

Raise the Bar: Supporting Rural Communities



Achieving Academic Excellence
Comprehensive and Rigorous Education

Goal: Ensure all students have access to a comprehensive and rigorous education with high-quality instruction that prepares them to be active, engaged, and lifelong learners.

This document is part of the “Raise the Bar: Supporting Rural Communities” series, which is intended to highlight areas of strength and opportunities for growth in rural schools as it relates to Raise the Bar focus areas. To learn more about Raise the Bar, visit www.ed.gov/raisethebar.

Introduction

“Raise the Bar: Lead the World” is the U.S. Department of Education’s (Department’s) call to transform public education and ensure all students have the resources needed to reach their full potential. **Achieving Academic Excellence** is a key focus area of Raise the Bar, which calls on the nation to ensure that students receive an education that prepares them to reach new heights of academic achievement by **delivering a comprehensive and rigorous education** for all students.

Rural communities often face unique challenges in the pursuit of academic excellence, including gaps in digital access and early childhood education, and resources to provide a range of advanced courses. At the same time, rural communities possess unique qualities that can set them up for success. This brief focuses on three relevant issue areas for rural communities in their work to deliver a comprehensive and rigorous education: **(1) eliminating the digital divide, (2) increasing access to early childhood education, and (3) increasing access to rigorous and innovative coursework.**

Eliminating the Digital Divide(s)

Many students faced barriers to increased academic achievement due to pandemic-related learning interruptions. These were felt acutely in rural communities where digital access can be weak, inconsistent, and expensive. In 2020, 37 percent of students in rural areas [reported inadequate internet connectivity](#) at home. Data from 2023 [showed that](#) the adult urban-rural broadband gap was 13 percent— 86 percent of urban adults subscribed to home broadband, compared to 73 percent of rural adults.

During the Biden-Harris Administration, rural communities have made significant strides in closing gaps in connectivity and access to technology. For example, the [Affordable Connectivity Program](#) connected 23 million households—many in rural and/or tribal communities—to the internet before the program expired in May 2024. Using federal pandemic relief dollars, grant funds from the Bipartisan Infrastructure Law (including investments like the [Tribal Broadband Connectivity Program](#)), and the Federal Communications Commission’s (FCC) [E-Rate](#) program — states and local communities have invested in high-speed broadband in rural schools, libraries, and students’ homes. In 2022-2024 alone, the E-Rate program benefitted [54,367,186 students](#). Moving forward, states can increase connectivity using funds from the National Telecommunications and Information Agency (NTIA)’s \$42.5 billion [Broadband Equity, Access, and Deployment \(BEAD\) Program](#), and \$2.75 billion [Digital Equity Act Programs](#) to expand high-speed Internet

access by funding planning, infrastructure deployment, and adoption programs to states and territories. In the fiscal year (FY) 2024 application for the Department's [Small, Rural School Achievement Program \(SRSA\) funds](#), 53 percent of local educational agencies (LEAs) indicated plans to use SRSA funds for technology and 33 percent on non-device technology expenditures.

Beyond [digital access](#), rural communities are also working to bridge gaps in [digital use](#) (improving how students use technology to enhance their learning) and [digital design](#) (providing opportunities for educators' professional learning and building capacity to design tech-enabled learning experiences).



Washington is working to bridge both digital design and access gaps with its [Digital Equity and Inclusion Grant](#), which funds districts to pursue a range of digital equity strategies, such as establishing a one-to-one device ratio and training teachers to use educational technology and better support inclusion using technology. Recognizing the barriers that rural districts face applying for and managing grants, the state educational agency dedicated support to help rural districts apply for this grant and provided personalized coaching and support to rural recipients.

Increasing Access to Early Learning Opportunities

Rural communities often face gaps in access to [high quality early learning experiences](#) from birth through third grade, which have implications for children's [immediate and long-term school success](#).

As part of Raise the Bar, the Department has embraced a [two-track strategy](#) to support early school success: expand access to high quality preschool and ensure kindergarten is a sturdier bridge between the early years and early grades. The Department collaborates closely with the Department of Health and Human Services on early childhood health, development, and learning from birth to kindergarten entry. The Department has developed [resources](#) to support young learners' early school success with a focus on students with the least access, including rural low-income students. These resources include [guidance on using Title I funds for preschool](#), [technical assistance such as the Kindergarten Sturdy Bridge Learning Community](#), and various discretionary grants. Research also shows that rural families [rely more on Head Start](#) for early education. In FY2024, Head Start saw an increase of more than \$275 million over FY2023 with a total appropriation of \$12.27 billion.



States have worked to expand rural early learning access and provide a sturdy bridge from early childhood to kindergarten. [Yoncalla Early Works](#) in rural **Oregon** is the result of a partnership between Head Start, Yoncalla School District, the Children's Institute, the Ford Family Foundation, and the South Central Learning Hub (among others), who have come together to provide high-quality learning opportunities from birth to age eight in this rural town of 1,100. A central piece of this partnership is the neighborhood school approach they have embraced. Family voice and empowerment are critical in Yoncalla, and the initiative provides early learning and health supports while engaging families and sharing leadership among all partners, including families. Thanks to the involvement of Yoncalla School District and the alignment of family, district, and early learning priorities, children are offered elementary school-aligned early learning experiences so that learners transition seamlessly from preschool into kindergarten and beyond.

