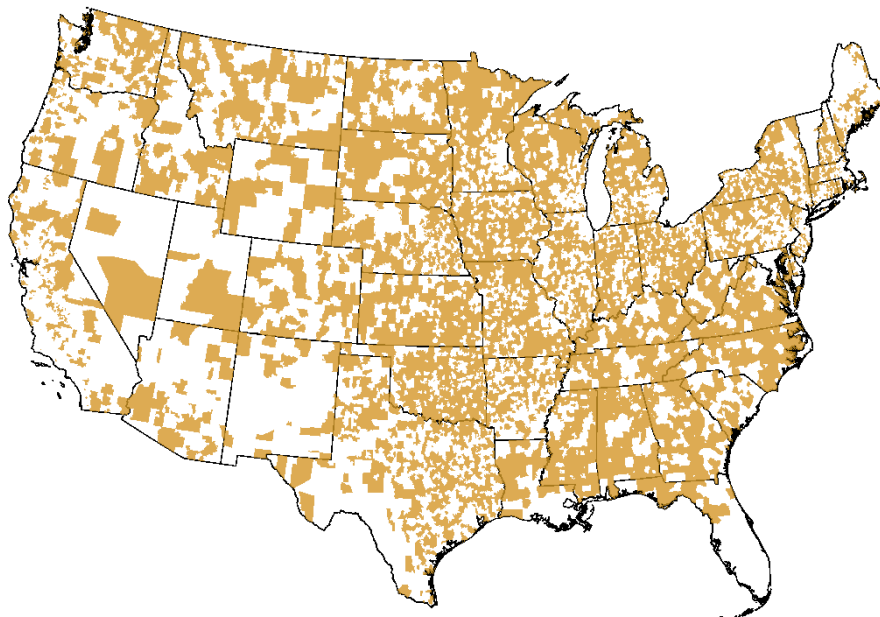


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# Segregation Persists in Rural School Districts Despite Rising Ethnoracial Diversity

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Research Brief | August 2021



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## Introduction

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American districts and communities are becoming more ethnoracially<sup>1</sup> diverse across the geographic spectrum. Rural communities have historically lived in racially concentrated settings but demographic shifts, particularly the out-migration of native-born White residents and the influx of new immigrants, are changing longstanding settlement patterns.<sup>2</sup> Ethnoracial diversity, especially when structured to provide equitable opportunities for all students, can improve academic and social outcomes and can enhance community cohesion in rural areas.<sup>3</sup> However, school segregation is higher than it has been in 50 years, and diversifying communities may not lead to integrated schools.<sup>4</sup>

Currently, relatively few school districts are still under court desegregation orders. Some districts that are not under any such court orders voluntarily integrate their schools, but without explicit student assignment policies focused on integration, many schools remain and/or are increasingly segregated. One integration strategy is to draw attendance zone boundaries in ways that would integrate schools, but other districts draw boundaries in ways that maintain ethnoracial separation, thereby allowing White and advantaged families to monopolize educational opportunities.<sup>5</sup> In other places, choice policies permitting transfers between district schools, or between assigned district school and other public or private options, can also contribute to stratification. Rural districts have seldom been the target of federal education reform initiatives but they have experienced the impacts of these efforts nonetheless.<sup>6</sup>

This brief summarizes a recent study published by *Rural Sociology*, in which we examine the extent and nature of ethnoracial diversity and segregation in rural school districts between 2000 and 2019.<sup>7</sup> We find that rural America and its public school districts are experiencing growing diversity and rising poverty. These overall patterns vary by region and ethnoracial identity of students. Drops in the share of White students and rises in poverty were both substantially more pronounced in

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<sup>1</sup> Ethnoracially means both ethnically and racially.

<sup>2</sup> Brown, D. L. and Schafft, K. A. (2019). *Rural people & communities in the 21st century: Resilience and transformation* (2nd ed.). Cambridge, MA: Polity Press; Johnson, K. M. and Lichter, D. T. (2019). Rural depopulation: Growth and decline processes over the past century." *Rural Sociology*, 84(2): 1-25.

<sup>3</sup> Mickelson, R. A. and Nkomo, M. (2012). Integrated schooling, life-course outcomes, and social cohesion in multiethnic democratic societies. *Review of Research in Education*, 36(1): 197-238.

