The Heart of a Rural Community:

How to better support Colorado's Small Rural School Districts

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INTRODUCTION

In all corners of Colorado, students attend school in rural districts. Many of these districts are small, serving fewer than 1,000 students. All face challenges tied to their remote locations, but all also serve an essential role in their communities, one that is rarely studied and poorly understood by policymakers in Denver.

More than 80 percent of Colorado's school districts are classified as "rural" or "small rural," though together they serve only about 16 percent of the state's students. The few reports that examine rural education tend to focus on deficits: the teacher shortages, the funding gaps, the enrollment declines. Those challenges are real, and this report examines them in detail.

But the Keystone Policy Center set out with a broader aim: to document not only the struggles these districts face but the strengths they bring to their students and communities, strengths that are often invisible to the legislators and state officials who shape the policies governing them.

This report profiles three of those districts:

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1. **Plateau Valley School District 50,** perched on the Grand Mesa east of Grand Junction with roughly **260 students**
2. **North Park School District in Jackson County,** where superintendent Amy Ward oversees a dwindling **enrollment of 113**
3. **Idalia School District** near the Kansas border,with about **155 students**

The report also incorporates statewide data on enrollment, staffing, and student outcomes across all of Colorado's rural and small rural districts.

What emerges is a picture of schools that know their students deeply, anchor their communities, and produce results that meet or exceed statewide benchmarks in key areas. It is also a picture of institutions operating inside systems that were not designed for them, at costs that policymakers do not fully recognize.

Let people in those districts tell those stories, and a clear picture emerges.

Lenae Lengel remembers when most of her kindergarten students were born.

She taught their older siblings. She saw them as toddlers at Friday night basketball games. She watched them in the preschool room next door, where she shares an office with the preschool teacher and can pop in several times a week to observe what skills the children are developing before they ever walk into her class.

In Idalia, a farming community of a few hundred people about 15 miles from the Kansas border, everyone knows everyone else.

> ***"I know so much about my students before they ever even come to my classroom," Lengel said, "which really sets me up to work with them in a way that's going to be most effective."***

In the town of Walden, a couple of hundred miles to the northwest, Superintendent Amy Ward was wrestling with a different reality. The Colorado Department of Education required her district, North Park, to use a GIS-based mapping tool to identify high-poverty areas in the community so it could qualify for certain grants and funding streams.

The problem: The system does not work in places where streets are not labeled and addresses are rural routes.

Ward knew her families. She knew that 64 percent of children in Jackson County live below the poverty line, according to the county's kids-count data.

But because only a third of families filled out the free and reduced lunch paperwork, and because the mapping software cannot locate homes that do not have street addresses, the tool classified North Park as less poor than it is. The district was locked out of funding for which its students would otherwise qualify.

In Idalia, Lengel knows every child in her school by name, by family, by temperament. In Walden, CDE's mapping tool cannot even find their houses.

These two scenes capture the essential paradox of Colorado's smallest rural school districts: an intimacy of relationships and depth of community engagement that larger districts can only aspire to, operating inside systems ostensibly designed to serve them but that often hinder them instead.

Across the Eastern Plains, the Western Slope, and remote mountain parks, small districts with enrollments in the low hundreds or even double digits are educating children, anchoring communities, and doing it all with a fraction of the staff and resources available to their urban and suburban counterparts.

The survey findings show that educators have a strong interest in affordable housing, even if it means that, in effect, their boss is also their landlord. Teachers report spending an unsustainable percentage of their take-home pay on rental housing. This makes it difficult if not impossible for them to save toward a down payment on their own home.

It also makes meeting daily expenses a major challenge. Many educators report living paycheck to paycheck. Others speak of colleagues who have left teaching to work in restaurants or car dealerships, where, shockingly, the pay is better.

We present this report in three key sections: survey data findings, voices from the frontlines, and an overview of studies across the nation on educator housing. We conclude with some recommendations and considerations for policy makers.

This is a pervasive problem of longstanding that is not going away. Policy prescriptions are challenging to devise. But unless the state, districts, entrepreneurs, and philanthropists coordinate and combine efforts, the unaffordability of housing for teachers will continue to create a major drain on this vital profession.

	Plateau Valley School District 50	North Park School District	Idalia School District
Number of Schools	4	1	2
2024-25 Enrollment	281	130	136
5 Year Enrollment Change (Statewide Change -3%)	-19%	-5%	-23%
Number of Full Time Employees	23.8	12.7	15.7
Average Teacher Salary (Statewide average $63,235)	$53,319	$53,126	$46,149

STRENGTHS

Relationships, Opportunity, and Results

> ***"It's all about relationships," said Trevor Long, the superintendent of Plateau Valley. "In a small school, we know our kids, they get to know us. No one falls through the cracks."***

Long, who spent 15 years as a principal at Roosevelt High School in Johnstown before moving to the Western Slope, said he has watched rural students develop a confidence that their suburban peers often lack.

In a school where every student is needed for every activity, he said, young people are pushed into leadership roles early and often. "Kids sometimes find themselves standing on the stage with the microphone when they wouldn't in a big suburban school," Long said. "Everybody's going to get a turn."

Lengel, in Idalia, described the advantage of class sizes so small that she can focus targeted attention on each student. "My whole group is almost the same size as a Johnstown small group," said Lengel, who also previously worked in that larger Front Range district. She said she can monitor every student's progress in real time, pulling children for one-on-one instruction without feeling she is neglecting the rest.

Amy Ward, the retiring superintendent of North Park, put it in the bluntest terms. "We support kids probably better than any district I've ever been in," she said. "We are family."

