ACRES OF OPPORTUNITY:

Educational Choice in Rural Tennessee

Beacon
CENTER OF TENNESSEE

Introduction

Across Tennessee and the country, the discussion about parental choice in education has largely focused on cities and densely populated areas. Though rural school districts are generally comprised of smaller schools, student bodies, and budgets compared to their larger counterparts, rural students are generally an afterthought when it comes to education policy on the state and national level. While most choice programs more heavily emphasize urban communities, rural areas are the ones where educational choice has an immense opportunity to expand.

Urban families have long had access to quality private education for their children—when they can afford it—but rural areas have struggled to provide the same opportunities. And if a public school is unable to cater to a student's needs and homeschooling is not a possibility, those students can be stuck in schools that may create more problems than solutions. Even for those families in rural areas who have the means to afford private school tuition, the distance from their home to a private school can put that choice out of reach.

Thankfully, there is hope on the horizon for rural education: innovative education models, enhanced student based funding, and legislative changes at the state and school board levels to remove regulatory barriers would allow rural students to obtain the education that best suits their unique needs.

Going the Distance: Rural Education and Accessibility

The unique challenges rural schools and students face extend far beyond the physical distance between their homes and their classrooms. The Beacon Center's 2019 report, "Reviving Rural Tennessee: A Prescription for Rural Resurgence," showed how rural areas have been dealing with stagnant population levels, or even population loss, as families move to urban areas with more economic opportunities.[1] Declining populations mean declining tax bases, leaving rural districts with fewer local dollars for education and fewer students, which could lead to combining classes or even closing schools. While declining student populations and smaller budgets might not mean fewer dollars per student, it does not take an education degree to see what poverty and population loss spell out for rural communities.

Before solving the problems facing rural education, the definition of "rural" has to be clear. That is not as easy as it sounds. For example, according to the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), a rural area is a "Census-defined rural territory that is less than or equal to 5 miles from an urbanized area, as well as rural territory that is less than or equal to 2.5 miles from an urban cluster" up to a "Census-defined rural territory that is more than 25 miles from an urbanized area and is also more than 10 miles from an urban cluster."[2] What sounds like a technical yet clear definition of "rural" soon turns murky when you find out there are schools in Davidson and Shelby counties that meet this definition—meaning the NCES views some schools in the most densely populated counties in the state as "rural." Since the NCES definition leads to abnormalities that would make it impossible to study rural schools in Tennessee on a district level, rural *counties* provide the best and clearest lens for understanding rural districts and their schools.

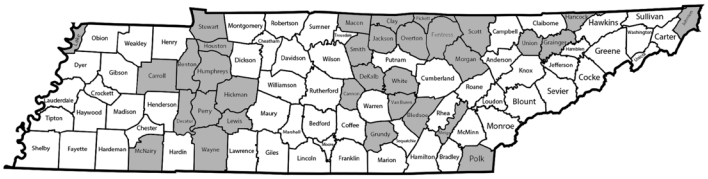
In August 2016, the Tennessee Advisory Committee on Intergovernmental Relations (TACIR) published a report titled "Just How Rural or Urban are Tennessee's 95 Counties?" In the report, TACIR found the most appropriate way to classify a rural area is through the Index of Relative Rurality (IRR) produced by Purdue University, because "[t]he index is based on four factors: total population, population density, percentage of residents living in urban areas, and distance to metropolitan areas."[3] These factors allow the index to rank counties on a scale ranging from 0.0 (meaning most urban) to 1.0 (meaning most rural). Due to the multiple factors and number scale, the IRR avoids traps that could place a rural county within a more urban threshold if rankings were based only on one or two factors.

Based on data from the IRR, 33 counties across Tennessee have an IRR score of 0.5 or greater, indicating they are more rural than the national average. In these counties, the public school districts are run at the county level, except for

1 Ron Shultis, "Reviving Rural Tennessee: A Prescription for a Rural Resurgence." Beacon Center of Tennessee. November 13, 2019. https://www.beacontn.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/11/R.R.-Study-FINAL-.pdf.
2 "Rural Education in America—School Locale Definitions." National Center for Education Statistics. https://nces.ed.gov/surveys/ruraled/definitions.asp.
3 Lynnisse Roehrich-Patrick and Bob Moreo, "Just How Rural or Urban are Tennessee's 95 Counties?" Tennessee Advisory Commission on Intergovernmental Relations. August 2016. https://www.tn.gov/content/dam/tn/tacir/documents/2016JustHowRuralOrUrban.pdf.