<sup>4</sup> Frankenberg, E., Ee, J., Ayscue, J. B., and Orfield, G. (2019). *Harming our common future: America's segregated schools 65 years after Brown*. Los Angeles, CA: Civil Rights Project/ Proyecto Derechos Civiles and Center for Education and Civil Rights; Hall, M. (2013). Residential integration on the new frontier: Immigrant segregation in established and new destinations. *Demography*, 50(5): 1873-96; Lichter, D. T., Parisi, D., and Taquino, M. C. (2015). Toward a new macro-segregation? Decomposing segregation within and between metropolitan cities and suburbs." *American Sociological Review*, 80(4): 843-873.

<sup>5</sup> Anderson, J., Taylor, K., and Frankenberg, E. (2018). Voluntary integration policies in U.S. school districts." *UCEA Review*, 59(2): 28-30.

<sup>6</sup> Tieken, M. C. 2014. *Why rural schools matter*. Chapel Hill, NC: The University of North Carolina Press.

<sup>7</sup> Kebede, M., Maselli, A., Taylor, K., and Frankenberg, E. (2021). Ethnoracial diversity and segregation in U.S. rural school districts. *Rural Sociology*. <https://doi.org/10.1111/ruso.12398>

districts with a majority of Black, Hispanic, or American Indian and Alaskan Native (AIAN) students. Further, while most rural students became less ethnoracially isolated within their districts, after accounting for each ethnoracial group's share of rural enrollment, minoritized rural students are the most segregated.

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## Regional Clustering of Rural School Districts by Ethnoracial Composition

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Using data from the U.S. Census, American Community Survey, and National Center for Education Statistics, we classified all 5,642 rural districts by applying a majority rule typology to examine their prevalence and spread across the U.S.<sup>8</sup> Mapping this typology illustrates how rural districts are clustered based on the identity and percentage of their ethnoracial composition (Figure 1). The most common district type is White Dominant, and these districts are found primarily in the Northeast, Mid-Atlantic, and the Midwest—areas of the country that generally have the highest percentages of White students. The South, the region with the most Black students, is home to almost all Black Majority districts, and the Mexican border is where we found most Hispanic Majority districts. AIAN Majority districts are mostly in areas where we would expect to see reservations, including the West. White Shared and No Majority districts cluster around Black/Hispanic/AIAN Majority districts.

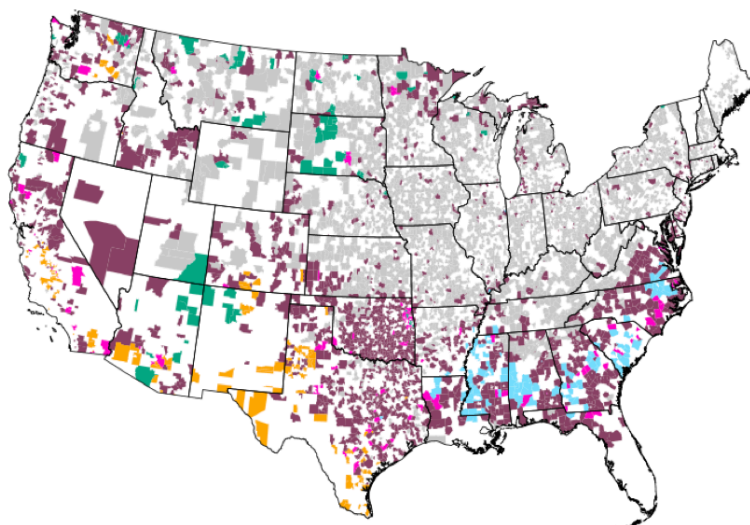
The majority of districts remained in the same district type classification from 2000 to 2015, however, 20% of Black Majority districts transitioned to No Majority districts, 25% of No Majority districts transitioned to Hispanic Majority districts, and 37% of White Dominant districts transitioned to White Shared districts.