Ward, who has worked in multiple Colorado districts including the comparatively well-resourced and larger Salida, said the smallness that creates challenges with staffing also allows teachers to respond to student needs almost instantly.

"Our teachers are more aware of our students, and they can create intervention groups very quickly," she said. "It's not a long, drawn out process. It is almost instantaneous."

Sheldon Rosenkrance, the chief district operations officer at the Colorado Department of Education and the department's de facto rural representative, offered a perspective from the state level,though with a decidedly rural twist.

Rosenkrance grew up in rural Idaho, graduating in a class of 12 students. He was a principal for 10 years at a school of about 200 students in Mackay, Idaho, worked in rural schools in Washington state, and served as superintendent of Estes Park before joining CDE.

Growing up in rural Idaho, he said, he had constant interactions with adults in the community, from working cattle to walking uptown. "Everybody knew everybody about everybody," he said.

Rosenkrance said his daughters, engineers and accountants, have told him that their comfort talking to adults in professional settings traces directly to growing up in a small town. "Their experiences of working in the greenhouse or 4-H or with their cows connected with people at the highest levels in the corporate world."

The connections forged in small rural schools are visible in the data. Statewide, rural and small rural districts post higher average four-year graduation rates than non-rural districts. They also show higher rates of participation in dual enrollment and Career and Technical Education courses, and higher rates of CTE certificate completion.

At Idalia specifically, Lengel said the district maintains a 100 percent graduation rate and works individually with every senior to develop a post-secondary plan tailored to their strengths. College matriculation rates for rural districts are comparable to those of non-rural districts statewide.

Idalia superintendent Kristi Minor said the district's sports teams have recently won state championships in football and girls track, and were runners-up in girls basketball. Ward said North Park, despite years of upheaval, has seen steady improvement on assessment scores since she rebuilt the district's instructional systems.

Even as North Park has shrunk to 113 students and had to cancel boys basketball this year for lack of players, there is a flip side.

"We're so small, students can participate in everything they want," Ward said. "There's no tryouts. And if we have it, you're in it."

She described partnerships between students and the broader community that would be unusual in a larger district: students who take part in the Future Farmers of America program cut and deliver firewood to elderly residents each winter.

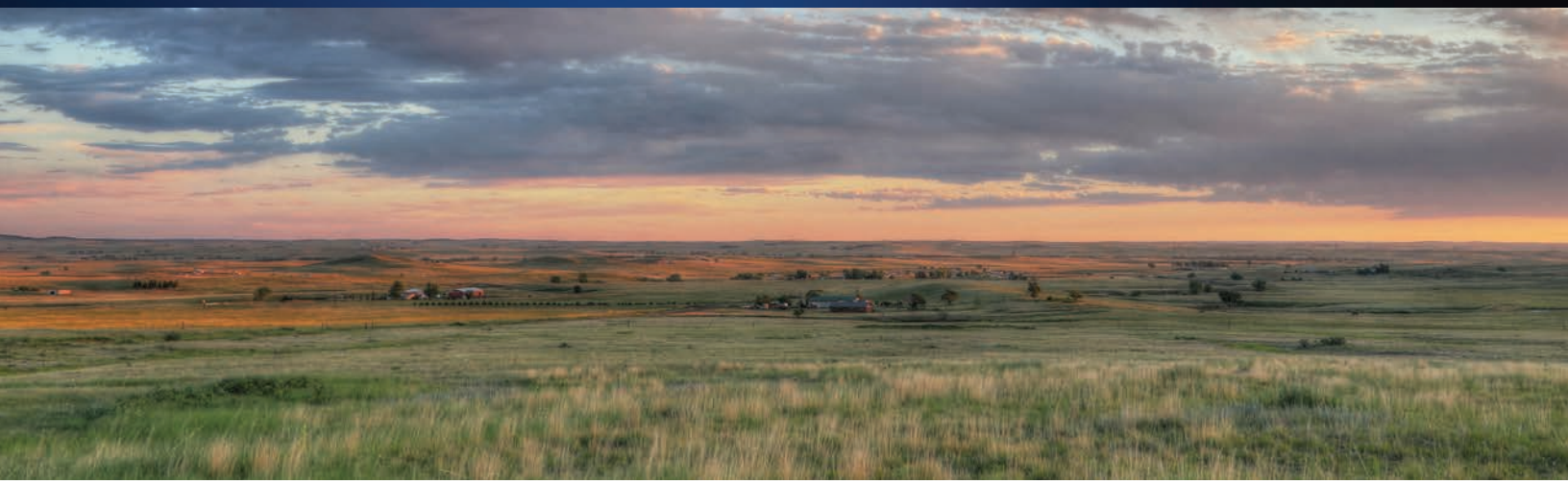
> ***"I think there is such a symbiotic relationship between our students and our community," she said.***

Long made a similar observation about Plateau Valley, where sports teams and clubs need every willing body. "We need everybody to field the team," he said. That sometimes means a student ends up in an art class or on the basketball team even if it is not their natural inclination.

But the result, Long said, is that students discover interests they would never have explored in a larger school and form connections with peers and staff they otherwise would not have known.

Small class sizes also present challenges that outsiders rarely consider. Lengel described a year when her kindergarten class had just four students. "A lot of people said to me, oh, four students, that must have been amazing," she said. But with so few children, she said, group brainstorming stalls, there are fewer perspectives to draw from, and the teacher must essentially run four individualized programs simultaneously.

