

PENNSYLVANIA ASSOCIATION OF RURAL AND SMALL SCHOOLS

National Rural Perspectives in Education

Why Rural Matters 2025 — Data, Story, and Action

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Raise your hand if...

Keep it up if the next one is true too.

1 Your school building is older than you are.

2 You have personally handled a job this year that is not in your contract.

3 You know the name of every student in your building.

4 The nearest hospital or urgent care is more than 20 miles from your school.

5 You chose rural on purpose.

That last one matters most. Welcome.

Before the data,

a story.

I spent years as a rural superintendent. I know what it means to make impossible decisions with limited resources, in a community where everyone knows your name and your students by name. This report is personal to me. And I think it will be personal to you too.



Before we begin

What does your community need the world to understand about rural education?

In the next 60 minutes, we will look at what the data says, what it means for Pennsylvania, and how you can use it to make that case — loudly, clearly, and credibly.

Your Presenter

Dr. Melissa Sadorf

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- Assistant Teaching Professor, Northern Arizona University
- Director, NAU Rural Resource Center
- Author, *The Resilient Rural Leader* (ASCD, 2024)
- Host, *The Rural Voice* & *The Rural Scoop*
- Co-Founder, Lead WEL — Rural Women in Educational Leadership

**NATIONALLY
RECOGNIZED
RURAL
EDUCATION
EXPERT**

nrea.net



National Rural Education Association

Founded 1907 • Advancing Rural Education for Over 115 Years

1

Advocacy with Integrity

Giving rural schools a national voice.

2

Research that Informs Practice

Data into action for rural classrooms.

3

Leadership that Builds Community

Connecting educators across rural America.

4

Partnerships that Expand Possibility

Bringing resources to rural places.

5

Celebration of the Rural Advantage

Rural is not less — it is different.

Our 60 Minutes Together

10 min

The National Framework

What Why Rural Matters measures, how it works, and what it found nationally.

5 min

National Key Findings

Six findings every rural leader in Pennsylvania needs to know.

15 min

Pennsylvania's Data Story

All five gauges, your state's rankings, and what the numbers say about PA kids.

5 min

Turn and Talk

What does this confirm or surprise you about your community?

15 min

From Data to Action

Advocacy frameworks, message maps, and pushback responses that work.

10 min

NREA and Getting Involved

How to connect, resources to take home, and next steps together.

The National Framework

*25 years of data. 50 states. One consistent question:
does rural matter?*



Why Rural Matters 2025

11th

Edition

The WRM series began in 2000 — giving us 25 years of trend data to show policymakers.

50+

States

All 50 states plus Bureau of Indian Education schools, included for the first time in 2025.

25

Indicators

Five composite gauges, five indicators each, equally weighted to produce one priority ranking.

Free

To Download

The full report, all state profiles, and the communication toolkit are free at nrea.net.

Five Gauges. Five Questions.

Each gauge contains five equally weighted indicators. Higher ranking = greater urgency.

1

Rural Education Footprint

How rural is Pennsylvania's educational system?

Notable Crucial

2

Student and Family Characteristics

Who are Pennsylvania's rural students and families?

Fair Urgent

3

Educational Policy Context

What policy conditions shape rural schooling?

Notable Crucial

4

Educational Outcomes

How are rural students performing?

Fair Urgent

5

Access to Supports for Well-Being

Can rural students access health and well-being supports?

Fair Urgent

The definition of rural just changed.

The 2025 U.S. Census Bureau update to rural locale definitions has shifted how students are classified nationally. This means state rankings changed - not because conditions changed, but because the measuring stick changed.

Why it matters for Pennsylvania:

Policy assumptions built on old definitions may no longer accurately target the students most in need. If your district was reclassified, your funding eligibility, reporting obligations, and grant access may all be affected. Verify your locale classification.

Key Finding 2 of 6

Bureau of Indian Education schools show dire need.

183

BIE schools
across the country

86%

of BIE students
attend rural schools

14.7%

of rural BIE students
are unhoused

63.9%

rural graduation rate
(vs. 89.4% nationally)

Added to WRM for the first time in 2025. Their inclusion reveals significant gaps that demand national attention - and inform how we think about equity for the most underserved rural students in America.