In September 2024, the Department announced a [new Center for Early School Success](#). This Center will support states and LEAs in implementing Raise the Bar aligned early learning strategies including comprehensive and aligned early learning systems, kindergarten transitions, everyday attendance, and evidence-based instructional practices.

Increasing Access to Rigorous and Innovative Coursework

Ensuring that every student has access to a full range of academic coursework, including opportunities for advanced and specialized courses, is [critical to student engagement and success](#) in college and career. Small school sizes, funding inequities, and shortages of qualified educators can limit rural schools' ability to offer the full range of advanced and specialized courses that allow students to pursue their interests and prepare for college and career. Rural districts have increasingly looked to solve this problem by sharing access to courses across school districts, allowing each district to offer more courses than they would have been able to offer individually.

The Department offers a range of resources that can be used to support access to advanced coursework, including eligible formula funding and competitive grants. The [Rural Postsecondary and Economic Development Grant Program](#) supports projects to improve rates of postsecondary enrollment, persistence, and completion among rural students through development of high-quality career pathways aligned to high-skill, high-wage, and in-demand industry sectors and occupations in the region. The [Career-Connected High Schools Grant Program](#) funds projects (with at least a quarter of funds earmarked for rural schools) that aim to transform public high schools by expanding existing and implementing new strategies to help students identify and navigate pathways to postsecondary education through career preparation, dual enrollment, workforce credentials, and work-based learning. While neither of these programs is currently open, competitions open periodically as funds are available.



Additionally, some states fund access to online learning to increase access to rigorous coursework that rural districts may not have the staff or minimum number of students to offer: **Montana** offers access to advanced and specialized coursework to students online through [Montana Digital Academy](#). The academy, whose instructors are Montana public educators, places an emphasis on rural access, offering dual credit, AP courses and classes in subjects like Artificial Intelligence and Indigenous languages.



The [Rural School Innovation Zone](#) in South **Texas** is a partnership made up of five districts and six institutions of higher education. These partners came together to create a cross-district collaborative that works to provide career-technical education academies open to students in all five districts. The collaborative funds students' transportation to attend classes, offers students dual credit and/or industry recognized credentials, and promotes collaboration and innovation among districts to develop regional solutions—a range of options that the districts would not have been able to provide alone. The Texas Legislature recently enacted House Bill 2209, which establishes incentives for similar multi-district [Rural Pathway Excellence Partnerships \(R-PEP\)](#). Through this, districts with less than 1,600 students can develop similar collaborative partnerships to support robust pathways programs.

Questions for State and Local Policymakers

State and local policymakers working to remove barriers and increase support for rural communities to provide a comprehensive and rigorous education can consider the following questions as they develop strategies to advance this work:

Digital Divide

- What proportion of your rural communities have access to high-speed broadband? What are your state's current plans for filling gaps in access over the short and long term?
- Does your state educational agency play an active role in procuring high-quality education technology (such as devices, digital programs/curricula, and relevant-professional learning) for schools? If not, how might the state use this strategy to increase rural schools' capacity and purchasing power for high-quality educational technology?



Want additional detailed action resources for school, local and state leaders working to overcome the digital divide? Explore Appendix 1 of the Department's 2024 [National Educational Technology Plan](#).

Early Learning

- How many Head Start and public Pre-K slots exist in your state? How many in rural communities?
- Are districts and early learning providers in your rural communities collaborating to offer early learning experiences that create a sturdy bridge into kindergarten and beyond?
- How might expanding access to early learning opportunities influence workforce participation and economic mobility in your state's rural communities?
- How can your state support local communities to braid state, local, and federal investments (such as Title I, Part A, Rural Education Achievement Program, Migrant Education Program funds, for example) to expand early learning access in rural schools?

Increasing Access to Rigorous and Innovative Coursework

- What creative solutions (such as regional and online coursework) does your state currently support to ensure that rural students have access to advanced coursework, college credit-bearing courses, career-technical education, and work-based learning?
- What role can your state's K-12 and higher education agencies play in ensuring that rural students have equitable access to high-quality advanced coursework?
- Does state law support the expansion of access to career-technical education pathways, advanced courses, and dual enrollment?



Want to learn more about your state's policies that impact career pathways programs in the areas of Dual Enrollment, Work-based Learning, Workforce Credentials, and Career Advising and Navigation? [This map highlights](#) state-specific policies across the country.



Disclaimer: The resources and examples listed here include links to information created by other public and private organizations. These links are provided for the user's convenience. The Department does not control or guarantee the accuracy, relevance, timeliness, or completeness of this non-Department information. The inclusion of these links is not intended to reflect their importance, nor is it intended to endorse views expressed, or products or services offered, on these non-Department sites.