

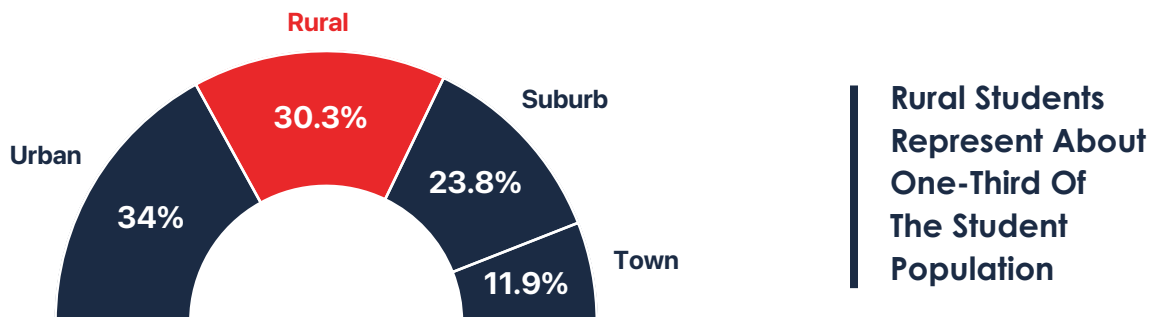
# Rural Pathways To Workforce Readiness

JULY 2023

## RURAL STUDENTS FACE UNIQUE CHALLENGES TO STUDENT ACHIEVEMENT AND ECONOMIC INDEPENDENCE

EDUCATION IS THE FOUNDATION of Tennessee's future workforce and essential to ensuring that every student has the skills and knowledge to succeed in a career that enables economic independence. Importantly, these workforce needs vary across different regions of the state. Urban, suburban, and rural communities reflect unique needs. Each year, about three in 10 students attend a rural school in Tennessee. Rural communities are a critical component of Tennessee's culture and economy, and it's important that we ensure students, educators, and employers have the supports needed to meet their communities' unique needs. Research also shows that students in rural areas face unique challenges in K-12 and postsecondary education that impact workforce readiness and employer demand in rural areas.<sup>1</sup>

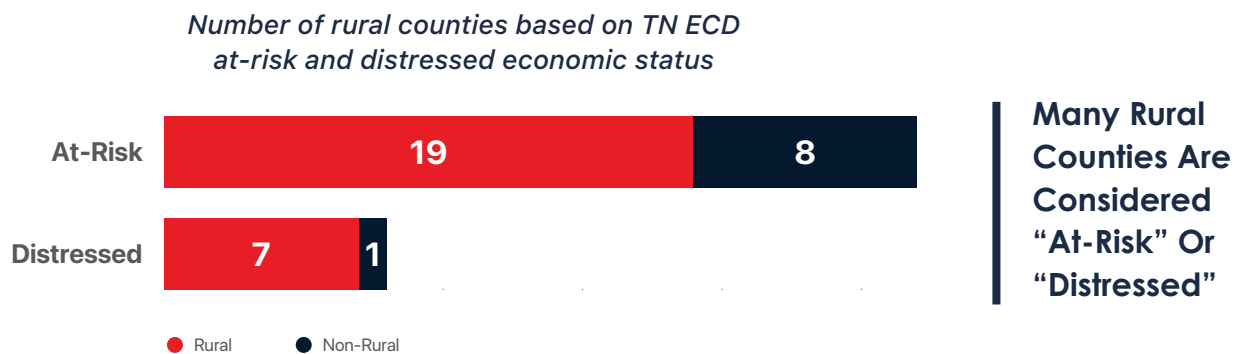
Percentage of K-12 school enrollment by NCES locale, AY2021-22



Source: National Center for Education Statistics and Tennessee Department of Education, 2023

Students in rural areas also face barriers to college and career opportunities. The state's college-going rate measures the number of high school graduates who immediately enroll in a technical college, community college, or university immediately following graduation.<sup>2</sup> For rural students, the proportion of students going to college is 52 percent, whereas the state average is 54.3 percent. Studies have also shown that students attending school in a rural area have fewer Dual Enrollment course options, one of the early postsecondary opportunities that allow students to earn credits toward college and career opportunities.<sup>3</sup>

Some of Tennessee's rural areas also face significant economic challenges. The state has 35 counties that are considered at-risk or distressed — 26 of which are rural. These federal designations indicate the county has high levels of unemployment, high poverty, and a significant low-income population. When it comes to connecting education to workforce opportunities, it's clear that K-12, higher education, and industry play important roles in preparing students for high-wage employment opportunities within often challenging economic conditions.



