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## Report Cites Ongoing Needs in Rural Schools

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State and national policymakers need to pay more attention to the problems of rural schools, which in some states are extremely urgent, a report due out this week says.

“Why Rural Matters 2005” is the latest edition of the nation’s most comprehensive report on rural education policy. Published by the Rural School and Community Trust, the third version of the report sounds the alarm on a host of problems facing rural schools.

Scheduled for release May 11, the 106-page report calls on states and the federal government to preserve small schools and community school districts and to increase funding and policy work on the problems that plague many rural schools.

### FOR MORE INFO

The report, “Why Rural Matters 2005,” will be available from the [Rural School and Community Trust](#) this week.

“States need to invent ways to keep their small schools open and make them as good as they can be,” said Marty Strange, the Randolph, Vt.,-based policy director for the Rural Trust and a co-author of the report. “When [small schools] are well funded, properly funded, they do a super job.”

The report also highlights demographic changes brewing in rural schools, most notably the expanding racial and ethnic diversity among the nation’s 8.8 million rural students—about one of every five American children enrolled in public

schools.

“The increasing diversity and the increasing poverty in certain regions means these kinds of issues are going to intensify in the next decade,” Rachel Tompkins, the president of the Rural Trust, said in a recent interview at the group’s headquarters here outside Washington.

Most of the top 10 states in the report’s ranking of the “educationally needy” were in the South, including No. 1-ranked Mississippi.

Nearly half of Mississippi’s students are rural, and most are poor. But the state spends the nation’s least amount of money on instruction for each rural student, the report shows. Mississippi also has the nation’s second-lowest scores for rural students in mathematics and reading on the National Assessment of Educational Progress in grades 4 and 8.

“You’re talking about the state that has arguably the greatest need, and [rural schools] are getting the least to try and meet those needs,” said Jerry Johnson, the Ashland, Ky.-based policy data analyst for the Rural Trust and the report’s other co-author.

Mississippi state Superintendent of Schools Education Henry L. Johnson agreed with the report’s findings, but said achievement is improving even as he pushes for enough money to improve rural schools. The state has added low-cost diagnostic testing aligned with state academic standards, he said, and has upped requirements for prospective teachers and high school graduates.

“The trend lines are going up,” Mr. Johnson said last week.

### Rural Challenges

The Rural School and Community Trust ranked the 50 states on four indicators: prevalence of rural schools, levels of poverty, friendliness of policies toward rural schools, and other challenges. They are ranked in order of the most urgent need, based on the indicators.

## Nationwide Priorities

A couple of Western states also ranked among the most “educationally needy,” with New Mexico at No. 2 on the report’s priority list. Arizona, the other Western state in the top 10, tied at ninth.

New Mexico has the nation’s highest percentage of families with school-age children living below federal poverty levels, at 23 percent. The state also has the lowest NAEP scores for rural students and the highest percentage of limited-English-proficient students, at 14 percent.

Carlos Atencio, the executive director of the Rio Rancho-based Northern New Mexico Rural Education Network, a cooperative of 50 districts in the state, sees an opportunity for improvement.

“There is, for the first time in a number of years, some hope of an ownership of the whole state in doing something about it,” he said, citing recent hikes in state funding and attention by state leaders.

In Kentucky, the No. 3-ranked state on the report’s list, three of four rural schoolchildren qualify for federally subsidized school meals. The state also has the nation’s highest percent of adults without a diploma, 32 percent.

“We are funding our schools about \$1,000 less than the national average. We’re simply not investing what it takes to fund the reforms we put into place,” added Robert F. Sexton, the executive director for the Prichard Committee for Academic Excellence, a Lexington, Ky.-based advocacy group. (Mr. Sexton is a board member of Editorial Projects in Education, which publishes *Education Week*.)

The Rural Trust report shows that some of the nation’s best values in rural schools—meaning that students in those schools do relatively well, even with modest education funding—are in Montana, Nebraska, South Dakota, and Wyoming.

1. Mississippi	26. Maine
2. New Mexico	27. Virginia
3. Kentucky	28. California
4. Louisiana	29. Nevada
5. Alabama	30. Washington
6. Oklahoma	31. Indiana
7. Arkansas ( <i>tie</i> ) South Carolina	32. Kansas
9. Arizona ( <i>tie</i> ) North Carolina	33. Nebraska ( <i>tie</i> ) Ohio
11. West Virginia	35. Wyoming
12. Georgia	36. Pennsylvania
13. Florida ( <i>tie</i> ) Tennessee	37. Iowa
15. Idaho	38. Maryland
16. Texas	39. ( <i>three-way tie</i> ) New York Michigan Vermont
17. South Dakota	42. New Hampshire
18. Missouri ( <i>tie</i> ) Oregon	43. Illinois ( <i>tie</i> ) Minnesota
20. Montana	45. Colorado
21. North Dakota	46. Wisconsin
22. Alaska	47. New Jersey
23. Hawaii	48. Rhode Island
24. Delaware	49. Connecticut
25. Utah	50. Massachusetts
SOURCE: Rural School and Community Trust	

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### FROM THE ARCHIVES

**“Rural Activists Note the Highs and Lows of School Advocacy,”** April 13, 2005.

**“New Rural Education Center Launches Research Projects,”** April 6, 2005.

**“Federal Efforts Lacking, Rural Advocates Say,”** February 2, 2005.

**“Critics Question Research Center on Rural Schools,”** November 17, 2004.

**“Rural Schools in Need of Guidance, GAO Says,”** October 6, 2004.

For background, previous stories, and Web links, read **Rural Education**.