

# Introduction: Uncovering the Productivity Promise of Rural Education

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The first three volumes of the SEA of the Future provided new mindsets and strategies for advancing productivity in state education agencies. In this volume, we show why rural schools and districts are uniquely poised to contribute to these efforts. Like their urban counterparts, rural schools and districts are being asked to stretch their dollars further but they are more likely to face limited economies of scale, difficult teacher labor markets, and inadequate access to time and money-saving technologies. And, while rural schools and districts educate millions of American students, they do so with less support and attention than their urban and suburban counterparts.

These challenges obscure the productivity promise of rural education: as this volume details, rural schools and districts are innovative in how they deliver services and reimagining how they recruit teachers, use technology, and serve special populations.

The key question for states is how to better capitalize on and support these vanguard efforts. This volume provides one set of answers and aims to spark discussion among state leaders about the challenges and opportunities of rural education.

Paul Hill, with the Center on Reinventing Public Education, kicks off the volume by detailing why state education agencies should focus on rural schools and districts. His discussion reveals the unique challenges faced by rural school districts and provides suggestions for how states can tailor their offerings to better support the needs of rural educators.

In the second essay, Marguerite Roza, director of the Edunomics Lab at Georgetown University, challenges the assumption that rural districts are necessarily less productive than their urban or suburban peers. Through an analysis of rural district return-on-investment, she finds that rural districts are more likely to “beat the odds,” delivering better than expected results without the higher per-pupil price tag.

The next essay reports on the results of a national consensus panel on Rural Education and Technology, which brought together a diverse panel of experts to consider the potential for technology to address common challenges in rural districts and schools and how states can support rural districts to pursue these technology solutions. The panel identifies four ways that technology can be brought to bear on some of the most pressing problems facing rural school systems, including lack of access to specialized content, administrative inefficiencies, and limited professional support for rural educators. But to leverage technology, states must ensure that rural schools are connected to the Internet and are able to redesign how they deliver services to students and educators.

In the last essay, Tessie Rose Bailey, assistant professor, Special Education at Montana State University Billings, and Rebecca Zumeta, senior researcher, Education Program at the American Institutes for Research, discuss the acute challenges rural districts face in meeting the unique needs of special student

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populations. They suggest that states can help rural districts and schools meet their obligations by providing greater flexibility around staffing and certification, and reducing the regulatory burden faced by the rural central office.

Together, these essays suggest that state education agencies have an instrumental role to play in supporting the work of rural education. States seeking to turn the ideas in this volume into practice should consider several tools developed by the [Center on Innovations in Learning](#), including a [collection of digital resources for educators](#) and a [rubric for evaluating state's virtual learning strategies](#). SEAs seeking more comprehensive support can request a direct consultation from [BSCP Center](#) partners, who will work in close partnership with the regional content centers to provide focused and context-specific services.