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## Overview

Rural areas cover more than 70 percent of land in the United States, comprising about 15 percent of the nation's total population. The rural population is decreasing, aging and highly migratory, and, as a result, these communities present unique challenges in providing quality educational opportunities with limited resources. This lack of access means rural residents are more likely to have lower educational attainment and suffer from [negative health or lifestyle outcomes](#).

[Research shows](#) consistent participation in afterschool programs can decrease dropout rates, improve school attendance and reduce risky activity in older youth. However, it is particularly difficult to connect youth with high-quality afterschool and summer programming in rural areas. Despite these challenges, the potential benefits are substantial. By increasing students' access to high-quality afterschool programs, rural communities can decrease their likelihood of developing problem behaviors and create more opportunities for success.

This brief outlines the state of rural afterschool resources and the challenges unique to the rural afterschool setting. It also highlights one state's policy efforts to support rural programs and presents examples of rural community programs using creative solutions to address students' afterschool needs.



## Afterschool Participation in Rural Areas

In a [2016 report](#), an Afterschool Alliance survey estimates that more than 3 million school-age children in rural communities would participate in an afterschool program if one were available. Currently, only 13 percent of rural children participate in afterschool programs, compared with 25 percent of urban children. Most rural program offerings are similar to those in urban areas; however, rural students are more likely to participate in city-run programs (such as a parks and recreation department) or 4-H than their urban counterparts.

## Challenges Unique to the Rural Context

Barriers to rural afterschool participation include affordability and availability—problems that plague urban and rural parents alike. But there are other obstacles unique to or exacerbated by the rural context:

■ **Funding.** While many afterschool programs struggle to make ends meet regardless of geographic context, rural areas are [particularly challenged](#) by a smaller pool of resources. Local governments may fund afterschool programming, but a smaller tax base limits that subsidy. Without a broad base of local organizations in the business, nonprofit and higher education sectors, rural programs struggle to diversify their partnerships and achieve sustainability.

■ **Staff.** Rural communities also have a smaller pool from which to draw qualified staff, and they lack the resources to offer competitive pay, benefits and professional development to incentivize retention. Many rural areas have few higher education institutes nearby, so career pathways for afterschool professionals are difficult to cultivate.

■ **Transportation.** Schools in rural areas spend more per pupil on transportation due to low population density and school consolidation. [Absent additional funding](#) for afterschool transportation, parents are often unable to enroll their children due to transportation conflicts.

■ **Facilities.** The Afterschool Alliance [reports](#) that rural programs are less likely to take place in school buildings than urban programs. There are fewer spaces available for programming, and finding a location equidistant for participants poses a challenge in sparsely populated areas.

■ **Programming.** Rural providers point out that high-quality programming resources on the state or national level do not necessarily translate to the rural context. For example, best practices research encourages providers to partner with local higher education or professional organizations to boost career exposure for participants. However, [rural communities may not have access](#) to these opportunities.

## State Policy Initiatives

California has the largest state-funded afterschool program in the country, the [After School Education and Safety](#) (ASES) program. To ensure rural students are not prevented from participating in ASES programs, the state passed legislation in 2015 to provide [supplemental transportation grants](#) to programs in areas classified with “frontier” status. Funding began in the 2017-18 school year, and all programs with this classification are eligible for funding of up to \$15,000 per site.

## Rural Program Highlights

### THINK MAKE CREATE LABS IN NEBRASKA

Creative solutions were required to provide high-quality, project-based learning to students across the state. Beyond School Bells, a public-private partnership with the Nebraska Children and Families Foundation, came up with the [Think Make Create labs](#). These 6-foot by 12-foot trailers travel to existing expanded learning opportunity programs and provide supplemental hands-on learning to students. With 10 trailers currently operating across the state, these mobile labs are ideally designed to provide rural students with unique learning opportunities.

### SHINE IN PENNSYLVANIA

Since 2007, the [Schools & Homes in Education](#) (SHINE) program has provided wrap-around services in two rural Pennsylvania counties, including a high-quality afterschool program. Through partnerships with local higher education and school districts, the program has more than tripled its number of children served with a curriculum focused on Science, Technology, Engineering, Art and Math (STEAM) education and career exposure. Independent evaluators found positive impacts on enrollees’ academic achievement, attendance and STEAM knowledge.

## Conclusion/How Can States Help

Understanding the needs of the rural constituency presents its own challenge to policymakers; nine states have formed [legislative committees, councils and agencies](#) tasked with studying the issues unique to rural areas around workforce, health and education. By developing a complete picture of rural resources and conditions, legislators can craft policy solutions to address the needs of its rural residents. Providing quality education and improving student outcomes later in life can be supplemented by high-quality afterschool and summer learning programs, but creative solutions, such as the ones highlighted in this brief, are essential to overcome the unique barriers rural populations face.