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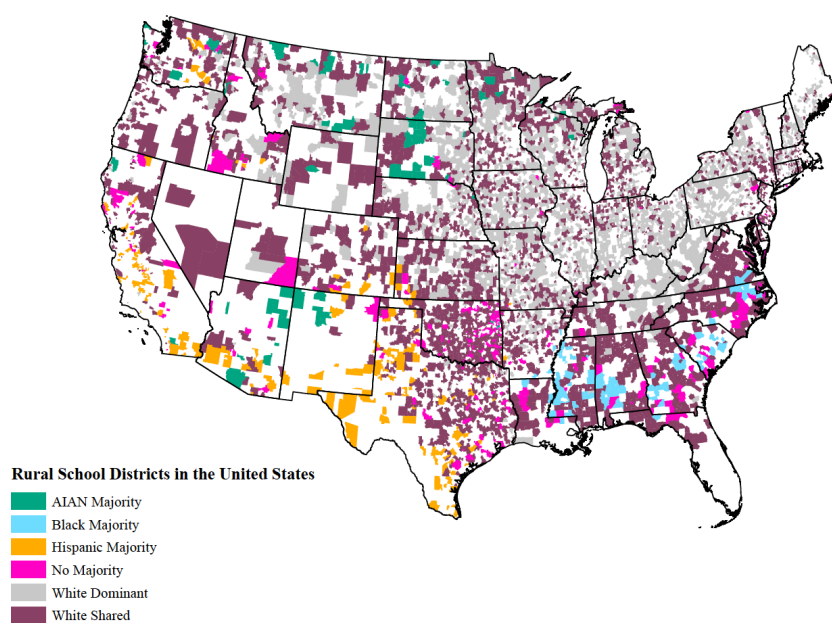
<sup>8</sup> Based on the ethnoracial composition of their under-18 population in 2000, districts are labeled American Indian and Alaska Native (AIAN) Majority (AIAN > 50%), Black Majority (Black > 50%), Hispanic Majority (Hispanic > 50%), No Majority (All groups ≤ 50%), White Dominant (White > 90%), or White Shared (50% < White < 90%). There were no *Asian Majority* district types. This typology is an expansion of Sharp, G. and Lee, B. A. (2017). New faces in rural places: Patterns and sources of nonmetropolitan ethnoracial diversity since 1990." *Rural Sociology*, 82(3): 411-443.

Figure 1. Geographic Spread of Rural School District Types, 2000 and 2015

2000



2015



Source: EDGE NCES Census 2000 and 2015 (under-18 population data).

## Diversity Impacts Rural Students Differently based on their Ethnoracial Identities

Between 2000 and 2019, enrollment in the average rural school district shrunk by 7.4%, but some districts became larger (Table 1); notably, Hispanic Majority districts, which had the largest increase in mean enrollment (11.4%). In both 2000 and 2019, Black Majority districts had the largest mean enrollment which also declined the most (-31.7%) during this time.

**Table 1. Distribution of Enrollment by Rural School District Type, 2000 and 2019**

District Type	% of Districts, 2000	Mean Enrollment		
		2000	2019	% Change
White Dominant	61.6	1,154	980	15.1
White Shared	29.8	1,694	1,760	3.9
Black Majority	1.9	2,704	1,846	-31.7
Hispanic Majority	2.6	1,083	1,207	11.4
AIAN Majority	2.0	633	562	-11.2
No Majority	2.0	1,637	1,706	4.2
Total	5,642	1,343	1,243	-7.4

Source: EDGE NCES Census 2000; CCD 1990-00 and 2018-19.

When we explored enrollment by ethnoracial group (Table 2), we found that the share of Hispanic enrollment increased across all district types but especially in Hispanic Majority districts. Hispanic students had the third largest share of the total rural enrollment in 2000, but by 2019, they had the second largest share.

Every district type also experienced drops in the average percentage of White student enrollment, but the declines in district types with larger shares of minoritized students were steepest.<sup>9</sup> White residents are more likely to be wealthier than non-White residents, which in turn increases their districts' tax base and revenue,<sup>10</sup> therefore, in losing larger shares of White peers from their districts, minoritized students are likely also attending schools that are losing funds.

<sup>9</sup> This finding is more pronounced in the data presented in the full *Rural Sociology* study, which shows White Shared districts further disaggregated by the non-White group that constitutes 10% or more of their under-18 population.

<sup>10</sup> Percheski, C. and Gibson-Davis, C. (2020). A penny on the dollar: Racial inequities in wealth among households with children." *Socius: Sociological Research for a Dynamic World*, 6: 1-17.

