

# Rural New York schools grapple with declining population, increasing poverty

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A recent report has highlighted the dire development of increasing poverty and declining enrollment many rural school districts are facing across New York state, forcing these districts to choose between making onerous cuts, combining with other districts, or closing schools within the district, thus forcing students to travel longer distances.

According to a report titled “Demographic Challenges Facing Rural Schools: Declining Enrollment and Growing Poverty” by the New York State Association of School Business Officials, the dual phenomena of increased poverty and lower enrollment are wreaking havoc on local school budgets, which are primarily funded by local property taxes.

Calling enrollment declines “omnipresent,” the report states that “96.7 percent of rural school districts had declining enrollment and 84.9 percent had drops of at least ten percent.”

While the rate and overall population in poverty is still higher in New York’s suburban and urban school districts, the poverty rate in rural areas is increasing at a noticeably faster pace.

From 2003 to 2015, the poverty rate for school-age children increased from 14 percent to 18 percent for children in rural school districts and from 19 percent to 21 percent for children in non-rural school districts. For both rural and non-rural school districts the greatest jump in poverty rates occurred between 2009 and 2011 following the 2008 financial crisis.

Another measure of the economic plight of school children is the percentage of children receiving free or reduced priced lunches. In rural school districts 48.3 percent of students receive free or reduced priced lunches, and that number rises to 53.2 percent of students in non-rural districts. A student is eligible for free or reduced priced lunch when his or her family

makes less than 185 percent of the poverty level.

Although the report was released to shed light on the challenges facing rural school districts, it made clear that poverty among the state’s school children has no geographic limits. According the report, “The combination of poverty and Free- and Reduced-Price Lunch (FRPL) data show that a little more than one in every five schoolchildren in New York lives in poverty, while a little more than half of all school children face significant economic constraints at home.”

The report compiled data from the 340 rural school districts, which make up about half of those in New York State, but serve only a little more than 11 percent of the students.

The report noted that the population losses and increases in poverty cannot be separated from the financial crisis of 2008, stating “for a few years prior to the onset of the Great Recession, growth rates in urban and rural counties were closely related. Beginning in 2008, rural populations entered a period of sustained decline, while urban populations continued to grow, though their pace of growth slowed after 2011.”

According to United States Census data, the emptying of much of rural America can be directly connected to the shrinking number of jobs in non-metro areas, as the rural job market is now 4.26 percent smaller than it was in 2008.

Speaking to the *Daily Star* of Oneonta, NY, the rural Delaware Academy School District’s Superintendent Jason Thomson stated that the current 47 percent of students who qualify for free or reduced price meals is the “highest we’ve ever seen.”

In addition, many of the rural counties mentioned in the report have also been hit hard by the opioid epidemic, claiming the lives of young workers and reducing an already declining population. Tioga

County, for instance, lost up to 10 percent of its population between 2002 and 2016 and averaged 16.7 opioid deaths from 2013 to 2015 according to New York state.

With rapidly declining enrollment, rural schools are forced to count on smaller and smaller budgets with each succeeding school year, resulting in cuts to classes, teachers, programs and extracurricular activities and an overall sense of living in a world with scant opportunities for future life.

As the report states, rural “schools may have to cut back on valuable academic and enrichment opportunities, from Advanced Placement courses to music and sports programs, when they no longer have the student numbers needed for viability. Any potential reductions in college readiness preparation are incredibly serious. Decreasing enrollment can also increase students’ sense of isolation as there are literally fewer peers for them to interact with.”

To add to an already dire state of morale in rural schools, despite the fact that poor rural schools often have significantly higher graduation rates than poor urban schools, diplomas from rural schools are often seen as “worthless” according to David Little, executive director of the New York State Rural Schools Association. Poor rural schools in New York are simply unable to afford the cost of offering advanced placement (AP) and college-level coursework that is seen as necessary by college admissions officers.

For its part, the New York state government and the Andrew Cuomo administration have failed to respond to the demographic and social declines in rural school districts and increase state aid. The state continues to use a formula created in 2008, prior to the financial crisis, which categorizes the majority of rural schools as “average need.” If current demographic and poverty data were used, the majority of rural schools would now be considered “high-need,” requiring increased state aid.

Increasing rural poverty is not unique to New York. It has been rising across the country after falling sharply over many decades to a record low rate in 2000 of 13.4 percent. 16.7 percent of rural Americans lived in poverty in 2015, compared to 13 percent in poverty within metropolitan areas, according to the United States Census Bureau.



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