Carroll County, which breaks schools into special school districts (SSDs). In total, 37 school districts in Tennessee can be considered the most rural in the state.

FIGURE 1: TENNESSEE COUNTIES WITH AN IRR SCORE OF 0.5 OR MORE.



Source: Prepared by Beacon staff from data presented by the Tennessee Advisory Committee on Intergovernmental Relations (2016)

Rural students in these counties have far fewer educational options than their urban counterparts. Due in part to their limited populations, rural areas can struggle to support options such as private or charter schools. The limited landscape of educational choices has generally left families in these rural counties with four options: their zoned public school, restricted options in virtual education, homeschooling, or moving.

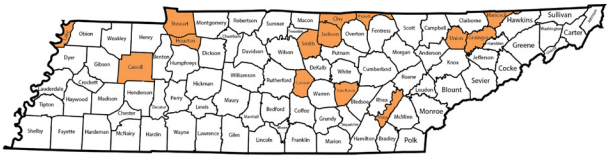
In addition to struggling with fewer choices than their urban counterparts, rural students tend to overly struggle with serious personal and educational attainment issues. Compared to the statewide averages, 70 percent of the rural school districts have a student population that is more economically disadvantaged, 86 percent have lower academic achievement, and 92 percent have higher percentages of student bodies deemed to have a disability, according to the 2019 Report Card published by the Tennessee Department of Education.[4] Rural students deserve the same opportunities to thrive and obtain an education that meets their unique needs that are afforded to students in more populated areas. Removing barriers to options and expanding choice could help alleviate some of these issues, increase academic performance, and expand economic opportunities.

4 "State Report Card." Tennessee Department of Education. https://www.tn.gov/education/data/report-card.html.

Low Yield:
Rural Private and Charter Schools

Students in rural Tennessee counties are sometimes left with no other choice outside of their public school or homeschooling. Fourteen of the counties covered have no private schools in operation, so an educational choice program that would only provide for private school tuition would not immediately serve these students. Of the counties that do have existing private schools, most only cover a certain number of grades, further reducing choice for rural students.[5]

FIGURE 2: RURAL TENNESSEE COUNTIES WITHOUT A PRIVATE SCHOOL



Source: Prepared by Beacon staff from data presented by the National Center for Education Statistics, Private School Universe Survey (2017-2018)

Private schools are not the only type of institution that is few and far between in rural areas. Tennessee's rural counties are truly charter school deserts. Across the state, none of the 33 rural counties have a charter school. In fact, only four of Tennessee's 95 counties have charter schools.[6] As charter school operators have tried to establish them in a handful of counties outside of Tennessee's "big four," they have always been rejected by local school boards.[7] One way to increase educational options is for Tennessee to join 24 other states that allow for non-district charter authorization.[8] These authorizers include institutions of higher education, independent chartering boards, and nonprofit organizations, among others. Currently, charter denials can only be appealed to the State Board of Education, but expanding the number of authorizers will increase the odds of creating new educational options for students.

Recent studies conducted by Dr. Thomas Sowell have displayed charter schools' ability to offer high quality education to the students they serve. In a July 2020 interview discussing his research findings, Dr. Sowell stated that he found some New York City charter schools occupied the same buildings as traditional public schools. Because both types had students from the same neighborhoods attending, studying these schools was the most accurate way to research charter school effects, as there were minimal variables at play. Sowell discovered that on average, the charter school students were passing math tests seven times more often than their peers in the public school right down the hall.[9]

Welcoming charter schools to rural areas, potentially even allowing them to occupy unused space in an existing public school or other building, could provide new educational opportunities for rural students. Considering there currently are no rural charter schools in Tennessee, there is no data to compare their performance against rural public schools. However, in its annual report on charter schools, the state education department noted that on the Tennessee Value Added Assessment System, a way to measure school effectiveness and student achievement, charter schools significantly outperformed district-run public schools.