Source: Tennessee Department of Economic and Community Development and the National Center for Education Statistics, 2023

## RURAL COLLABORATIVES PROVIDE ONE SOLUTION TO SUPPORT STUDENT SUCCESS

One important strategy to advance workforce readiness and improve the connection between education and work in rural communities is the creation of collaborative pathways between schools, higher education institutions, and industry. While there are many different approaches to rural education collaboratives, successful collaboratives are committed to a common purpose, organized through a member-led governance structure, and focused on providing practical solutions to clearly defined education problems in rural areas. In general, rural education collaboratives are formed to (1) share resources; (2) leverage voice; (3) design and scale up innovative programs; and (4) implement initiatives to support college and career readiness.

Across the US, many innovative collaboratives showcase how communities can extend access to college and career readiness for students in rural areas.

- **Collegiate Edu-Nation** was founded out of the Roscoe Independent School District in West Texas to serve as an intermediary organization across rural school districts to support the redesign of their K-12, postsecondary, and workforce pathways for students. The group connects rural students to local and regional industry opportunities and supports districts with accessing and navigating resources for early postsecondary opportunities.
- The **Rural Schools Innovation Zone (RSIZ)** is a partnership between three school districts and two institutions of higher education in Texas to provide specific college and career pathways for students. In particular, RSIZ has five academies that provide a specific pathway to students across these school districts to specialize in areas including STEM, technology, and medicine.
- The **Colorado Rural Education Collaborative** is a group of over 50 rural school districts who collaborate to share resources to promote new career pathways, distance learning opportunities, and science and technology integration for rural students. This collaborative also uses these partnerships to support teacher recruitment, retention, and professional development.

# POLICY OPPORTUNITIES TO STRENGTHEN RURAL PATHWAYS TO WORKFORCE READINESS

To advance collaboration across K-12, postsecondary, and industry in rural areas and expand opportunities for students, SCORE recommends prioritizing the following:

- **Expand innovative school models grants to provide an additional focus on rural collaboratives and staffing.** Tennessee's existing innovative school models grants incentivize school districts to reimagine time, space, and modes of learning to promote postsecondary education and workforce opportunity. As this work continues, the state should provide a specific premium funding amount for collaboratives between K-12, postsecondary, and workforce that are in rural areas and permit rural school districts to maintain full funding for strategic staffing positions. These collaboratives should also be provided with access to the state's longitudinal data system to improve collaboration among school districts, postsecondary institutions, and industry partners.
- **Incentivize staffing strategies that expand access to qualified instructors.** Access to qualified instructors is often a barrier to access in Dual Enrollment or career and technical education opportunities in rural communities. Instructors who have the technical expertise to teach these courses often require salary beyond what a district can afford. The state should provide stipends for districts to either recruit qualified instructors or share instructors across districts. This approach would expand the number of students in rural areas who have access to college and career options while in high school.
- **Provide grant funds to local collaboratives to strategically use data** to develop inter-district pathways, design pathways aligned to regional workforce need, and partner with postsecondary institutions to improve college going and persistence for rural students. These collaboratives would foster data-driven collaboration that increases college and career readiness options for students.

1. Matt Krupnick, "As Jobs Grow Hard To Fill, Businesses Join The Drive To Push Rural Residents Toward College," *The Hechinger Report*, January, 28, 2019, <https://hechingerreport.org/as-jobs-grow-hard-to-fill-businesses-join-the-drive-to-push-rural-residents-toward-college/>; National Math and Science Initiative, "Education Equity For Rural Communities," *NMSI Blog*, February 17, 2022, [https://www.nmsi.org/Resources/Newsroom/Blog/2022/February/Education-Equity-for-Rural-Communities.aspx?gclid=CjwKCAjwaZSIBhBwEiwAfoZUICNyZMIFdJWPX-5u8tqQoAMxGITWdcGn\\_lhnH-nCWqpwPfcUh\\_YKfxoCKVkJQAvD\\_BwE](https://www.nmsi.org/Resources/Newsroom/Blog/2022/February/Education-Equity-for-Rural-Communities.aspx?gclid=CjwKCAjwaZSIBhBwEiwAfoZUICNyZMIFdJWPX-5u8tqQoAMxGITWdcGn_lhnH-nCWqpwPfcUh_YKfxoCKVkJQAvD_BwE).

2. "College-Going Rate By High School and Demographics," Tennessee Higher Education Commission, 2023, [https://www.tn.gov/content/dam/tn/thec/bureau/research/college-going-reports/CGR%20by%20HS%20with%20Demographics\\_Suppressed.xlsx](https://www.tn.gov/content/dam/tn/thec/bureau/research/college-going-reports/CGR%20by%20HS%20with%20Demographics_Suppressed.xlsx).

3. Dr. Allen Pratt and Alan Richard, "Improving Education In Rural Tennessee Schools," *SCORE Blog*, November 26, 2019, <https://tnscore.org/improving-education-in-rural-tennessee-schools/>.