Lengel said the same dynamic applies to teachers themselves: just as students have fewer peers to collaborate with, she is the only kindergarten teacher in the building. "I have to rely more on my own knowledge because at the end of the day, I'm the only one teaching kindergarten," she said.



The Heart of the Community

The role these schools play extends beyond academics. In communities where the school may be the only public building large enough to hold a crowd, it becomes the civic center, the social hub, and the economic anchor all at once.

Ward described North Park's 1949 gymnasium, still in use, as a de facto community center. "We open it up to our elderly during the day, and they can walk or play pickleball," she said. "All the events happen, from funerals to bingo happen in our walls. There's not any other place for it to happen."

In Idalia, Minor said the community's devotion to the school is visible on any game night.

"The stands are filled during football, the stands are filled during basketball," she said. "The community recognizes that the school is the heart of the community."

She said driving through nearby towns that have lost their schools provides a stark visual warning. "I can't imagine what would happen if the school was not here, because we can see it all along Highway 36, these towns that don't have a school or a social hub. They're drying up."

Long described Plateau Valley's school as "the gathering place," whether it is a Friday night football game, a Saturday robotics competition, or an FFA barbecue fundraiser.

"This is where everybody gathers and where everybody ultimately becomes part of that identity, the Plateau Valley Cowboys," he said.

The district recently opened a $66.6 million new school building, funded by a state BEST grant and a community bond. Part of the pitch to voters, Long said, was that the building would serve the whole community, not just students.

"We've committed to, if there's a community event and you want to host it here, this is an opportunity," he said. "It's their building."

Lengel described the school as something closer to a second home. "We're just always all here," she said. "If there's a community meeting, we can have it here. The school's always open and available."

As both a teacher and a parent, she said, the closeness of the community brings a sense of security she treasures.
"I know my kids' friends. I know their friends' parents," she said. "That creates an ease and a comfort if they go out for sleepovers."

Dawn Thilmany, a professor of agricultural economics at Colorado State University, provided broader context for these observations. Schools and access to health-care, she said, are the two most critical factors in whether a small town can sustain itself and attract new residents.

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Schools are often one of the largest employers in a rural community, providing a cluster of middle-income jobs that form the basis for other kinds of economic development. They are required for families to live in a community, she said, and are often the main social fabric holding that community together, providing a place for families to connect rather than, as sociologist Robert Putnam famously described it, "bowling alone."

Thilmany said Colorado's rural communities face a particularly acute version of this challenge. On the Eastern Plains especially, the distances between towns are far greater than in states like Kansas and Iowa, where communities may be only 30 minutes apart. In eastern Colorado, the next town with services can be 90 minutes or more away, making the presence or absence of a local school that much more consequential.

Ken Haptonstall, co-executive director of the Colorado BOCES Association and a former superintendent of Parachute and Mesa 51 school districts, pointed to the tiny Eastern Plains town of Arriba as a cautionary tale.

When Arriba's school consolidated with Flagler, the community began to wither. "Every year we'd go out there, there would be either more houses that were just abandoned or for sale, or soon to be both," Haptonstall said. "Many people there blame the town's slow demise on the fact that the school districts consolidated."

CHALLENGES

The Reporting Burden

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Frank Reeves, Director of Operations at the Colorado Rural Schools Alliance and long time rural Superintendent, said districts of all sizes must submit upwards of 200 annual reports to the Colorado Department of Education.

Many of those reports were created by individual pieces of legislation, some dating back decades, and each one lives in a different statute. "CDE doesn't even look at a lot of those reports anymore," Reeves said. "They don't go anywhere. But it is required by legislation that districts submit them."

While the burden falls on every district in the state, the weight of the obligation is radically different depending on district size. A district like Jeffco or Cherry Creek can assign reporting duties to specialized staff members. At North Park, Ward said, two employees handle virtually all state reporting, and she sometimes steps in herself to lighten their load.

CDE Director of Communications Jeremy Meyer said the department recognizes that reporting requirements can be particularly onerous for small districts.

> ***However, many reports districts submit each year are required by state or federal law, so CDE can't waive them," Meyer said. "Still, we agree that the process needs to be as straightforward and efficient as possible."***

At Idalia, Minor estimated that state compliance work consumes at least 75 percent of her key staff members' time. "We could hire another person just to do data reporting and keep them employed full time," Minor said.

Minor described an additional layer of frustration. The state built a data pipeline that was supposed to serve as a clearinghouse, allowing districts to enter information once and letting CDE pull reports from the data. Instead, she said, the pipeline has generated new reporting requirements on top of the old ones.

Meyer disputed Minor's characterization. "The CDE Data Pipeline is the system districts use to securely send data to CDE. The idea behind it is the same one (Minor) described: districts submit data once and the department can use it for multiple reports and processes."

Meyer said the pipeline itself "does not create new reporting requirements. Those requirements come from state or federal law." He said CDE meets regularly with district data staff through the Data Pipeline Users Group to hear what is working and what is not, and "we use that feedback to keep improving the system."

Statewide data confirms that rural and small rural districts serve higher percentages of students eligible for free and reduced lunch than the state as a whole, even as these districts receive less attention from policymakers. Ward's experience with the GIS mapping tool, described at the opening of this report (and which CDE acknowledges poses a challenge), illustrates how that disconnect plays out in practice: the state's own systems cannot accurately identify the poverty in communities where they operate.

Denille LePlatt, Executive Director of the Rural Schools Alliance who previously served as an administrator at the Primero School District in southern Colorado, argued that the problem goes deeper than mere paperwork. She described the entire framework as a systems design issue.

