

How School Vouchers Hurt Rural Communities

Public schools are the foundations of rural communities. They provide the [community space](#) where neighbors gather, the local entertainment on Friday nights, and the support services families rely on. Public schools even fuel rural communities' economies, since they are often the [main employers](#) in town. Nearly [1 in 5 students in the US attend a rural school](#), and across the country more than [27,000 rural schools](#) educate 9.8 million students every year. However, the rise of school voucher programs, which provide public funding for students to attend private school, poses a significant threat to rural schools, students, and communities.

Here's why.

1. **Rural schools stand to lose the most state funding when school voucher programs are implemented.**

- a. School voucher programs can force the state to decrease funding for school districts
 - i. Rural school districts [rely heavily](#) on funding from the state, since their lower population densities mean they raise less money through local taxes. This is especially true for low-income rural areas.
 - ii. In [many states](#) most of the students using vouchers were previously homeschooled or attended private school, meaning that the state didn't pay for their education. These students represent a new cost the state must fit into its existing budget.
 - iii. To do so, the state may have to cut back on the amount of funds it sends to school districts. **Since rural school districts rely more on state funding, any reduction in state funding for education will [affect them more](#).**
- b. In addition to this reduction in state funding, when a student uses a voucher, their public school loses the per-student funding it would have received from the state to educate them. Since student bodies in rural areas tend to be smaller, this cut has a [larger impact](#) on rural schools' budgets.

In Kentucky, [one study](#) estimated that **eight rural school districts would have to cut their budgets by 20% if the state implemented a school voucher program.** The two largest urban school districts would have their budgets cut by less than half that.

What does this mean for students?

Rural schools may be forced to cut enrichment programs, such as extracurriculars, and community events. This is because schools still have fixed costs, such as transportation, building maintenance, and administrative staff, that remain the same regardless of enrollment. In fact, some of these costs are higher in rural areas due to their small and dispersed populations. To cover these fixed costs, schools may have to cut things like sports, art & music classes, afterschool programs, and school-sponsored family events. If enough students leave public schools, this could even mean cutting staff. This results in a less enriching, less engaging, and lower-quality education for students. Alternatively, districts may be forced to increase property taxes to make up for any lost state funding due to vouchers. This means a larger [tax burden](#) on residents even if they don't use school vouchers.

As one rural educator [noted](#): *"If we lose five or 10 students, that's {equivalent to} a teacher salary. But we can't afford to have one less teacher, so now we're cutting academic programs, we're cutting sports, we're cutting the things that this community relies on."*

2. **Fewer private schools exist in rural communities, making it hard if not impossible for rural families to use school vouchers.**

- a. Only [34% of rural students](#) have a private school within five miles of them, compared with 92% of urban students.
- b. In Tennessee, [42%](#) of rural school districts have **no private schools at all**.
- c. The private schools that do exist in rural areas are often few and far between, meaning rural students must [travel long distances](#) to attend them. This extra travel time can put a strain on families or make attending these schools simply unfeasible.
- d. Furthermore, just because voucher programs exist does not mean private schools have to admit all students using them. There is no guarantee that the few private schools in rural areas will accept students using vouchers.
- e. Additionally, if voucher programs are implemented, it is unlikely that more private schools would open in rural areas since these communities often have fewer students overall.

What does this mean for students?

The lack of private schools in rural areas means that families in rural communities may not be able to use a school voucher, **even though their taxes help fund them.**

Vouchers do not serve rural communities; instead they drain much-needed funds without expanding educational options for students. As [one educator](#) put it, **"Our public school system is our town...[Vouchers] would create all types of division — a racial divide, a social status divide, monetary divide as well as academic and extracurricular division."** Tell your legislator to oppose school vouchers. For more information, visit edtrust.org/vouchers.