

From No Child Left Behind to
Every Child a Graduate



Is Your Local High School Making the Grade?

Ten Elements of Successful High Schools: *A Guide for Rural Communities*



ALLIANCE FOR
EXCELLENT EDUCATION

Did you know that ...

- approximately 3.4 million students attend rural high schools in the United States?
- more than half of school districts and one third of all public schools in the United States are located in rural areas?
- although student enrollment is declining in some rural schools, overall rural enrollment is on the rise—up 15 percent, or 1.3 million rural students—over the past several years?
- one in four students fails to graduate from rural high schools?
- more than 20 percent of the nation's poorest-performing high schools are located in rural areas—where less than 60 percent of entering ninth graders actually graduate four years later?
- students of color, low-income students, English language learners (ELLs), migrant students, and children with special education needs are at even greater risk for dropping out of rural high schools?
- college enrollment rates for eighteen- to twenty-four-year-olds are lower in rural areas than in any other location?
- a larger percentage of teenagers in rural areas, as compared to suburban areas, are neither enrolled in school nor employed?
- rural college graduates currently earn more than twice as much as rural high school dropouts and have significantly lower unemployment rates?
- nearly two thirds of new jobs created nationally will require some postsecondary education, as will 90 percent of jobs with higher than average growth and higher than average earnings?

Strong Rural High Schools. Strong Rural Communities.

Successful high schools are the backbone of America's rural communities.

Globalization and technological changes have had, and will continue to have, a significant impact on the U.S. economy and the nation's job market. Rural communities have also been profoundly affected by these forces. Manufacturing plants—once the backbone of many rural communities—have closed or moved offshore. Highly educated workers are leaving rural areas for higher-paying job opportunities in suburban and urban communities. And while a high school diploma was once the ticket to a stable job with benefits in a rural area, new and more specialized skills are needed to meet the growing demands of the workplace as rural markets expand beyond their traditional agriculture base.

For many rural areas, in fact, the quality of high schools has a direct impact on the economic success of the community, especially as national businesses seek to identify local expansion opportunities. To guarantee both the stability of rural communities and the nation's ongoing competitiveness in the global economy, it is more important than ever to ensure that all rural high school students graduate with the skills they need for college, careers, and life.

Rural schools face both advantages and disadvantages in meeting the goals of the twenty-first century. Among the challenges are high dropout rates, limited access to advanced coursework and technology, and difficulty in recruiting and retaining highly effective teachers. At the same time, the benefits of rural schools provide a strong foundation for change. These include greater opportunities for individualized attention for students and increased volunteer and community support from parents and neighbors in close-knit communities.

With strong community and local business support, backed by appropriate and adequate support from state and national leaders, rural high schools can ensure that all of their students graduate ready to succeed in college, careers, and life.

With community and government support, rural high schools can improve.

Rural high schools are not just places where students come to learn. Like faith-based organizations and local volunteer fire departments, they are the heart of the community—bringing together people of all ages to participate in cultural activities, entertainment, sporting events, and town hall meetings. And like any community institution, in order to succeed, they require ongoing support from the government, parents, community leaders, and young people.

If rural areas are to continue producing successful graduates, building strong families, and transforming their economies, they must work together to advocate for the necessary policies, programs, and partnerships to ensure the success of all students and the economic future of local communities. This includes building support for the full range of changes needed to improve educational outcomes.

Parents and community members can help to build successful rural high schools by

- ensuring that rural high schools are preparing all students for college, careers, and life by demanding a challenging, relevant college and career curriculum for all students;
- advocating for the infrastructure and community support needed to bring the most cutting-edge technologies and twenty-first-century learning opportunities to every rural school;
- reinforcing the value of college and connecting rural students to college resources;

- offering professional advice, internships, and other work opportunities;
- participating in local parent-teacher organizations, town hall meetings, and school board meetings;
- visiting local schools and talking with teachers and staff to identify ways to assist high school administrators, teachers, and coaches; and
- participating in high school fundraising, cultural, and adult learning opportunities.

Parents and community members must also hold local, state, and national leaders responsible for

- developing and implementing effective local, state, and federal policies to help rural high schools ensure that every student graduates ready for success in college, careers, and life; and
- providing sufficient funding for rural high schools.

Is your rural high school making the grade?

The Alliance for Excellent Education understands that the first step in improving any rural high school is to encourage and support the active engagement of students, parents, teachers, the community, and business leaders.

This guide is designed to give parents and community members some suggested ways to begin thinking about whether their local high school is adequately preparing all of its students for a successful future and what they can do to help turn that vision into reality.

Bob Wise

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Bob Wise'.