Rural America is far more diverse than the narrative suggests.

The rural diversity index of 34.3% means there is better than a 1-in-3 chance that two students randomly selected from the same rural school will identify as different races or ethnicities.

42%

increase in rural
ML students over
10 years

Pennsylvania context:

PA's rural diversity index is 22.7% — less diverse than the national rural average of 34.3%. But that average masks significant variation across PA's rural regions. Programs and resources designed around a homogeneous rural student body will miss real student needs.

Rural students have less access to healthcare than their peers.

297:1

Rural students
per counselor/
psychologist

national avg

6.4%

Rural students
without health
insurance

vs. 5.7% non-rural

322:1

Rural students
per primary
care clinician

national avg

These are not education statistics. They are equity statistics — and they show up in classrooms every day.

Lower mobility and housing instability are signs of rural community strength.

7.8%

rural household mobility rate
vs. 9.7% nationally

Rural students are 2.7% unhoused, slightly below the national average of 3.0%.

Stability is not luck. It is the product of communities that hold together — and schools that are the center of that holding.

This is the story to tell legislators. Rural communities are not chaotic. They are rooted.

Key Finding 6 of 6

The NAEP data holds a story most people haven't heard.

Non-Rural Gr. 4

-5.2

Reading drop

-2.7 in math

Rural Gr. 4

-3.4

Reading drop — less than non-rural

Rural Gr. 8 OUTSCORED non-rural in both reading and math

Nationally, rural schools are holding ground better than urban and suburban schools. Pennsylvania is the striking exception — the largest Grade 4 decline in the nation. That makes PA's story a policy conversation, not a rural character flaw.

Pennsylvania's Data Story

What the numbers say about 290,000 rural students in the Keystone State.



Pennsylvania — At a Glance

PRIORITY
RANKING

31

Significant

290,414

rural public school students

5th largest rural enrollment in the US

28.3%

of PA schools are rural

Rank 33 nationally

19.2%

of PA students are rural

Above national average of 16.7%

3.7%

in remote rural districts

Much lower than US avg of 18.7%

Pennsylvania has the 5th largest rural student population in the country — that is not a footnote. That is a constituency.

Before we look at the data...

290,000
rural students in Pennsylvania.

More than 3 times the population of Erie, Pennsylvania's third-largest city.

They are not a footnote. They are the reason we are in this room.





Behind every number is a name.

290,000 is not an abstraction. It is a third grader in a school with no reading specialist. A high schooler bussing 45 minutes each way. A principal who is also the counselor, the coach, and the only consistent adult in a child's life. When we look at this data, we are looking at them.

Gauge 1: Rural Education Footprint

Rank 36

Important

| Indicator | Pennsylvania | U.S. | Rank |
|------------------------------------|----------------|------------------|-------------|
| Percent rural schools | 28.3% | 30.7% | #33 |
| Percent small rural districts | 9.3% | 50.0% | #36 |
| Percent rural students | 19.2% | 16.7% | #33 |
| Number of rural students | 290,414 | 94,593 (med.) | #5 ★ |
| Rural students in remote districts | 3.7% | 18.7% | #43 |

290,000 rural students ranks 5th nationally in absolute terms. That is not a small state issue — that is a major rural education responsibility.

Gauge 2: Student and Family Characteristics

Rank 41

Serious — Pennsylvania's rural students are comparatively stable and less impoverished than many states.

| Indicator | Pennsylvania | U.S. | Rank |
|---|--------------|-------|------|
| Rural diversity index | 22.7% | 34.3% | #36 |
| Poverty level in rural school communities | 322% | 290% | #39 |
| Children experiencing poverty | 11.8% | 14.2% | #26 |
| Percent rural multilingual learners | 1.7% | 5.6% | #42 |
| Percent rural household mobility | 6.3% | 7.8% | #39 |

Lower poverty and mobility are genuine strengths. These numbers also tell you where PA rural schools differ from national stereotypes.