5 Ibid.
6 "Tennessee SDE Directory." Tennessee Department of Education. https://k-12.education.tn.gov/sde/CreateSchoolList.asp?sql_id=465758.
7 "Tennessee State Board of Education: Charter School New Start Appeal Decision History." Tennessee State Board of Education. https://www.tn.gov/content/dam/tn/stateboardofeducation/documents/charter_schools/New-Start-Appeal-Decision-History.pdf.
8 Todd Ziebarth, "Measuring Up to the Model: A Ranking of State Public Charter School Laws." National Alliance for Public Charter Schools. January 2020. https://www.publiccharters.org/sites/default/files/documents/2020-01/2020_model_law_ranking_report-single-draft2%20%281%29.pdf.
9 Dr. Thomas Sowell, "An Economist Looks at 90." Hoover Institution. July 6, 2020. https://www.hoover.org/research/economist-looks-90-tom-sowell-charter-schools-and-their-enemies-1.

Specifically, "a significantly higher percentage of charter schools (40%) are identified as Level 5 'Most Effective' as compared to district-run schools (only 29%)."[10] Since the education of students should be the first priority for public tax dollars allocated to schools, if charter schools have found a way to provide better outcomes for students—usually while receiving less funding than a district school—local school boards should not seek to deny a charter request, but welcome it as a viable way to help students reach their full potential.

There is an even simpler way to expand choice in these rural areas and across Tennessee, without creating a new program: Tennessee is one of the few states in the country that specifically prohibits the creation and operation of online charter schools. A 50-state comparison on virtual charter schools conducted by the Education Commission of the States found that of the 45 states that have enacted charter school laws, the overwhelming majority either explicitly allow virtual charter schools, regulate their operation, or make no mention of them in state law. Only Tennessee, Kentucky, and California have gone so far as to prohibit their creation or operation.[11] Therefore, Tennessee legislators should change the law to remove the barrier to online charter schools, allowing rural students to access a new educational option. This is even more important when many schools are still on remote or hybrid schedules due to COVID-19 restrictions. For students who have not found it easy to work with their public schools' virtual curricula, an online charter that focuses on their interests or abilities could allow for that student to not only pass grades online but thrive in a virtual setting.

10 "Charter Schools Annual Report." Tennessee Department of Education. https://www.tn.gov/content/dam/tn/education/documents/2019%20Charter%20Report%20final.pdf.
11 "Charter Schools: Does State Law Explicitly Allow Virtual Charter Schools?" Education Commission of the States. January 2020. http://ecs.force.com/mbdata/MBQuestNB2C?rep=CS2023.

Sowing Opportunity with Education Savings Accounts

With the passage of the Tennessee Education Savings Account (ESA) Pilot Program in 2019, some students were finally given the opportunity to attain previously out-of-reach choices for their schooling. Not only did the program open up opportunities for these students, it also has proven to be financially beneficial to the public school districts implementing it. A report by the Beacon Center calculated that the program would save Metro Nashville Public Schools $522 for each student who took an ESA. Shelby County Schools fared even better, with an estimated savings of nearly $2,100 for each ESA student. At the legislatively capped 15,000 students, these two districts would save a combined estimate of $21 million annually.[12] These fiscal benefits follow a multitude of studies showing the positive benefits ESAs provide to students and taxpayers.

However, the law only applies to low- and moderate-income students in Shelby and Davidson counties, leaving the majority of students across Tennessee unable to take advantage of this new program. Even if it did apply to rural students, it would be of little immediate benefit to those in counties that do not currently have a single private school or other non-public option. Furthermore, when calculating the fiscal impact of the current ESA program to these rural counties, the numbers are not as positive as urban areas due to the program's structure of the program and the state's education funding model. Under the Basic Education Program (BEP) the state covers a higher percentage of funding for rural and economically disadvantaged counties. In fact, information provided by the Comptroller of Tennessee revealed all the 37 rural districts receive between 70 and 90 percent of their BEP funds from the state.

With such a large percentage of these districts' funding coming from state tax dollars, the ESA financing structure would not allow most rural districts to realize the same fiscal benefits as urban districts. Just as schools are never a one-size-fits-all model for students, neither are education funding models. However, an ESA program would still provide new opportunities for rural students to meet their unique needs, and that is not a fact to be overlooked.

Although the current program's structure would not perfectly fit rural districts, that does not mean a retooled ESA program could not benefit rural communities. For

12 Jason Edmonds, "Evaluating ESAs in the Volunteer State." Beacon Center of Tennessee. November 12, 2020. https://www.scribd.com/document/484008908/Evaluating-ESAs-in-the-Volunteer-State.

