



Key Takeaways

- Population decline and “brain drain” are continuing issues in rural communities.
- Educators are rethinking the structures of education to provide more flexibility for students to complete degrees and certificates.
- Partnerships between educators, employers, and the community are essential to bolster rural education and economic outcomes.
- Broadband access is essential. The lack of broadband, during the pandemic and now, continues to be a significant issue.

The 2021 Rural Policy Summit is a virtual series that brings together a wide range of stakeholders, including policymakers, nonprofit leaders, academic researchers, industry professionals, and others interested in rural, to learn about and discuss major policy issues that will affect rural Pennsylvania over the next 5 to 10 years.

The five topic areas for the series are education, health care, local services, economic development, and agriculture.

This session, which was held September 15 and highlighted here, focused on the challenges and opportunities facing our rural educational institutions.

The series is being cohosted by the Pennsylvania Office of Rural Health, Pennsylvania Rural Development Council, Pennsylvania Department of Community and Economic Development, Pennsylvania Downtown Center, and Philadelphia Federal Reserve Bank’s Community Development and Regional Outreach Department.

Scan QR code for the presentation, and session recording.



Background on Rural Education

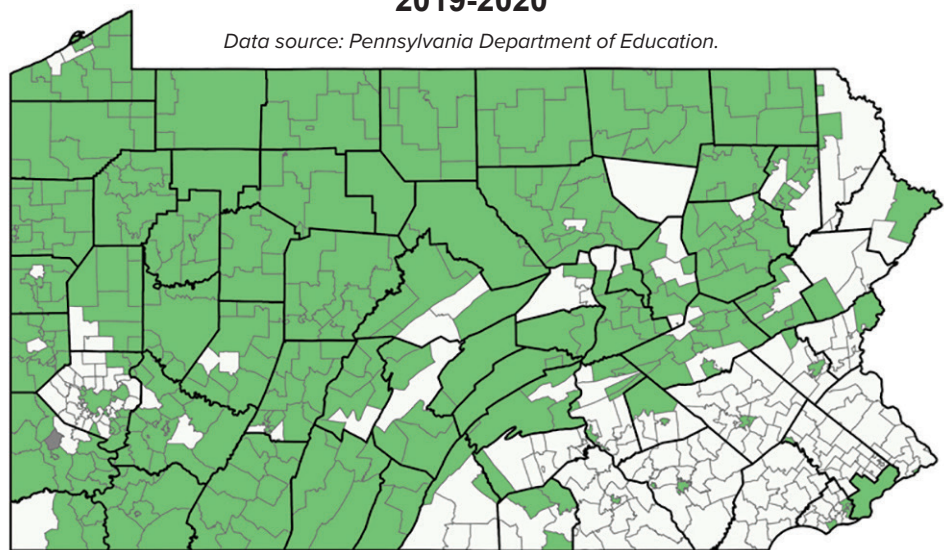
According to the Pennsylvania Department of Education, rural school districts receive 47 percent of their funding from state sources, compared with 34 percent for urban schools. Rural school districts are more reliant on state funds than urban districts. As rural school districts continue to experience population declines, that trend may continue.

Spending in rural schools per student has also trailed urban students. Rural schools spent \$18,677 per student, on average, in the 2019-2020 school year, which was more than \$500 less per student than urban districts. Despite these financial limitations, rural school districts have historically generated higher graduation rates, and this past school year, graduated 5 percent more of their students, for a total rate of 92.3 percent.

From 2010 to 2019, postsecondary education enrollment declined 9 percent across the state. While not all the highest growing jobs require post-secondary education, access to the kinds of jobs available to post-secondary degree holders can mean significant increases in lifetime earnings. Only 22 percent of rural adults have postsecondary degrees, compared to 34.7 percent of urban adults, according to the

Percent of School District Revenues from State Sources, 2019-2020

Data source: Pennsylvania Department of Education.