Gauge 3: Educational Policy Context

Rank 10
CRUCIAL

This is Pennsylvania's biggest structural vulnerability.

| Indicator | Pennsylvania | U.S. | Rank |
|--|-----------------|----------|---------------|
| Rural instructional expenditures per pupil | \$10,923 | \$8,417 | #39 |
| Ratio of instruction to transportation spending | \$9.25 | \$11.54 | #7 ⚠️ |
| Instructional salaries for special education | 10.0% | 11.8% | #2 ⚠️ |
| State revenue to schools per local dollar | \$0.86 | \$1.25 | #12 ⚠️ |
| Rural adjusted salary per instructional FTE | \$88,403 | \$83,256 | #29 |

The Transportation Problem in Pennsylvania

\$9.25

spent on instruction

for every \$1 on transportation

Rank #7 — 6 states spend less on instruction relative to transportation

National average:

**\$11.54 per
transportation dollar**

Pennsylvania's rural schools spend proportionally more on getting students to school than on educating them once they arrive. This is a geographic reality — but it is also a policy choice about how transportation costs are funded.

\$0.86 in state support per local dollar raised. Only 11 states rely more heavily on local tax bases to fund rural schools.

Gauge 4: Educational Outcomes

Rank 22
URGENT

Pennsylvania holds a distinction that demands urgent attention.

#1
Largest Gr. 4 Reading
Drop in the Nation
-14.9 pts (US avg: -3.4)

#1
Largest Gr. 4 Math
Drop in the Nation
-14.0 pts (US avg: +0.3)

Grade 8 NAEP Reading
PA: 263.1 | US: 257.5 | Rank #37

Grade 8 NAEP Math
PA: 285.8 | US: 273.7 | Rank #45 ★



Rural HS Graduation Rate
PA: 92.0% | US: 89.4% | Rank #40 ★

Grade 4 is the crisis. Grade 8 and graduation show PA rural students CAN and DO perform. The Gr. 4 decline is a warning sign about what is coming - and it is urgent.

Gauge 5: Access to Supports for Well-Being

Rank 27
Serious

A mixed picture — some positive indicators alongside real gaps.

| Indicator | Pennsylvania | U.S. | Rank |
|---|--------------|-------|---|
| Rural students per psychologist/counselor | 250 | 297 | #33 |
| Percent rural children who are unhoused | 1.9% | 2.7% | #31 |
| Children without health insurance | 8.4% | 6.4% | #11  |
| Rural enrollment in public preschool | 33.8% | 40.2% | #12  |
| Rural students per primary care clinician | 237 | 322 | #39 |

8.4% of rural students without health insurance ranks PA 11th most concerning. Preschool enrollment at 33.8% is below national average. Two specific areas for targeted policy asks.

Pennsylvania's Rural Strengths

Name these. Protect these. Use these to earn advocacy credibility.

5th Largest Rural Enrollment

290,414 rural students. PA has more rural kids than most states will ever count. The scale demands attention and investment.

92% Graduation Rate

Above the national rural average of 89.4%. Rural PA students finish high school at strong rates — despite funding constraints.

250 Students Per Counselor

Better than the national rural average of 297:1. PA rural schools are investing in student mental health access.

Better Primary Care Access

237 students per clinician vs. 322 nationally. Rural PA communities maintain healthcare infrastructure many states have lost.

Lower Mobility and Homelessness

6.3% household mobility vs. 7.8% nationally. 1.9% unhoused vs. 2.7% nationally. Stability is a PA rural asset.

Above-Average Gr. 8 Scores

NAEP Grade 8 reading and math scores both exceed national rural averages. Older rural students are performing.

Pennsylvania's Rural Urgencies

These are the data points that should anchor every policy conversation.

#1 Largest Grade 4 Reading Drop

Down 14.9 points from 2019-2024. The national rural average was -3.4. Pennsylvania's drop is more than 4x the average.

#1 Largest Grade 4 Math Drop

Down 14.0 points when the national rural average was essentially flat at +0.3. Both reading and math: the largest declines in the nation.

Transportation Costs — Rank 7

Only \$9.25 in instruction per transportation dollar vs. \$11.54 nationally. Geography costs money — and PA rural schools are absorbing it.