> ***"We're continuing to do school the way that we've done school for the past 100 years. We could work smarter, not harder, but because of the way that the system is designed, it doesn't allow us to do that."***

She offered the READ Act as a specific example. In small systems, she said, teachers already know which students are struggling to read; they do not need a standardized assessment protocol to tell them. When the READ Act was implemented at her former district, it identified fewer struggling readers than the district's own internal process had been catching.

"It was actually a disservice to those students," LePlatt said. "Our standards were much higher, we were much more thorough."

LePlatt said because each reporting requirement was created by a different bill, there is no simple mechanism for consolidating or eliminating them. An audit of all existing requirements would cost money the state has not been willing to spend. The Rural Schools Alliance has run bills in consecutive sessions to reduce the reporting burden, with only partial success.

Long, at Plateau Valley, described trying to insulate his teaching staff from the reporting grind. "Ultimately, when we submit, the question is, does it really connect with our kids and our community?" he said. "Most of the time, absolutely it doesn't. But you've got to do it."

Rosenkrance said CDE is aware of the burden and has made reducing it a priority. He said the State Board of Education has directed the department to gather only what is required by state and federal law, and that any new data request must be approved by the Educational Data Advisory Committee, a group of practitioners from school districts.

He said the sheer volume of legislation creates a recurring problem: every new bill can introduce a new data collection point that does not fit neatly into existing systems.

Rosenkrance said Colorado's strong tradition of local control contributes to the complexity. Unlike Washington state, where he previously worked and where a statewide student information system automatically feeds data to the state, Colorado's districts each use different systems, making it harder to streamline collection.

"There's a lot of advantages to local control," he said. "But it does create some issues."

Recruitment, Retention, and the Housing Puzzle

Finding and keeping qualified teachers is a perpetual challenge for districts that cannot match urban and suburban salaries and that are located hours from the nearest city.

The data bears out what superintendents describe anecdotally: rural and small rural districts have lower average salaries than other settings, higher teacher turnover rates, and a higher percentage of positions filled through shortage mechanisms such as alternative licensure and emergency authorizations.

While rural salaries have increased at roughly the same rate as non-rural salaries over the past five years, the gap persists, and the data shows a correlation between lower salaries and both higher turnover and a greater reliance on shortage hiring.

Long described the experience of attending job fairs as a rural superintendent. "At a bigger district, you have a candidate pool every time, and it just happens by making a social media post," he said. "At a rural district, you can post, but you're probably not going to get a pool till you go out and start recruiting."

He said candidates at job fairs often try to walk past small districts' tables, and recruiters have to physically wave them over and sell the lifestyle: fishing, hunting, skiing, the four-day work week, the chance to be a head coach right away.

Haptonstall said that when he was superintendent in Parachute, he used to recruit teachers from midwestern states like Ohio. "Those kids like to mountain bike, so we'd tell them you have no mountains, and we'd show them pictures of mountains, and we're on a four-day week, and you got three days to go ride bikes," he said.

"The problem is, after about three or four years, if they didn't find a significant other, they went home."

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– Trevor Long, Superintendent of Plateau Valley

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CDE has pushed aggressively to expand the pathways into teaching, Rosenkrance said. He said the state now offers roughly 20 different routes to teacher certification, including programs that allow paraprofessionals to earn credentials while remaining in their communities.

The legislature has funded programs that let people go back to school for teaching degrees while still working, and BOCES can help candidates get certified through alternative licensure.

At Idalia, nearly every teacher has a personal connection to the area, whether through marriage, family ties, or having grown up in a similar rural setting. Lengel said that dynamic is not happenstance.

"If I were to actually stop and look at all the teachers, all of them have some type of pull within the district," she said. "Either they married somebody that grew up in this area, or they have a family member that grew up in this area."

Minor said she credits the East Central BOCES alternative licensure program with helping Idalia develop homegrown talent. "We're growing our own," she said.

Minor herself is a product of that pathway, having earned her teaching and administrative credentials through alternative licensure after a first career as a state park ranger.

The four-day school week, she said, has been a significant recruiting and retention tool. "It was a huge morale boost for our staff and our students," she said. "It's cut down on our absenteeism, and just kids being in the building for school has really improved."