President, Alliance for Excellent Education
Former Governor of West Virginia

10 Elements That Every Rural High School Should Have

□ College- and Work-Ready Curriculum for All Students

Recent research tells us two important things: First, the same skills that are required for success in college are required for success in the modern workplace. Second, the greatest predictor of success in college is the rigor of high school curriculum. For these reasons, every rural student should benefit from taking demanding classes in the core subjects of English, history, science, and math during all four years of high school. Furthermore, students should be given the opportunity to earn industry certification or some college credit while in high school through programs such as Advanced Placement, International Baccalaureate, dual-credit, or other programs offered in partnership with local colleges and universities. Rural communities should also encourage their local high schools to offer all students rigorous and relevant course options by exploring teacher sharing with other nearby communities, using distance learning to deliver advanced subjects, and implementing new technologies that give students access to essential curriculum enrichment opportunities.

□ Personal Attention for All Students

All students in rural high schools should have teachers, guidance counselors, and other staff members who know their individual abilities, aspirations, and needs well. With lower teacher-student ratios, many rural high schools are particularly well suited to meet students' unique learning needs. By ninth grade, students should have a detailed plan for graduation—identifying the specific courses they should take, opportunities they should pursue, and extra help they need. Knowing all students well also requires knowing if the student is attending school regularly. Rural schools should establish an attendance system to keep track of students and communicate with parents whenever an unplanned absence occurs. This requires the use of data and advanced technology to track student progress and ensure that each student completes the courses and individualized learning experiences in the graduation plan.

□ Extra Help for Those Who Need It

Every rural high school should have the right data and tools to identify and assist students who need extra help or other individualized learning. This includes specialized courses for ELL students, transition plans for children of migrant workers, and responsive, appropriate programs for children with special needs. Rural schools must also pay special attention to those students who are struggling with reading, math, and other core subjects. In rural communities that are trying to balance multiple needs and limited resources, parents and community members can help by volunteering their time and expertise to provide supplemental tutoring and offering outreach to students facing multiple barriers—whether academic, social, emotional, or health related.

□ Bringing the Real World to the Classroom

Rural high schools should help students make the connection between book learning and the skills needed to succeed in college and a career. Rural communities are well equipped to engage students in meaningful, hands-on educational opportunities. Rural high schools

ould Have in Place

should use close community connections and public support to create innovative place-based learning programs that capitalize on local industries, state and national park resources, unique geographic features, and individuals willing to share their professional, career-related expertise. Rural high schools should also explore using distance-learning technologies to give students access to valuable cultural and academic learning opportunities around the world through connections with national and international businesses, nonprofit organizations, and communities.

□ Family and Community Involvement

Students thrive when their high schools encourage positive and supportive relationships among families, educators, faith-based groups, businesses, and civic and community organizations. Smaller rural school districts are in a unique position to capitalize on close community relationships to improve academic outcomes for local high school students. Parents and community members should visit their local schools frequently and speak with teachers and staff to understand high school academic expectations and course options, exchange ideas, identify volunteer opportunities, promote curricular activities, and voice concerns. Parents and community members should also be encouraged to support the local high school as a center for cultural, athletic, and adult-learning activities.

□ A Safe Learning Environment

Every rural high school must guarantee the safety of its students, teachers, staff, and visitors. Like their urban and suburban counterparts, rural high schools also struggle with drug and alcohol abuse, teen pregnancy, and gang activity. Parents can help school and community leaders tackle these issues by talking to their own children and others about emerging problems before they become a crisis, and by keeping the lines of communication open with teachers and staff. In rural communities with limited funding for family outreach and social services, parents and community volunteers can also help by mentoring and supporting at-risk students.

□ Skilled Teachers

All rural high school teachers should know the subjects they teach and understand how to engage students with different needs and from different backgrounds. Rural districts usually have less funding (e.g., lower salaries), more geographic isolation, and fewer cultural amenities than nearby suburban and urban areas which can make it more difficult to recruit and retain effective teachers. At the same time, rural high school teachers consistently report high satisfaction in teaching and living in tight-knit communities. Parents and community members can support their local teachers by helping recruit and retain effective teachers, volunteering in the classroom, encouraging academic excellence in class work, and providing a positive learning environment at home. They also can be strong advocates with local administrators and school boards in ensuring adequate salaries and high-quality professional development opportunities for high school teachers.

□ Strong Leaders

Every high school needs an effective principal. A great principal can collaborate effectively with parents and the community as both a skilled administrator (able to effectively manage the finances and keep the high school running smoothly) and a strong instructional leader (able to ensure that all students receive the instruction and support they need for success). As strong leaders they cultivate an environment for student success in the high school. They also work to keep the school a vital partner in advancing community and economic development efforts. Parents and community members in rural areas often have exceptional access to their school leaders and can support administrators by helping to identify and address unmet needs of students and the local community. They also can help promote public awareness of the school's success.

