



National Alliance for Public Charter Schools

To: Todd Ziebarth
From: Tiffani Tatum
Re: Rural Charter Schools
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Charter schools in rural communities have been a part of the charter landscape since the earliest stages of the movement. Similar to the charter movement as a whole, the success of these schools has been varied. Rural charter schools face several challenges not realized by schools in urban settings, largely due to the small size of rural communities.

On the other hand, rural communities have several characteristics that make them a ripe setting for charter schools, such as their strong history of community cooperation, support, and inclusiveness.

This memo provides examples of rural charter schools in operation as well as a list of some of the challenges faced by rural charter schools.

Examples of Rural Charter Schools

While charter schools were founded on the premise of offering innovative approaches within public education, rural charter schools have also been created to fill a void in small communities. Often, school districts find rural one-room schoolhouses to be inefficient uses of resources, so school districts consolidate these small schools into one larger school to serve several communities. Consequently, students are often forced to travel multiple hours each day to attend school.

Charter schools are sometimes created in these communities as an alternative for families, preserving a school in their community while eliminating the long commute. Common characteristics of these rural charter schools include multi-age classrooms, use of a staggered start schedule, and elevated community involvement.

Currently, 15% of the public charter schools in operation are located in rural communities (with another 9% located in towns). Six such schools are highlighted below.

Sugar Valley Rural Charter School (SVRCS) in Loganton, PA opened in 2000 and offers instruction to K-12 students. Currently, there are 225 students enrolled.

SVRCS focuses classroom instruction on personalized learning with small class sizes and outside of class tutoring when needed; community involvement with students participating in community service projects; and an integrated rural environment where students gain experiential learning through class trips and awareness of their surroundings.

The Schoolcraft Learning Community in Bemidji, MN opened in 2000 and serves 175 students in grades K-8. The school specializes in small multi-age classrooms with a focus on hands-on learning experiences.

Minnesota New Country School in Henderson, MN opened in 1994 and has approximately 120 students. The school uses project based learning, requiring students to work in groups of 12-15 peers with an adult advisor, who facilitates the learning process.

Paradox Valley School in Paradox, CO, which opened in 1999, currently serves 30 students. It operates as a partnership between the community and school, seeking to preserve their rural culture. The school is the hub of the community, a literacy center where students are educated and the residents volunteer, gain employment, and come for entertainment.

Paisley School in Paisley, OR opened its doors in 2001 and serves grades K-12. It is a conversion charter school that was nearly eliminated due to state budgetary cuts, which it regularly faces due to its small size—only 82 students are enrolled. Consequently, they elect to have classroom instruction Monday-Thursday; nonetheless it has a 90% graduation rate and has received “exceptional” rating status by the Oregon Department of Education. The school serves a community of 350 people and operates a radio station, maintains 15 cattle, and houses a rainbow trout program.

Rural Community Academy in Sullivan, IN serves 148 students in grades K-8. The school takes a place-based approach to teaching, which leverages the local community with experiential learning methods to better engage the students. Classroom size is limited to 19 students.

Virtual Charter Schools

Virtual charter schools are a recent wrinkle in the discussion about public charter school options in rural communities. Advocates of these schools argue that on-line education allows students to receive individualized curriculum and targeted instruction.

From their perspective, virtual charter schools provide inexpensive opportunity to diversify and improve offerings where students might otherwise have limited options (e.g., advanced placement classes and college preparatory courses). Opponents are skeptical that on-line learning can effectively replace the traditional learning environment, particularly regarding the socialization skills gained by interacting with one’s peers.

There are a number of states where virtual charter schools are serving rural (and other) communities, including Pennsylvania, Ohio, Wisconsin, Idaho, and New Mexico. In some of these virtual charter schools, students take all of their classes in the on-line setting. In others, they take some classes on-line and others in-person in a more traditional environment. Two virtual charter schools are highlighted below:

- **Wisconsin Virtual Learning Academy** is a K-12 school offering small class sizes, experienced and certified virtual teachers, and a variety of curricular options. It currently uses six curriculum providers in an effort to ensure that each student receives a program best suited to his or her needs. There are over 900 students enrolled across the state. The school has been in operation for six years.
- **The Southwest Learning Centers** in New Mexico provide virtual and in-person learning to their students. The schools require students to attend three in-person sessions per week, with each session lasting three and a half hours. A fourth session occurs in the school's smart lab which serves to bridge the gap between classroom and on-line instruction. Southwest boasts graduation rates at 93% and attendance rates at 98%.

Challenges Faced By Rural Charter Schools

The primary challenges faced in setting up a charter school in a rural community include:

- **Resource Limitations:** As a whole, rural areas have a lower amount of resources at their disposal, which can lead to shortages of start-up money and operating capital, limited course offerings and extra-curricular activities, and inadequate facilities. While these are challenges that many charter schools face, they are heightened in a rural setting.
- **Conflicts with Other Educational Entities:** Given the small size and limited resources of rural communities, there can be conflicts over the loss of students between traditional public schools and public charter schools. These conflicts can create a polarizing effect in the community and sap the vitality out of a charter school effort.
- **Staff Recruitment:** It can be difficult for rural schools to convince qualified staff to live in small towns, where the nearest large metropolitan areas are often hundreds of miles away.

- ***Re-Segregation Concerns:*** There has been a trend toward the racial re-segregation of public schools in rural communities, especially in the South. Charter operators and authorizers need to guard against the possibility of charter schools exacerbating this trend.

These challenges can prevent schools from opening or staying open. For example, Keystone Academy in Sandy Valley, NV opened in 1999 and subsequently closed in April 2007. It served 40 high school students but each year faced a myriad of problems for failing to meet state requirements. A traditional public school now more successfully serves the needs of the community.

Notwithstanding these challenges, rural charter schools continue to meet critical needs in a growing number of the nation's rural communities. We expect to see continued growth in the number of rural students attending charters in the future, particularly with the introduction of virtual charter schools in an increasing number of states.