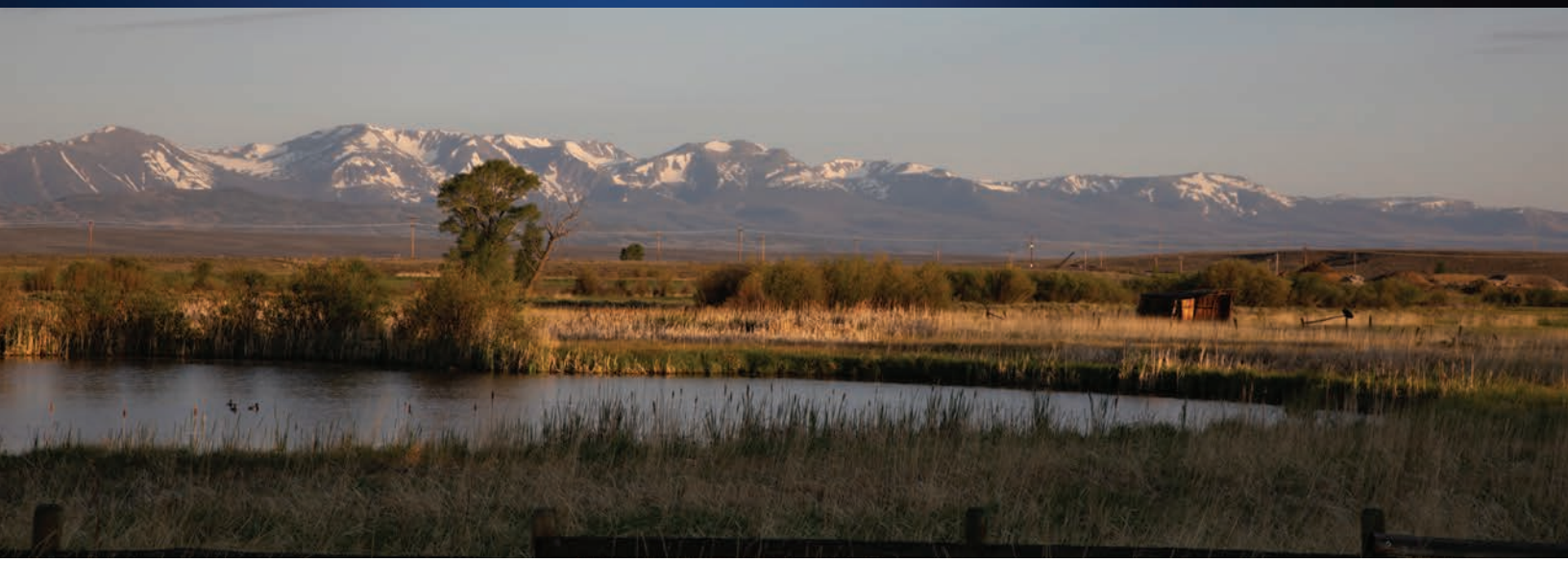
Thilmany, the CSU economist, said while the four-day week helps with recruitment, it can also create challenges for families who depend on the school for childcare on that fifth day.

Haptonstall said the BOCES system is increasingly filling gaps that individual districts cannot manage alone. Local BOCES handle special education services, alternative licensure programs, and, in some cases, Career and Technical Education programming.

His state association has set up a recruitment specialist to find speech-language pathologists, occupational therapists, and other hard-to-find specialists for rural districts, cutting out private staffing companies that were charging districts as much as $180 an hour for virtual providers.

But he said many new superintendents do not even know what their BOCES offers. "Two thirds of these people are brand new, and they don't even know what a BOCES does," he said.

Housing compounds the recruitment challenge. Ward said North Park owns two trailers behind the school that are always occupied by staff members, and that she personally maintains a list of every available rental in the community, calling landlords each recruitment season to check availability.



Funding, Cooperation, and the Fiscal Cliff

The financial pressures facing small rural districts are both chronic and, at the moment, potentially acute.

Reeves described a fundamental instability in how Colorado funds its schools. The legislature is required by law to pass the school finance act before the overall state budget and to do so by early April.

"They have not done either in probably 20 years," Reeves said. "It's always the last week of the session." That uncertainty makes it nearly impossible for small districts to plan ahead or launch new programs.

LePlatt criticized the state's growing reliance on competitive grant programs as a funding mechanism. Grants, she said, cannot sustain permanent programs, and the capacity to write and administer them is itself a luxury that small districts often lack.

Reeves said at one point, $420 million in state education funding was allocated through grants rather than the school finance act. "That money in the school finance act would be huge for every district," he said.

Rosenkrance said CDE has been working to address the grants issue. A few years ago, the department reviewed its state grant programs and looked for ways to reduce the burden on applicants. One result was the consolidation of certain grants, including a postsecondary and workforce readiness grant, and a shift from competitive applications to formula-based distribution.

Under the new approach, CDE identifies districts that meet certain criteria, such as high chronic absenteeism or a lack of previous grant funding, and distributes money directly rather than requiring a competitive application.

For small districts, the mathematics of enrollment decline is particularly punishing. Long said losing even 10 students represents a significant revenue loss, but the programs those students were enrolled in do not disappear.

"You still have to run the same programs, even though you've dropped 10 kids," he said. "If you're doing what's right by kids, you need to keep things going."

The state's enrollment averaging, which smooths year-to-year fluctuations, is being reduced from a five-year window to a shorter period, a change that could magnify the financial shock of even modest enrollment dips.

Rosenkrance said the potential reduction in enrollment averaging is "definitely on CDE's radar." As a former superintendent in three states with different rules, he said he understands the volatility it creates for small schools.

He said CDE has communicated to the legislature and the governor's office that shortening the averaging window "has large impacts on our small schools" and makes it difficult for districts to plan budgets and retain teachers.

If the change goes through, he said, CDE would offer technical advice to help districts manage the transition.

Haptonstall, at the BOCES Association, said he is urging small districts to cooperate before the state forces consolidation on them. "My message to both legislators and to superintendents is you better figure out how to cooperate, whether that's through a BOCES or it's just you call up your neighbor and say, hey, we don't both need a transportation director," he said.

Many new superintendents do not know what their local BOCES does, and that superintendents by nature tend to resist ceding any control.

But the alternative, he said, is grim.

> ***"For the first time in my 33, 34 years, I'm actually worried that there is really a fiscal cliff," Haptonstall said. "A billion dollars this year, probably a billion dollars next year. I keep trying to tell superintendents, you really need to be proactive in your cooperative thinking."***

LePlatt described her own efforts to build a shared service model by merging BOCES in the southern part of the state, only to run into statutory limitations that no one had previously tested.

The relevant statute, she said, was written in 1965. "I worked with eight different attorneys and the Attorney General's Office on trying to figure out what we could actually do," she said.