"A statewide ESA program in Tennessee would result in a total economic benefit of $2.9 billion by 2038."

example, Arizona has a statewide ESA program that has succeeded in expanding educational opportunities while creating positive fiscal benefits for both the state and local school districts in one of the most remote parts of the country. In some areas of Arizona, there are dirt roads that can't accommodate school buses, preventing students from attending certain schools.[13] In fact, the most recent data from the U.S. Census Bureau shows Tennessee has nearly three times more people per square mile than Arizona, meaning rural areas are less prominent here than in the Grand Canyon State.[14] Research on Arizona's educational choice program has shown positive fiscal benefits for taxpayers and opened doors to new educational opportunities for students who had no other means to attain them.[15] On average, the program was found to increase public school funds by $654 per ESA participant. Additional savings allowed the state to set aside $3 million to overhaul the Arizona Department of Education's IT system, which is used to calculate payments for all public schools statewide—a benefit to all public schools and their students.[16]

This program, which has expanded choice to students statewide while improving the per-pupil funding of public schools, could serve as a model for Tennessee. By looking into Arizona's ESA funding formula, Tennessee lawmakers could potentially create a program that benefits students from the most urban areas to the most rural.

In addition to the educational benefits, a rural ESA program—or a statewide program—would have untold economic benefits. A 2018 Beacon Center report by Dr. Corey DeAngelis and Dr. Will Flanders found a statewide ESA program in Tennessee would result in a total economic benefit of $2.9 billion by 2038. It would also increase high school graduation rates, reduce the number of felons, and increase personal income across the state by $638 million in that time frame.[17] As the program stands now, rural students are left empty-handed, without access to this additional education option and its economic benefits.

While rural students currently do not have the ability to access an ESA, in which dollars follow the student to the school or educational environment of their choice, rural families do have one program where a small portion of dollars follows the student, though it doesn't expand educational choice: Should local roads be insufficient for a school bus or should a student live in a remote area, state law grants local school boards the authority to pay parents the average cost of a student's transportation.[18] This is essentially a pilot program of dollars following the student that is specific to rural families in the state. If Tennessee and local school boards believe parents and students can make responsible choices with a portion of their education tax dollars, we must ask why this principle could not be expanded to involve a multitude of educational expenditures.

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13 Keerthl Vedantam, "In Indian Country, potholes can be a bump in the road to an education." *Arizona Capitol Times.* May 24, 2019. https://azcapitoltimes.com/news/2019/05/24/in-indian-country-potholes-can-be-a-bump-in-the-road-to-an-education/.

14 "U.S. Census Bureau QuickFacts: Arizona; Tennessee." United States Census Bureau. https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/fact/table/AZ,TN/POP060210.

15 Tim Benson, "Arizona's ESA Program Is Significantly Benefitting Low-Income Students." Heartland Institute. January 13, 2020. https://www.heartland.org/publications-resources/publications/research--commentary-arizonas-esa-program-is-significantly-benefitting-low-income-students.

16 Matt Beienburg, "The Public School Benefits of Education Savings Accounts: The Impact of ESAs in Arizona." Goldwater Institute. August 13, 2019. https://goldwaterinstitute.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/08/Public-School-Benefits-of-ESAs_web.pdf.

17 Corey DeAngelis and Will Flanders, "Counting Dollars and Cents: The Economic Impact of a Statewide Education Savings Account Program in Tennessee." Beacon Center of Tennessee. December 6, 2018. https://www.beacontn.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/12/BCN_ESAReport_v3.pdf.

18 Tenn. Code Ann. § 49-6-2104.

Harvesting CTE & Course Access

Rural areas are often plagued by a loss of young talent to urban centers—leaving these areas with not only a reduced tax base, but also a dearth of skilled workers. This only exacerbates the struggle with poverty many rural areas already face. One way New Jersey has found to keep skilled workers in rural areas is to allow counties to directly create and manage vocational schools, independent of the local school board.

A study of New Jersey's innovative model for Career and Technical Education (CTE) by Andy Smarick of the American Enterprise Institute found surprising results in both educational attainment and response to community needs. The CTE model created schools that are led by appointees of the county commission, who generally have close ties with the county administration and are aware of larger economic and social issues facing each unique locale. These vocational schools, which are approved by the state and offer CTE on top of traditional studies, have created tremendous results for the counties and the state as a whole. Smarick writes, "This [model] significantly influences New Jersey's vocational schools. Because the counties are different—in terms of urbanicity and rurality, wealth and poverty, economic base, local employers, and so forth—the schools have evolved in different ways. This is a feature, not a bug, of the state's program. These schools are intended to meet their counties' particular needs."[19]

19 Andy Smarick, "The Evolving High School CTE." American Enterprise Institute. November 2017. https://www.aei.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/11/The-Evolving-High-School-CTE.pdf.

