work toward changing state school finance systems so they will provide a fair and adequate distribution of funds. At the same time, schools and districts that strive to maintain democratic school governance and provide high-quality services and learning opportunities for all children must find ways to work within the constraints they currently face and to be creative in maximizing the efficiency of available resources. More so than ever before, rural

districts must work with other districts as part of regional or local consortia to help reduce the costs of everything from paper and insurance to electricity and diesel fuel. They must create an environment in which everyone—the school board, administration, and staff—is working to cut costs and build up long-term financial stability. And they must look to their communities to help offset operational costs through school-business partnerships. This article provides strategies that can help rural school districts meet the challenges posed by their small size and diminished fiscal capacity.”

Kemp, S. (2016, January–February). A perfect storm: Declining enrollment, increasing student poverty and rising operational costs are putting pressure on rural schools. *Wisconsin School News*, pp. 14–17. Retrieved from [https://wasb.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/03/perfect\\_storm\\_JanFeb\\_2016.pdf](https://wasb.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/03/perfect_storm_JanFeb_2016.pdf)

*From the article:* “In Wisconsin, aging population and declining births have meant a decrease in rural school district enrollment. In addition to declining enrollment, poverty increased during the recession of the late 2000s, especially among children. This increase is evident by the increasing number of students qualifying for free or reduced-price lunch. Meanwhile, fixed costs like transportation and food services have increased. Many rural school districts responded by cutting variable costs including instruction and support staff and by delaying facility improvements. Faced with these challenges, rural school districts have been placed in a perilous situation. As a researcher at the University of Wisconsin Madison’s Applied Population Laboratory, I have been exploring these trends including enrollment decline, increasing costs and rising poverty, and their effects on rural schools.”

New York State Association of School Business Officials. (2017). *Demographic challenges facing rural schools: Declining enrollment and growing poverty*. Albany, NY: Author. Retrieved from [https://www.nysasbo.org/uploads/reports/1502213217\\_Demographic%20Challenges%20Facing%20Rural%20Schools.pdf](https://www.nysasbo.org/uploads/reports/1502213217_Demographic%20Challenges%20Facing%20Rural%20Schools.pdf)

*From the abstract:* “Rural schools in New York face numerous challenges, including long-term declines in student enrollment and increasing levels of student poverty. Because these issues are linked with demographic trends in rural communities themselves, understanding their causes, consequences, and potential solutions requires looking beyond school district-level data. The first section of this report shows the magnitude of enrollment declines and changes in poverty rates, before considering how these trends affect rural schools. The second section looks at demographic trends in the general population to put school trends into context. The final section offers local and state-level proposals for how to address these challenges.”

Sandel, K., & Bhat, S. (2008). *Financing and sustaining out-of-school time programs in rural communities*. Washington, DC: Finance Project. Retrieved from <http://eric.ed.gov/?id=ED501503>

*From the abstract:* “Leaders of programs serving rural America need to act strategically to ensure the long-term success of their initiatives. This strategy brief describes the funding landscape of rural programs and highlights the unique challenges confronting rural program

leaders. It describes the different public and private resources that can support out-of-school time programming and identifies key strategies that can be used to finance and sustain these programs in rural communities.”

### **Additional Organizations to Consult**

Center on Rural Education and Communities: <https://ed.psu.edu/crec>

*From the website:* “The Center on Rural Education and Communities (CREC) conducts and supports both research and outreach activities that address rural education and community-related issues in Pennsylvania, the nation, and the world. CREC serves as an interdisciplinary focal point for these activities, connecting scholars and graduate students across the College of Education and the University more broadly. As an initiative supported by both the College of Education and Penn State’s Children Youth & Families Consortium, the Center forges networks and connections between Penn State-based scholars and graduate students, helping to develop and enhance a variety of research initiatives and outreach activities. The Center also houses the *Journal of Research in Rural Education*, a peer-reviewed scholarly journal which publishes original pieces of scholarly research of demonstrable relevance to educational and community-related issues within rural settings.”

National Rural Education Association: <http://www.nrea.net/>

*From the website:* “The NREA is the voice of all rural schools and rural communities across the United States. In an increasingly confusing system, we are at your service to help rural educators find and use the resources you need to educate today’s students. Whether you need to know about the current legislation that affects rural communities, have completed important research that needs to be published, or are looking for help with the specific education needs you face within your community, our national organization can help. We are your advocates – your voice – in education.”

Rural School and Community Trust: <http://www.ruraledu.org/>

*From the website:* “The Rural School and Community Trust is a national nonprofit organization addressing the crucial relationship between good schools and thriving communities. Working in some of the poorest, most challenging places, the Rural Trust involves young people in learning linked to their communities, improves the quality of teaching and school leadership, and advocates in a variety of ways for appropriate state educational policies, including the key issue of equitable and adequate funding for rural schools.”

## **Methods**

### **Keywords and Search Strings**

The following keywords and search strings were used to search the reference databases and other sources:

- Declining enrollment AND school services
- Declining enrollment AND school AND effects
- Declining enrollment AND school AND (“Title I” OR poverty OR FRPL)
- Rural schools AND declining enrollment
- Rural schools AND declining enrollment AND (services OR academic support OR transportation OR counseling OR social and emotional OR instructional)
- Rural schools AND declining enrollment AND (effects OR funding)
- Rural schools AND declining enrollment AND services AND (effects OR funding)
- Rural schools AND declining enrollment AND (“Title I” OR poverty OR FRPL)

### **Databases and Resources**

We searched ERIC, a free online library of more than 1.6 million citations of education research sponsored by the Institute of Education Sciences (IES), for relevant resources. Additionally, we searched the academic database ProQuest, Google Scholar, and the commercial search engine Google.

### **Reference Search and Selection Criteria**

In reviewing resources, Reference Desk researchers consider—among other things—these four factors:

- Date of the publication: Searches cover the most current information (i.e., within the last ten years), except in the case of nationally known seminal resources.
- Search priorities of reference sources: Search priorities include IES, nationally funded, and certain other vetted sources known for strict attention to research protocols. Applicable resources must be publicly available online and in English.
- Methodology: The following methodological priorities/considerations guide the review and selection of the references: (a) study types—randomized controlled trials, quasi experiments, surveys, descriptive data analyses, literature reviews, policy briefs, etc., generally in this order; (b) target population, samples (representativeness of the target population, sample size, volunteered or randomly selected), study duration, etc.; (c) limitations, generalizability of the findings and conclusions, etc.
- Existing knowledge base: Vetted resources (e.g., peer-reviewed research journals) are the primary focus, but the research base is occasionally slim or nonexistent. In those cases, the best resources available may include, for example, reports, white papers,

guides, reviews in non-peer-reviewed journals, newspaper articles, interviews with content specialists, and organization websites.

Resources included in this document were last accessed on October 30, 2017. URLs, descriptions, and content included here were current at that time.

This memorandum is one in a series of quick-turnaround responses to specific questions posed by education stakeholders in the Appalachia region (Kentucky, Tennessee, Virginia, and West Virginia), which is served by the Regional Educational Laboratory Appalachia (REL AP) at SRI International. This Ask-A-REL response was developed by REL AP under Contract ED-IES-17-C-0004 from the U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences, administered by SRI International. The content does not necessarily reflect the views or policies of IES or the U.S. Department of Education, nor does mention of trade names, commercial products, or organizations imply endorsement by the U.S. government.