The experience convinced her that the state needs to give districts and BOCES far more flexibility in how they design and deliver services. But local control, deeply valued across Colorado, makes consensus difficult.

"Every BOCES decides what they do, every school district decides what they do, and sometimes it's really hard to arrive at consensus," LePLatt said.

Higher costs are another reality that state funding formulas do not adequately recognize. Rural districts sit in counties with lower average weekly wages and lower percentages of residents holding bachelor's degrees, which limits the local tax base and the pool of potential employees.

Haptonstall described the HVAC situation from the opening of this report as typical: transportation costs, maintenance costs, and the cost of contracting for any specialized service are all inflated by distance and scarcity.

A Lack of Awareness

At the state level, LePlatt said, there is a lack of awareness among policymakers about the realities of small rural districts, and the fact that they comprise a majority of the state's school districts.

> ***When people talk about rural schools, they think they're talking about a small, insignificant number of schools, but we're really talking about over 80 percent of the state's systems," she said. "That doesn't resonate, for whatever reason."***

LePlatt, who spent five years working at the Colorado Department of Education, said even CDE staff often lack a real understanding of how rural districts function. "When you've never been to a lot of the places that exist in our state, you can't picture how it's functioning when all you know is a DPS or a Jeffco," she said.

Reeves described a pervasive one-size-fits-all mentality in the legislature that makes it difficult to craft policy appropriate for the state's enormous diversity.

"Everything has to fit everywhere," he said. "And then most things don't fit."

Only about 15 of the 100 state legislators represent rural areas, and while those members are strong advocates, they are working against the sheer weight of numbers. Haptonstall said he experienced this firsthand while testifying before a house committee. "One of the new house members said, explain to me what a BOCES does," he said. "And I said, we're here to save you all money."

Thilmany, the CSU economist, offered a structural explanation for why rural communities receive so little scholarly or policy attention. She said there are only about 10 land-grant universities nationally that have even one researcher focused on rural community issues, and perhaps 30 academics in the entire country who study them.

The scarcity of research, she said, contributes to the scarcity of informed policy.

Rosenkrance said CDE has tried to address this gap from inside the department. He said his role includes reviewing every major policy and initiative through what he called "a rural lens."

Commissioner Susana Cordova attends the Rural Alliance's weekly call of about 120 superintendents every Wednesday morning, he said, and that two state board members regularly attend as well. The department has also taken the state board on site visits to small rural communities, including Campo and the Lamar area on the Eastern Plains.

"It's about listening, giving technical advice, and then making sure that the legislators or the governor's office or whoever has the information they need before they make the decision," Rosenkrance said.

WHAT THE DATA SHOWS

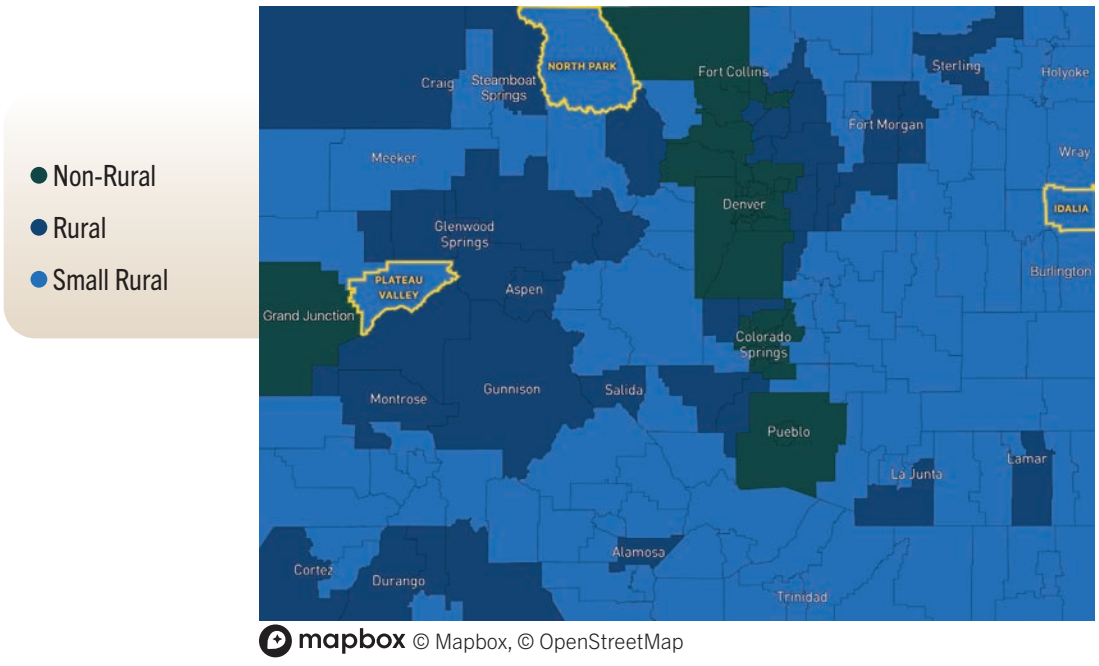
The stories told by these superintendents and educators are reinforced by a statewide data analysis of Colorado's rural and small rural districts.

The portrait that emerges from the data is one of districts serving a meaningful share of Colorado's students under structurally harder conditions, with results that are in some respects comparable to or better than those of their non-rural peers, particularly when it comes to getting students through to graduation and into career pathways.