WHERE THE GREENE GRADS GROW

A nonprofit organization in the northeast corner of Tennessee has been providing students with marketable skills. High school students in Greene County have been able to access workforce training through a unique partnership between the Niswonger Foundation, Greene County Schools, Greeneville City Schools, and local businesses, called CareerConnect. Selected students enroll in a three-year program that provides after-school and summer instruction on different career paths, as well as mentorships and real-world experiences, with the goal of getting students ready for a rewarding career after graduation. Private organizations like the Niswonger Foundation, which initiated the CareerConnect project, display how different avenues can address an area's unique needs and provide students with critical skills for future careers. State lawmakers should look at programs such as CareerConnect and search for ways to provide similar opportunities to all rural Tennessee students.

CTE schools not only provide a good education, but also prepare their students for meaningful career opportunities that are available in their respective local communities. These CTE schools are preparing students for success the minute they graduate by reflecting the community's needs and interests in the coursework. For example, New Jersey counties that are close to New York City have focused on financial courses, and counties near the shore offer hospitality courses because of the volume of tourism nearby. Because a county's needs can greatly differ based on its geographic location and established industries, independent CTE schools give students the knowledge and skills to gain a job needed in the local community. These schools are helping prevent students from leaving the county after graduation and increasing the talent pool of rural areas, bolstering the attractiveness for future business investments. In doing so, these programs are increasing overall economic opportunities in New Jersey's rural areas.

Facilitating a new CTE model comes with a price tag, so those counties unable to offer CTE classes should look at increasing students' awareness of Tennessee's existing Course Access Program. Established in 2016, the program does as its name suggests: It provides students who cannot attend such courses at their local school with access.[20] These courses can be taken online, in person, or a mixture of both. Utah's version of this model, the Statewide Online Education Program, has opened up a new form of public school choice for students, as well as increased revenue streams for schools through part-time students signing up for online classes.

In an article covering the growth of course access programs—"School Choice on Steroids," published in *The Atlantic*—public school districts found that not only was the course access program not taking funds away, it was actually providing opportunities for revenue growth. "The disaster that the state's public-school districts anticipated never materialized—partly because, within a few months, many of those districts had established online schools to compete for dollars with the online charter schools. Canyons School District, for example, went from having no online students in 2011 to 1,900 this past year, all of whom are enrolled part time and the vast majority of whom come from within the district…"[21]

The Tennessee Course Access Program is a good starting point to give students options to take general education, advanced-placement, or vocational courses. Expanding rural students' awareness and use of the Course Access Program is a simple way for rural districts to elevate their students' knowledge and skills.[22] The Tennessee Department of Education should take up an initiative to increase awareness of the program, informing students across the state of the options available to them.

While the needs of local communities may not be directly addressed through course access, as compared to an independent and local vocational school, there are still opportunities for it to meet some of those students' needs. For example, the course access catalog offers a multitude of classes, from computer science to welding to collision repair. Courses such as these can help prepare students for meaningful careers after graduation. Tennessee lawmakers should seek to increase awareness and take legislative action to ease restrictions on virtual charter schools in relation to online course access. In doing so, they can follow the lead of states like Utah that have opened up additional educational opportunities to students across the state, no matter where they are located.

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20 "Correlations of Course & Endorsement Codes." Tennessee Department of Education. https://www.tn.gov/education/lea-operations/correlations-of-course-and-endorsment-codes.html.

21 Rachel Monahan, "School Choice on Steroids." *The Atlantic*. August 20, 2015. ttps://www.theatlantic.com/education/archive/2015/08/course-choice-like-school-choice-steroids/401861.

22 "Chapter 0520-01-14." Tennessee State Board of Education. December 1, 2019. https://publications.tnsosfiles.com/rules/0520/0520-01/0520-01-14.20191229.pdf.

Two Peas in a Pod: Innovation and Educational Freedom

Though rural areas have struggled to support traditional private schools and charters, ESAs offer versatility in that a student's funds can be spent on any approved educational expenditure. This is great news for rural students, as innovative new learning models are available to meet their needs without multiple classrooms or dozens of administrators.