Statewide Rate = 36.8%

Below Statewide Rate
 At or Above Statewide Rate
 Data Incomplete or Unavailable

Census Bureau's 2019 American Communities Survey (ACS). Rural college graduates earned \$60,609, on average, compared with \$74,751 for urban college graduates.

Discussion Highlights

The panelists agreed that post-secondary programs need to be more flexible for students. As noted by Robert Farinelli, Vice President of Academic Affairs at Pennsylvania Highlands Community College, one of the worst things for students who attend college is to take 30 or more credits, and then, because of life circumstances, have to leave school without a credential, but with significant debt.

According to Census Bureau data, 16 percent of rural adults in Pennsylvania have acquired some college credits, but no degree. Panelists identified a variety of ways to help facilitate degree completion, including breaking traditional 15-week semesters into smaller pieces, adding more winter and summer courses, and creating more certificate and returning student programs. The panelists noted the importance of expanding stacked credential programs, where learners can build their education from a certificate to an associate degree or a bachelor's degree as their career develops, rather than in a single, four-year program.

Building partnerships between schools and potential employers to secure economic prospects for students was a strong point of focus among panelists. Collaboration with community members and business owners ensures employers have a steady supply of talent in rural communities, and students can develop specialized skills, access high-paying jobs, and remain part of their local economy.

Indiana University of Pennsylvania President Dr. Michael Driscoll noted that post-secondary institutions are a large part of the rural economy, and that academic institutions and their communities must work together to grow local opportunities for students.

Bradford Area School District Superintendent Katharine Pude said her district works closely with workforce development groups and businesses to identify high priority needs in the community. School district students are immersed in programs that are important to the local economy.

Joanna Papada, Vice President of External & Government Relations at Manchester Bidwell Corporation, reinforced the importance of collaboration among different academic institutions, noting how important it is to merge institutional missions so that all students can easily access opportunities and pathways that best meet their needs and interests.

The roundtable discussion concluded with policy ideas that could improve outcomes in rural schools. The panelists agreed on several steps for policymakers to consider, including promoting the role of teachers in the commonwealth, and rethinking how to elevate respect for professionals committed to education in the wake of the pandemic. The panelists also stressed how important broadband access is for remote learning and how valuable brick and mortar schools are in rural communities, as they tend to be a hub of resources and information. Lastly, they agreed that barriers to higher education and training could be removed with improved access to childcare and other support services for adults.

Thank you to the summit speakers and panelists: Representative Eddie Day Pashinski, Center Board Vice Chairman; Susan Snelick, Center Board Member and President of Northern Pennsylvania Regional College; Dr. Michael Driscoll, President of Indiana University of Pennsylvania; Joanna Papada, Vice President of Government & External Relations, Manchester Bidwell Corporation; Robert Farinelli, Vice President of Academic Affairs, Pennsylvania Highlands Community College; and Katharine Pude, Superintendent, Bradford Area School District.

Center for Rural Pennsylvania Board of Directors

Chairman

Senator Gene Yaw

Vice Chairman

Representative Eddie Day Pashinski

Secretary

Dr. Nancy Falvo

Clarion University of Pennsylvania

Treasurer

Stephen M. Brame

Governor's Representative

Senator Katie J. Muth

Representative Dan Moul

Richard Esch

University of Pittsburgh

Dr. Timothy Kelsey

Pennsylvania State University

Shannon M. Munro

Pennsylvania College of Technology

Dr. Charles Patterson

Shippensburg University of Pennsylvania

Susan Snelick

Northern Pennsylvania Regional College

Darrin Youker

Governor's Representative

Center for Rural Pennsylvania Staff

Director, Kyle C. Kopko, Ph.D.

Senior Policy Analyst, Jonathan Johnson

Communications Manager, Christine Caldara Piatos

Program Manager for Grants, Pam Frontino

Office Manager, Linda Hinson

Public Policy Data Analyst, David W. Martin



625 Forster St., Harrisburg, PA 17120
(717) 787-9555 • www.rural.pa.gov