

## **Rural Youth Survey: Trends and Developments in the Attitudes and Aspirations of Rural Pennsylvania Youth**

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This project expanded on the Rural Youth Education Project (RYE), a longitudinal study of 7<sup>th</sup> and 11<sup>th</sup> grade youth enrolled in rural Pennsylvania schools in 2006. The RYE concluded in 2010.

The goals of this project were to document the educational, career, and residential aspirations of rural youth today, to examine the community, family, and peer factors that might shape these aspirations, and to detail the opportunities and barriers that youth experience.

The study, conducted in spring 2021 during the COVID-19 pandemic, also investigated the impact of COVID-19 on rural youth and their families. This study involved the development and administration of an online survey to students enrolled in 9<sup>th</sup> and 11<sup>th</sup> grades. These students attended schools in four rural school districts in Pennsylvania. Secondary data from sources including the Pennsylvania Department of Education and the U.S. Census Bureau American Community Survey were used to assess how district-level factors, like poverty, were related to students' own aspirations. To supplement student survey data, the research team interviewed a school principal from each district for their insights into challenges and successes within each school district, barriers faced by students, opportunities available to students, and the impact of COVID-19.

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### **Key Findings**

- Educational aspirations of rural youth are lower than in the 2010 RYE. More youth today plan to earn a high school diploma or less, and fewer plan to complete a four-year college degree. In this project, 27.5 percent of 11<sup>th</sup> grade students indicated that they planned on attaining a high school diploma or less, a 16.5 percent increase since 2010.
- Educational aspirations were strongly related to family relationships. Youth who had a positive relationship with a parent held aspirations that paralleled the educational attainment of that parent.
- More youth today than in 2010 hoped to live in rural Pennsylvania as adults. About a third of 9<sup>th</sup> and 11<sup>th</sup> graders wished to either stay in their hometown or somewhere else in rural Pennsylvania. However, those with higher educational aspirations are more inclined to leave rural Pennsylvania.
- Few students reported being satisfied with current job opportunities or chances to get ahead in their local communities.
- Youth largely aspire to careers that are gender-normative (i.e. females gravitate towards nursing, males towards manufacturing), contributing to a gender divide in both educational and residential aspirations.
- Healthcare was the most common career field

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sought by students. There were few changes in the career aspirations of youth since 2010. The desire for positions in labor and production decreased since 2010, from 11 percent to 8.5 percent.

- Youth experiences with COVID-19 were unrelated to their aspirations for the future. However, significant percentages of youth reported concerns about the impact of COVID-19 on their health, future education, and relationships. Youth whose families were impacted by the pandemic reported more frequently experiencing symptoms of depression and anxiety.

### **Policy Considerations**

The study results suggest that today's rural youth need additional support from their schools and, indirectly, the Pennsylvania legislature to help close gender gaps and rural-urban gaps in youth aspirations and achievement. Specific policy considerations include:

- Expand the Reach Out PA: Your Mental Health Matters initiative to provide additional mental health support for rural youth as they return to in-person schooling. The results of this study indicate that rural students have experienced a substantial negative impact on their emotional well-being as a result of COVID-19. Addressing the mental health needs of these returning students will require more than the initiative initially suggested in regard to personnel (full-time counselors) and screening.
- Use social media more strategically to keep youth informed about jobs and educational opportunities in their local areas. A significant percentage (~25 percent) of students in this project reported using social media to learn about such opportunities. Social media can also be used to livestream classes, training, and other events for rural students who may not be able to access these opportunities otherwise.
- Integrate efforts to break down gender barriers in career aspirations and labor force participation into the existing Academic Standards for Career Education and Work (CEW). Without trusted adults to model success in various fields, rural youth may have difficulty seeing themselves working in a field that is not gender-normative or different from the jobs held by their family members.

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