The COVID-19 pandemic forced the closure of many schools at the end of the 2020 school year, and continues to create uncertainty in the 2021 academic calendar. Those factors have combined to create an explosion of innovative education models, especially learning pods and microschools. While not initially created during the pandemic, their popularity dramatically increased as public schools began closing their doors and shifting to virtual learning.

Learning pods are most easily understood as extensions of homeschooling. During 2020, they affectionately took on the nickname "pandemic pods" as parents sought in-person learning for their children. Similar to homeschooling co-ops, learning pods allow a small group of children from different families to come together to learn from a parent or certified teacher. Since learning pods are not yet widely utilized or understood, definitions of learning pods have yet to be solidified. However, one common definition defines it as a group of approximately 10 students.[23] With their small size, learning pods provide the safety and security of being held in a private home or shared space—something many parents are looking for in the ongoing pandemic. The pods also provide students with social interaction, another big selling point for parents. Through learning pods, students can continue their education and form relationships while the doors to public schools are closed. Due to their limited size and close-knit nature, learning pods can respond to the needs of parents and students alike. Their voices are amplified in a pod, and they truly have a say in how the teaching and learning are conducted.

Learning pods also have been positive for teachers; many have decided to leave their district schools to lead pods. Krissy Rand, a former teacher with more than a decade of experience, explained to *The Wall Street Journal* in

23 Melinda Wenner Moyer, "Pods, Microschools and Tutors: Can Parents Solve the Education Crisis on Their Own?" *The New York Times*. August 18, 2020. https://www.nytimes.com/2020/07/22/parenting/school-pods-coronavirus.html.

September 2020 how she is now making more money and enjoying her job more through leading learning pods than when she was in a school building—describing it as "a teacher's dream."[24] Teaching in a learning pod can be either a full-time position or help supplement a teacher's income by providing instruction only a few hours a week. Some even dub those embarking on this new career path "teacherpreneurs."

Meanwhile, microschools have also grown tremendously in popularity. While their terminology is sometimes used interchangeably, there are differences in the structure and operation of microschools and learning pods. Microschools can be considered the modern version of a one-room schoolhouse, as families bring their children together to form a miniature "private school" that serves multiple children at different grade levels.

As the term "micro" suggests, these "private schools" are much smaller than the average private school; the funding organization known as Microschool Revolution describes these institutions as enrolling fewer than 120 students.[25] The number of students in a microschool is much higher than the average learning pod, yet still small when compared to the statewide average of 189 students per private school and 526 students per public school.[26] These microschools can be taught by a parent or a teacher hired by the families, allowing for a more customizable and personalized education for the students. As such, microschools receive significant input from parents on what their children are actually learning.

Microschools can be accredited by the state government to act as a private school, or they can take their curricula from an organization or other institution. One such institution is Acton Academy. Acton's co-founder, Laura Sandefer, who earned both her bachelor and master's degrees at Vanderbilt University, created a learning model with her husband to empower parents to take control of their children's education. Acton Academy can

24 Nancy Keates, "Teachers Find Higher Pay and Growing Options in Covid Pods." *The Wall Street Journal.* September 27, 2020. https://www.wsj.com/articles/teachers-find-higher-pay-and-growing-options-in-covid-pods-11601204400.
25 "About Microschools." Microschool Revolution. https://www.microschoolrevolution.com/about-microschools/.
26 "Private School Universe Survey." National Center for Education Statistics. https://nces.ed.gov/surveys/pss/privateschoolsearch/; "2019 Annual Statistical Report." Tennessee Department of Education. https://www.tn.gov/content/dam/tn/education/documents/asr/2019%20 Annual%20Statistical%20Report_1.pdf.

be seen as a "franchise" model of microschools, through which parents can get all the information they need—from the curriculum to the network of educational innovators—to form their own miniature private school that fits their children's educational needs and desires.

The pandemic continues to force rural counties to decide whether to open for in-person learning or switch to virtual learning. Information from the Department of Education shows that rural districts by and large have chosen hybrid schedules, with limited in-person learning in addition to virtual learning.[27] These decisions may have caused some of the enrollment declines seen this year across these districts and the state. In fact, all but three of the state's 37 rural districts saw a decline in enrollment this year. Averaging a decline of 4.53 percent—with Cannon County seeing a 17 percent drop—many rural schools are seeing fewer of their students walk in or log in to the classroom.[28] These students may have begun homeschooling, attending a microschool or learning pod, enrolled in a virtual school, or potentially left the education system altogether. Instead of a "take-it-or-leave-it" education system, Tennessee families and students should be empowered to decide how to attend, whether in person, online, or both. By having education dollars follow the student, those parents who decide not to send their child to a public school on account of reopening plans or other factors could have the assistance and opportunity to send their child to the learning institution that best suits his or her needs.

