

## Analyzing the Effects of COVID-19 on Educational Equity in Rural Pennsylvania School Districts

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This study, conducted in 2021-22, explored the challenges faced by rural school district leaders as they attempted to address pressing equity concerns at a time of public health and socio-political crisis.

The research used a mixed methods approach, combining state-level institutional secondary data and local interview, case study, and school district data, to learn how rural districts have defined, responded, and adapted to equity concerns amid the COVID-19 pandemic and to identify district factors that might help to explain variations in responses and response outcomes.

### Key Findings

- *As of December 1, 2021, people in rural districts were disproportionately more likely to have tested positive for COVID-19 than in urban districts.* Among the school districts across the state with the highest rates of reported cumulative COVID-19 cases, the top four were rural. By December 2021, about 15 percent of residents in rural school districts had contracted COVID-19, while the same was true for slightly over 13 percent of residents in urban school districts.
- *Almost all district leaders cited teacher mental health and burnout as a primary concern.* Many teachers have left the profession during the pandemic, leaving rural districts at a higher rate.
- *The ability of rural school districts to operate remotely is impacted by the availability of a high-speed internet connection.* On average, rural school districts have slower download and upload speeds than urban districts, and there are fewer service providers offering high-speed connections than urban districts.
- *Poverty concentrates in rural areas.* Pennsylvania is no exception. Even rural school districts that are classified in this study as relatively “high resourced” still struggle with meeting the needs of significant numbers of students and families in poverty. (Note: “high resourced” and “low resourced” classifications were based on current expenditures per weighted student.)
- *District enrollments have dropped statewide, but they have dropped more precipitously in rural districts.* Data suggest these trends have been reinforced by the pandemic and rising cyber charter enrollments.
- *In the last decade Pennsylvania has experienced overall declines in teachers, though the declines are far more pronounced in rural districts, which saw a nearly 5 percent loss of teaching staff.* This has the potential for profound impacts on educational provision within rural Pennsylvania in the immediate future.
- *The ability of rural districts to invest in school infrastructure varies substantially across districts.* Based on available financial data, the highest resourced rural districts had invested, in aggregate, \$20 million more in technology than the lowest resourced rural districts by the end of 2019-20; the highest resourced rural districts were able to invest \$48 million more in operations and maintenance than the lowest spending rural districts in 2019-20.
- *There are large gaps in spending on support services for mental health; a majority of rural districts reported that they do not currently have the resources to meet their students’ growing demand for mental health services.* At the start of the pandemic, the highest resourced rural districts were able to invest \$18 million more on guidance and psychological services than the lowest resourced rural districts.
- *Rural districts have faced growing special education costs over time.* In nominal dollars, special education costs increased by more than \$295 million, yet state funding for special education has only increased by roughly \$31 million during the same period.
- *District leaders expressed considerable concern about budget deficits caused by increased costs combined with steep declines in both tax revenue and public school*

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*enrollments.* Nearly all districts reported an increase in cyber charter enrollment over the pandemic; rising enrollments in cyber charter schools increase the fiscal burden as per pupil funding is diverted to charter schools.

- *All students have been impacted by COVID-19, but certain student groups were of special concern as rural educators responded to the pandemic.* Rural leaders specifically identified students experiencing additional distress as: those without ready access to internet and cellular service, students in poverty, students requiring special education services, English Language Learners, and students with disrupted home environments.
- *The pandemic has contributed to significant burnout of educators and administrators in rural school districts.* It is unclear what the longer-term effects may be, but administrators and others have reported significant job-leaving and stress, coupled with difficulties in filling vacant district positions, causing crisis-level staffing issues in many districts.
- *Though student of color enrollment in both rural and urban areas has grown, the increase in teachers of color in rural districts has not been proportionate to the increase in student racial and ethnic diversity.* Demographic shifts, such as the influx of Hispanic populations in rural eastern Pennsylvania, is transforming some rural district demographics, suggesting an increased need for English Language Learner instruction and more students whose life experiences will differ from those of their overwhelmingly white teachers.
- *School district level equity initiatives have been hampered by increasingly contentious and politicized local debates.* The political division of a district had a profound effect on school leaders' ability to equitably support all students and has contributed to administrator/educator burnout and job-leaving.

**Policy Considerations**

- The Commonwealth should ensure that all communities have broadband access, without staggering start-up fees or a competitive grant application process.
- Revise the cyber charter school funding formula to reduce the impact charter enrollment has on district budgets, even in well-resourced districts. (Note: In June 2022, the Governor issued Final-Form Regulation 6-349 [IRRC #3315] that clarified elements of the Charter School Law and set conditions that emphasize accountability, equity, quality, and transparency.
- Examine both educational and school finance outcomes of districts opening or expanding their own district cyber academies as a way of keeping students enrolled in their district's public school.

- Construct communication pathways to efficiently solicit and use feedback from local communities to the Pennsylvania Department of Education, particularly about the unique needs of rural districts; facilitate and support, at the state level, communication spaces where practitioners can share with one another.
- Prioritize the mental health of students, educators, and district leaders by expanding the physical and mental health infrastructure to work with schools, which are especially central in rural communities. (Note: The 2022-2023 state budget included \$200M to address student mental health and school safety.)
- As the U.S. Department of Agriculture has ended its universal free meals program, Pennsylvania should consider following the lead of other states (e.g., Maine and California) in permanently providing meals to school-children.
- Assist with the equitable distribution of well-qualified teachers across the state by widening pathways for rural residents to work in schools and offering incentives for educators to move to rural areas.
- Monitor pandemic-related school staffing issues and how related challenges occur across different urban and rural places.
- Continue to support research on the ongoing effects of COVID-19 on students and schools.

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