Enrollment in Colorado's small rural districts ranges from as few as 22 students to just under 1,000, while rural districts range from about 1,100 to nearly 6,800. Together, rural and small rural districts enroll approximately 16 percent of the state's students, a share that has remained relatively stable over the past five years.

	Rural Districts	Small Rural Districts
Number of Districts	37	111
2024-25 Enrollment Range	1092-6809	22-976
Average 2024-25 Enrollment	2676	331

Rural and Small Rural Districts in Colorado



Total enrollment in these districts has declined 1.9 percent over that period, actually a smaller drop than the 2.9 percent decline in non-rural districts. But the averages mask dramatic variation: five-year enrollment changes in individual rural and small rural districts range from declines of 75 percent to increases of more than 50 percent.

The counties where these districts are located are projected to see lower rates of population growth over the next five and ten years than the rest of the state.

The staffing picture confirms what every superintendent described in interviews. Rural and small rural districts pay lower salaries than other settings. While those salaries have grown at roughly the same rate as non-rural salaries over the past five years, the underlying gap has not closed.

Rural and small rural districts have higher teacher turnover rates and fill a higher percentage of their positions through shortage mechanisms. Within rural districts, there is a correlation between lower salaries and both higher turnover and greater reliance on shortage hiring.

On student outcomes, the picture is mixed. Average proficiency rates on state assessments (CMAS and SAT) are lower in rural and small rural districts than in non-rural districts, and have seen greater declines in recent years. It is important to note that many districts are too small to have reportable data. And many also use local assessment to inform accountability through the S-CAP accountability system.

S-CAP is a CDE-approved local accountability system used primarily by rural districts to meet state accountability requirements through collaborative, peer-led school reviews that focus on the "whole child."

But graduation rates are higher than the state average, and students in these districts participate at higher rates in dual enrollment, CTE courses, and CTE certificate completion.

College matriculation rates are comparable to statewide figures. There is a correlation between the percentage of students eligible for free and reduced lunch and both proficiency rates and college matriculation rates, a pattern consistent with what researchers find in all settings.

Notably, however, there is no clear relationship between a rural district's free-and-reduced-lunch percentage and its teacher turnover rate or graduation rate, suggesting that these small communities find ways to retain stability and support students through graduation regardless of poverty levels.

Rural and small rural districts serve higher percentages of students qualifying for free and reduced lunch than the state as a whole, but lower percentages of students of color and English language learners. Transfer rates, both in and out, tend to be higher in small rural and remote districts than statewide, reflecting the volatility that comes when a single family's move can shift a district's enrollment by a meaningful percentage.

LOOKING AHEAD

Despite these challenges, the leaders of these three districts expressed a stubborn optimism grounded in what they see every day.

Long said the opening of Plateau Valley's new school building in January 2025 has given the district facilities that should serve it well for the next 15 to 20 years.

"Our community stepped forward to commit to our future, and that's really helpful," he said. What worries him is the larger economic question of whether families will continue to be able to make a living on the Grand Mesa, given the decline of the natural gas industry that long supported the region.

"Not knowing what that is makes me turn over a couple times every night," he said.

Minor said Idalia is financially stable and that its community support remains strong. But she worries about whether young people who leave for college will come back. "If the school was not here, I'm not sure what would happen to our community," she said.

Ward's story may be the most instructive. She returned to North Park in 2021 after watching the district cycle through five administrators in seven years, lose its counselor for seven years running, and see its systems collapse.

The previous superintendent had worked eight days a month and did not live in the community. When Ward arrived, she opened a file cabinet and found a folder labeled "Vision, five-year plan." The folder was empty..

Over five years, she filled it. She rebuilt the district's instructional framework, brought in $2 million in grants, hired qualified staff, and began seeing steady improvement in student achievement. This year, for the first time in her tenure, she does not anticipate significant staff turnover.

But she is retiring, driven in part by the toll of various family health crises. She is not leaving the community, she said, and will help where she can. But whether the systems she built will survive her departure is an open question.

For communities like these, the school is not just where children learn. It is the reason the town exists. As Lengel put it: "It's everybody's second home. It's that homing beacon for everybody in the community."

CONSIDERATIONS FOR POLICYMAKERS

While each of these districts are unique, many of the issues they are facing are not — within Colorado or in other states across the country. Policymakers in Colorado must consider how to adapt policies to better support rural districts like those highlighted here and in doing so should learn from other states and initiatives already underway closer to home. Some examples include:

- **Salary Minimums:** New Mexico and Tennessee have recently passed legislation to provide statewide minimum teacher salaries making it easier for small districts to compete for teachers.[1]
- **Tennessee Teacher Apprenticeship Program:** Tennessee launched the nation's first federally recognized Teacher Apprenticeship Program, focused on strengthening the local workforce and keeping educators rooted in rural communities.[2]
- **Texas Rural Innovation Zones:** The Rural Schools Innovation Zone brought five South Texas districts together to offer specialized high school pathways none could provide on their own, including dual enrollment and career connected learning. In just four years, dual-credit participation increased from 15% to 61%. The statewide teachers union has supported the exemption of this type of work through their Rural Pathways Excellence Partnerships.[3] These examples have inspired Colorado to explore this type of option as well.
- **Southwest Colorado Education Collaborative:** Similarly, SWEC is a collaboration between industry and education to bring more career connected learning to rural districts.[4] There are also other examples of this in Colorado to learn from.
- **Connecting to Digital Access in North Carolina:** State institutions in North Carolina, and other states, have used grant funding to partner with tech companies to provide digital infrastructure to rural counties in support of educational opportunities.[5] This program is similar to Colorado's Digital Learning Solutions program.
- **District Consolidation in Vermont:** Vermont legislators have at various points in history required consolidations of small rural districts in order to create sustainable systems. They also recently passed a controversial law to create cooperative administrative hubs and provide base funding to small struggling districts with the objective of strengthening small schools in many of their rural communities. While this can have detrimental effects on communities it is also something important to consider as resources are scarce.[6]

There are also other states like Wyoming, Iowa, Alaska and Nebraska that have historically invested in their small rural schools by having special supports for these schools and/or providing stable, adequate funding that is less dependent on local property taxes.