Currently, Tennessee essentially has zero regulations on learning pods, so lawmakers should seek to codify their protection and parents' rights to form alternative learning models. A recent report on learning pods by the Heritage Foundation's Jonathan Butcher states that lawmakers should look to model pod regulations on those applied to homeschooling and private schools.[29] Placing additional regulations on educational innovation will only make it tougher for parents to offer their children

"...many rural schools are seeing fewer of their students walk in or log in to the classroom."

34 OUT OF 37
rural districts saw decline

27 "District & School Re-openings." Tennessee Department of Education. https://www.tn.gov/education.html.
28 Laura Faith Kebede and Marta W. Aldrich, "School enrollment has dropped by 33,000 students across Tennessee amid pandemic." *Chalkbeat Tennessee.* November 10, 2020. https://tn.chalkbeat.org/2020/11/10/21558837/school-enrollment-has-dropped-by-33000-students-across-tennessee-amid-pandemic.
29 Jonathan Butcher, "Protecting Learning Pods: A 50-State Guide to Regulations Threatening the Latest Education Innovation." State Policy Network. November 2, 2020. https://spn.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/Protecting-Learning-Pods-Report.pdf.

other educational options. For Tennessee lawmakers, a learning pod protection law that prevents state agencies, local school districts, and zoning boards from interfering with the pod model will ensure Tennessee families have the right and protection to form this educational option for their children.

An educational choice program, such as an ESA, could help rural families form or attend microschools or learning pods. Because ESAs are not only tied to tuition, they can be used for any approved educational expenses. A rural student who has struggled in his traditional public school classroom could then have access to uniquely curated classes that fit his needs in a learning pod or microschool, while perhaps using a remaining portion of his ESA for private tutoring or therapy. The adaptability of ESAs ensures student funding is spent on that child's specific needs. Additionally, microschools and learning pods fit perfectly in rural areas where traditional private school options are limited. With fewer students needed, microschools and learning pods can flourish in rural areas. Historically, ESAs have focused on urban areas because private schools are already present there; microschools and learning pods have now brought rural areas to a place where educational choice is possible. Now the funding just needs to follow the student.

Conclusion

Not only are rural Tennessee students faced with fewer educational options, they are rarely mentioned in educational discussions about finding solutions. The need for parental choice has exploded as public schools across the country and within Tennessee began shifting toward virtual platforms in response to the ongoing pandemic. Further harm was done by limiting virtual education, due to a state law that bans virtual charters. The pandemic has not created all of the problems in education, but it has exposed the faults inherent in funding institutions over students.

While students of families in urban areas and those with the means to afford a private education have continued to thrive, those in rural areas have been left with few real options. Educational choice should not be limited to students who happen to live in the correct ZIP code or have the means to afford a private education. Removing barriers to new educational options, protecting the rights of parents and educators to form pods and microschools, expanding course access, and enhancing vocational education can provide immense benefits to those rural students who are currently left with little to no choices.

State lawmakers can begin to expand educational access and freedom to all Tennessee students through:

- Increasing virtual education opportunities by removing the ban on virtual charter schools.
- Allow for more authorizers of charter schools, apart from local school boards, to expand access and opportunities for rural charter schools, particularly those designed to meet the needs and opportunities of the local community, like those in New Jersey.
- Empower students to gain access to programs not offered at their local schools by expanding and more widely promoting the state's Course Access Program.
- Protect innovative education models, such as learning pods and microschools, from overregulation.
- Allow dollars to follow the student through a statewide ESA program that truly gives parents control over their child's educational environment.

Solutions that increase educational freedom and protect the rights of families should be at the center of education policy. Rural students deserve the same opportunities that are afforded to others, and Tennessee lawmakers should take action to make sure rural students are no longer cropped out of the education policy picture. By empowering all students and families, Tennessee can provide the best opportunities for students' success, no matter their location.

About Beacon

The Beacon Center empowers Tennesseans to reclaim control of their lives, so that they can freely pursue their version of the American Dream. The Center is an independent, nonprofit, and nonpartisan research organization dedicated to providing expert empirical research and timely free market solutions to public policy issues in Tennessee.

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