Health Insurance Gap

8.4% of rural students are uninsured, well above the national average of 6.4%. Rank 11 most concerning nationally.

\$0.86 State Support Per Local Dollar

PA provides only 86 cents in state funding for every local tax dollar raised. Only 11 states are more reliant on the local tax base.

Preschool Enrollment Deficit

33.8% rural preschool enrollment vs. 40.2% nationally. Rank 12 most concerning — missing critical early learning access.

Look around this room.

These are the people who stayed.

Who chose rural — on purpose.

Who show up in the hardest buildings, with the fewest resources, every single day.

The data we just looked at is urgent.

And so is this room.

Now let us talk about what you can do with it.



TURN AND TALK

5 Minutes

1

Which piece of Pennsylvania data confirmed something you already knew — and which one surprised you?

2

If you could share just ONE number from today with your state legislator, which one would you choose and why?

3

The Grade 4 NAEP drop is #1 in the nation. What is one thing happening in your district that might help explain it?

Be ready to share one insight with the full group.

From Data to Action

How rural leaders turn research into advocacy that actually moves things.



What Wins in Policy Conversations — and What Loses

Field-tested. From legislative offices to state boards.

| WINS |
|--|
| One clear, specific ask |
| One WRM proof point - a pattern, not a data dump |
| One local reality sentence from your district |
| One student impact line that puts a face on the number |

| LOSES |
|---|
| Six asks in one meeting |
| Long context without any request attached |
| Local frustration without a proposed solution |
| Rankings without a story that explains what they mean |

The Four-Part Advocacy Conversation

One conversation. Four moves. Practice it until it is natural.

1 The Data Point

The research shows...

Name one WRM finding specific to Pennsylvania. One number. One pattern. Not a list - a single, clear signal.

Example:

Pennsylvania's Grade 4 reading scores had the largest decline of any state in the nation between 2019 and 2024.

2 Your Local Reality

In our district...

Connect the national or state data to something specific in your community. Give it an address. Make it real.

Example:

In our district, we saw that same pattern — and we are a K-12 school with one reading specialist.

3 The Student Impact

This means that our students...

Translate the policy gap into a human consequence. A child, a family, a teacher. Not a statistic - a story.

Example:

This means a third grader who is already behind now has even less access to the support that could change her trajectory.

4 The Ask

We are asking you to...

One action. Specific. Achievable. Clear on what success looks like and who is responsible for it.

Example:

We are asking you to fund the rural literacy initiative in the state budget - before the end of this session.

Common Pushback — and How to Respond

You will hear these. Know them before you walk in.

We cannot fund everything.

We are not asking for everything. One action, one area, one documented barrier. WRM shows exactly where the pressure is. Let us start there.

Is this just your district or is it statewide?

Pennsylvania ranks 31st nationally. The Grade 4 NAEP drop is the worst in the country. This is not a single district story - this is a statewide rural education pattern.

Do rankings really capture the full picture?

Rankings are how we find the pattern. The pattern is what matters. Use the data to show the trend - then make the ask. The rank is just the door into the conversation.

Rural schools have always managed with less.

Yes. And they have done it remarkably well - the graduation rate and Grade 8 scores prove that. But managing with less is not the same as being funded equitably. These students have earned better.

Three Advocacy Moves for Pennsylvania

1

Lead With the Grade 4 NAEP Story

Largest in the nation - and it is not close.

Pennsylvania's Grade 4 reading and math drops are both ranked #1 worst nationally. The national rural average for reading dropped 3.4 points. PA dropped 14.9. That gap does not happen without an underlying policy failure. Lead with this in every conversation about rural education in Pennsylvania.

2

Name the Transportation Funding Problem

PA ranks 7th worst nationally on instruction-to-transportation ratio.

Pennsylvania's rural schools spend only \$9.25 on instruction for every dollar spent on transportation. The national average is \$11.54. This is not geography - it is a funding structure that forces rural schools to choose between getting students there and educating them once they arrive.

3

Celebrate What Works - Then Make the Ask

Your strengths are your credibility.

92% graduation rate. Grade 8 scores above national averages. Lower homelessness. Lower mobility. Rural Pennsylvania schools are doing extraordinary things with inadequate resources. Name that first. Then ask: imagine what equitable investment could make possible.