□ Necessary Resources

Every rural high school should provide all students and teachers with the books, computers, technology, safe transportation, and other resources they need to be successful. Rural high schools should also maintain safe and clean facilities, appropriate for effective teaching, learning, and community use. Many smaller, financially strapped rural school districts must often deal with aging facilities and limited funding for new equipment and technology. Parents and community members can assist the high school with supplemental fundraising activities. They can be critical partners for the school in identifying external funding sources, and in winning competitive state and federal grant funds. Partnerships with local businesses, government agencies, community organizations (including faith-based groups), and individuals can help the school fill resource gaps required to adequately meet essential student and community needs.

□ User-Friendly Information for Parents and the Community

All members of a rural community should have easy access to information that provides a clear, straightforward picture of how well the local high school is performing and how well it is serving students of all income levels and backgrounds. Parents and community members can encourage local high school administrators and the local school board to hold annual "state of the schools" meetings that attract members of the general public and local newspapers. More than ever, parents and community members need information on graduation and dropout rates, student access to advanced coursework, and knowledge of student proficiency, including but not limited to measures of college and work readiness and performance on state assessments. User-friendly websites can also provide rural residents with important information about the high school, particularly residents who may drive long distances to and from work or single parents and others with limited time to attend school functions. Advanced telephone systems at the high school can keep parents informed of student homework assignments, school absence, or other "need to know" issues.

What Is the Alliance for Excellent Education?

The Alliance for Excellent Education is a national policy and advocacy organization acting on behalf of America's secondary school students. The Alliance works to develop a strong national commitment to ensure that all students graduate from high school prepared for success in college, careers, and life. The Alliance specifically advocates for federal policies that will provide the maximum support to local efforts to help all students realize this dream.



One out of every four students fails to graduate from rural high schools.

Additional Resources for Rural Students, Parents, and Community Members

www.all4ed.org

- **U.S. Department of Education** offers federal education policy and program information for parents, including a parent toolbox, answers to commonly asked questions, and SchoolDataDirect, an online tool that provides data about local school districts. www.ed.gov
- **Rural School and Community Trust** helps rural schools and communities get better together by encouraging educators, parents, and others to participate in decisions that affect education quality. www.ruraledu.org
- **Communities in Schools** assists parents and others to help students stay in school and make the right choices by connecting schools with local resources and services to meet individual community needs. www.cisnet.org
- **Rural Blog** provides a national digest of events, issues, and ideas about rural America sponsored by the Institute for Rural Journalism and Community. <http://irjci.blogspot.com>
- **National Rural Education Association** helps rural school administrators, teachers, board members, and others to maintain the vitality of rural school systems. www.nrea.net
- **Navigating Resources for Rural Schools** provides access to recent rural education data collected by the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES). <http://nces.ed.gov/surveys/ruraled/>
- **Education Resources Information Center (ERIC)** provides free access to an extensive online library of educational articles and research through ERIC. www.eric.ed.gov
- **American Council on Rural Special Education** provides information and helps to expand services for rural students with special education needs. www.acres.sped.org
- **National Education Association** advocates for education professionals to fulfill the promise of public education and provides parent and community resources to help support teachers. www.nea.org
- **American Federation of Teachers** provides a national voice for the legitimate professional, economic, and social aspirations of teachers; strengthens educational institutions; and improves the quality of services. www.aft.org
- **National PTA** offers resources to parents, educators, students, and citizens active in their schools and communities, and provides a national database of local parent-teacher organizations. www.pta.org
- **Campaign for High School Equity** is a coalition of ten national advocacy organizations representing communities of color that believe high schools should have the capacity and motivation to prepare every student for graduation, college, work, and life. www.highschoolequity.org
- **National Indian Education Association** increases educational opportunities for American Indian, Alaska Native, and Native Hawaiian students while protecting cultural and linguistic traditions, and provides helpful links to local tribal education organizations. www.niea.org
- **Rural Community College Alliance** is a network and advocacy group that helps build the capacity of member community colleges to improve the educational and economic prospects for rural America. The Alliance seeks to reduce rural isolation and share effective solutions to problems facing distressed rural communities. www.ruralccalliance.org
- **Appalachian Regional Commission** is a federal-state partnership that works for sustainable community and economic development in Appalachia. www.arc.gov
- **Online Migrant Education Community** provides resources, support, and information to migrant students, their families, and communities. www.migrantstudents.org
- **Parental Information and Resource Centers (PIRC)** are funded by the U.S. Department of Education. A PIRC is located in each state to provide both regional and statewide services and disseminate information to parents on a statewide basis. www.nationalpirc.org

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