[1] https://www.governor.state.nm.us/2022/03/01/governor-enacts-historic-raises-for-new-mexico-teachers-bolsters-state-education-staff/

[2] https://excelined.org/2023/05/10/tennessees-grow-your-own-program-a-progress-report/

[3] https://excelined.org/2025/12/07/revitalizing-rural-education-state-policy-solutions-that-support-americas-rural-students/

[4] https://www.swcoedcollaborative.org/

[5] https://www.ncbroadband.gov/news/press-releases/2021/03/04/new-satellite-internet-pilot-program-connect-students-two-nc-counties

[6] https://www.governing.com/policy/as-rural-schools-disappear-policy-battles-emerge-over-consolidation

In addition to these rural focused programs, much of the recent positive press about schools making substantial academic improvements in Mississippi, Alabama and Tennessee has come from rural communities because of sustained state attention and investments in these schools.

In other words, a growing number of states are recognizing rural schools not as marginal systems, but as essential components of strong statewide education strategies and vibrant rural economies.

Despite the fact that Colorado's rural schools comprise most of the state's school districts, and schools being essential for the social and economic health in small rural communities, rural schools are typically only considered an afterthought in education policy discussions.

Keystone Policy Center has recently published a series of reports on the topics of four-day school weeks, rural teacher salaries and teacher housing, all of which are having a significant impact on rural student outcomes and highlight policy areas that should be considered with any inquiry into the future of Colorado's rural districts.

We hope policymakers will dive deeper into better understanding the strengths and challenges facing Colorado's small rural school districts and consider the following ideas.

- **Research and focus:** This could include a rural schools task force to make recommendations, senior leadership at CDE focused on rural districts and schools, and supported research on issues facing these districts. This could build on the current Rural Education Council that serves as an advisory council to the State Commissioner of Education with an expanded scope or as a separate group.
- **Reduced reporting requirements:** Conduct a comprehensive audit of state reporting requirements placed on school districts with the goal of eliminating redundant or unused reports and consolidating remaining requirements into a single streamlined reporting system. Small rural districts often have just a handful of administrative staff, and the current reporting structure consumes a disproportionate share of their time and resources.
- **Accurate rural poverty data:** Review and modify state eligibility and data systems to ensure that rural communities are accurately identified when determining poverty levels and eligibility for grants and other funding streams. Tools designed for urban environments, such as GIS-based poverty mapping and reliance on free-and-reduced-lunch forms, can underestimate poverty in rural areas and inadvertently exclude districts from support.
- **Differentiating resources:** Policymakers should also consider how to ensure rural districts have the necessary resources to offer high quality experiences. This could include consideration of a unique funding model that incorporates the realities of small districts (i.e., large fluctuations in enrollment year over year), specific grant programs, or non-financial resources such as the support of talent pipelines and teacher housing. This could include expanding current programs such as the BEST facilities grant and also stabilizing funding year over year through structural fixes to the funding model.
- **Increase collaboration:** Experiences from Colorado and other states demonstrate the potential of rural districts cross-collaboration Policymakers should consider how to support and incentivize this type of collaboration. One possible strategy would be to strengthen Colorado's rural BOCES system to better support rural districts and create more efficiencies in the system. CDE should encourage voluntary regional cooperation among neighboring districts through BOCES or other partnerships in areas such as transportation, specialized staff, and career and technical education programming.

- **Increase supports:** CDE offers a wide range of resources for districts, from trainings to improvement planning and much more. While rural districts can, and often do, access these supports CDE should consider how tailored supports can be provided. This could include talent-specific supports, training on working in small schools and other topics raised by rural districts.
- **Expand rural teacher pipelines:** Expand "grow your own" teacher pipeline programs, including alternative licensure pathways that allow paraprofessionals, community members and local graduates to become teachers while remaining in their rural communities. Programs such as those operated by several Colorado BOCES have demonstrated success in recruiting and retaining teachers with deep community ties.
- **Consider financial support for increased instructional time:** Consider providing financial resources for four-day school districts that want to expand to five-day weeks or increase instructional time, as Oklahoma recently did. Any such policy should recognize the role that four-day calendars have been seen as a teacher recruitment and retainment tool and the fact that they are popular in some communities.
- **Address compensation and housing:** Explore a variety of strategies to ensure that teachers have a living wage and access to housing in Colorado's rural districts. Examples include the development of a "BEST" like matching program to raise the salaries of Colorado's districts with the lowest salaries. Efforts could include rural salary supplements, housing partnerships or targeted state incentives to help districts recruit and retain educators.

We hope that this report, with its broad focus on the strengths and challenges facing rural school districts, sparks more intensive and comprehensive discussion by Colorado's policymakers about how to better recognize and support rural schools as an essential engine for our state's economic vibrancy and community stability.

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About the Keystone Policy Center

Keystone Policy Center is an independent, non-profit organization founded in 1975 to drive actionable, shared solutions to contentious policy challenges.

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