TURN AND TALK

5 Minutes

1

What is one advocacy move you could make in the next 30 days using what you learned today?

2

Who is the one person (at the district, state, or community level) who most needs to see Pennsylvania's WRM data?

3

What is one thing you want to take back to your team from this session?

Be ready to share one action with the group.

I want to tell you why I do this work.



Rural schools do not need more data. They need leaders who will stand up and use it on behalf of rural students. What's your Why?

NREA — and How to Get Involved

This work is bigger than one session. Here is how to keep going.



Why NREA Membership Matters

01

Access the Research

Full access to Why Rural Matters, research reports, and the communication toolkit — free for members. Updated every two years. Check out The Rural Educator journal.

02

National Advocacy Voice

NREA represents rural education at the federal level. Your membership amplifies advocacy in Washington on behalf of rural schools.

03

Professional Community

Connect with rural educators, leaders, and researchers across all 50 states. You are not doing this alone.

04

NFARE

National Forum to Advance Rural Education — NREA's annual fall conference for professional development, research, and advocacy.

05

The Rural Voice

NREA's podcast featuring rural leaders, researchers, and policymakers. Stories from the field, delivered to your commute.

06

Rural Principal Fellowship (New!)

A year-long fellowship for rural principals launching in 2025 — convening at NFARE, virtual sessions, and a 2027 capstone. Applications coming soon.

07

Rural Women in Educational Leadership (Coming soon)

Annual summit for rural women in educational leadership. Professional development, networking, and community built for rural women leaders.

08

Research Partnerships

NREA connects members to grant opportunities, externally funded research projects, and higher education partnerships.

nrea.net | [Join or learn more today.](#)

PARSS and NREA - Stronger Together

What PARSS Does for Pennsylvania

- Deep roots in Pennsylvania's rural education landscape
- Advocacy at the state legislative level
- Professional development tailored to PA rural context
- Community of practice for rural leaders statewide
- Direct relationships with PA Department of Education

What NREA Brings to the Table

- National research and data - including WRM
- Federal advocacy and policy voice
- Connection to 50-state rural education network
- Research partnerships and grant support
- National conference and professional community

Together, PARSS and NREA can amplify Pennsylvania's rural story from Harrisburg to Washington. The data exists. The network exists. What rural PA needs is leaders willing to use both.

Your 90-Day Action Plan

Concrete. Manageable. Starting this week.

Days 1–30

Get Grounded

- Download the PA profile and full WRM 2025 report at nrea.net
- Share the Grade 4 NAEP slide with your board at next meeting
- Identify your district's one strongest data point and one most urgent gap

Days 31–60

Start Conversations

- Schedule a meeting with your state representative or senator
- Use the Message Map framework to prepare - one ask only
- Connect with PARSS leadership to coordinate a statewide message

Days 61–90

Amplify and Sustain

- Share the PA WRM data with your local newspaper or community forum
- Bring one colleague into the conversation - share this deck
- Join NREA and connect to the national rural education network

Take These With You

Full WRM 2025 Report

nrea.net/research/why-rural-matters/

Free download. All 50 state profiles, national findings, and topical essays.

Pennsylvania State Profile

WRM 2025 Report — Page 118

All five gauges, all 25 indicators, PA vs. US comparisons in one page.

WRM Communication Toolkit + FAQ

nrea.net/research/why-rural-matters/

Pre-written messaging, advocacy language, and FAQ to adapt for your community.

NREA Membership

nrea.net/membership/

Join the national organization that produced this report and advocates for your students.

The Rural Voice

nrea.net/podcast

NREA's podcast featuring rural leaders, researchers, and policymakers. New episodes regularly.

Contact Melissa

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Questions about the report, NREA membership, or advocacy strategy for your community.

People. Place. Possibility.

*Rural education is not a problem to be managed.
It is a national asset to be invested in.*

Pennsylvania's rural leaders show up every day for students who deserve every advantage. You now have the data to prove it — and the framework to demand the investment it requires.

melissa@nrea.net | nrea.net | NFARE October 19-21, 2026, San Antonio