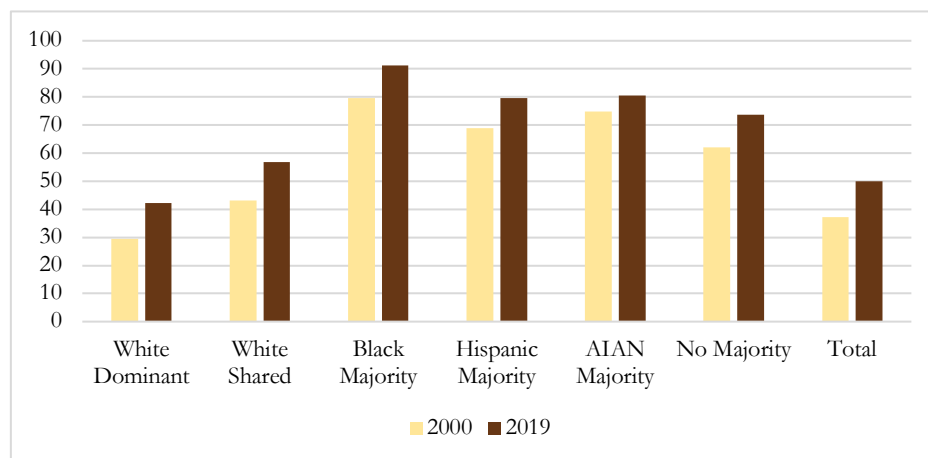
**Table 2. Mean Ethnoracial Composition by Rural School District Type, 2000 and 2019**

District Type	2000					2019				
	White	Black	Hispanic	Asian	AIAN	White	Black	Hispanic	Asian	AIAN
White Dominant	97.6	1.1	0.9	0.4	0.4	90.3	1.4	4.6	0.8	0.4
White Shared	76.2	15.5	5.9	0.9	2.4	62.3	13.2	16.5	1.5	2
Black Majority	23.9	74.7	1.1	0.2	0.3	22.1	69.1	5.9	0.5	0.4
Hispanic Majority	17.9	1.7	79.6	1	0.8	8.6	1.3	88.2	0.6	0.6
AIAN Majority	12.9	0.3	1.6	0.4	85.1	7.6	0.2	2.6	0.4	86
No Majority	43.9	36.1	13.6	0.5	6.4	31.1	26.3	32.5	1	5.4
Total	82.5	10.4	4.9	0.6	2.2	72	9	12.6	1.1	2

Source: EDGE NCES Census 2000; CCD 1999-00 and 2018-19.

However, poverty is growing for rural students of all backgrounds. On average, half of all rural students were receiving free and reduced-price lunch (FRL) by 2019 (Figure 2), and it is likely that the actual figures are much higher because many eligible students do not apply due to stigma or fear of disclosing their immigration status. Even within this broader context of growing rural poverty, minoritized students remain the most disadvantaged. Districts with fewer White students had higher and still rising poverty levels, most especially districts with higher shares of Black students.

**Figure 2. Distribution of Poverty by Rural School District Type, 2000 and 2019**



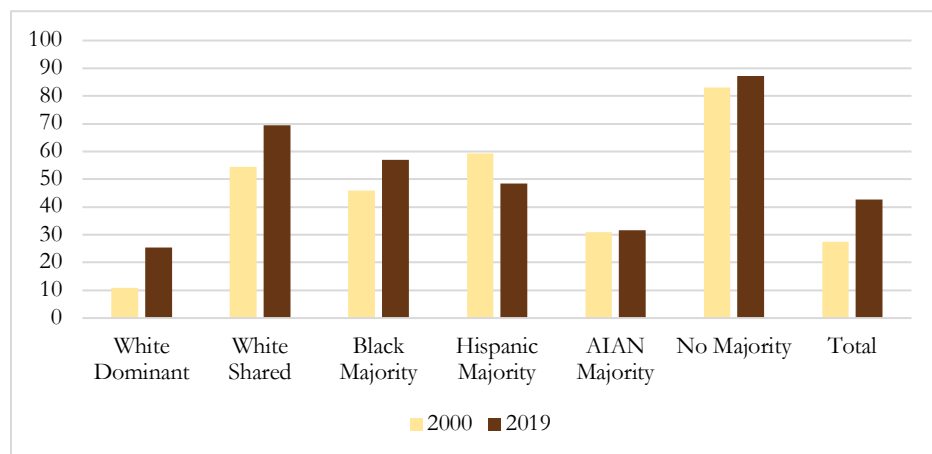
Source: EDGE NCES Census 2000; CCD 1999-00 and 2018-19.

Note. The average share of students that receive FRL is the most widely available estimate for poverty (up to 185% of federal poverty line).

These shifts in enrollment between 2000 and 2019 brought about gains in diversity for rural school districts overall, and for districts with the highest shares of White students in particular (Figure 3). White Dominant districts, which are the most common type of rural school district, are the least

diverse district types but doubled their mean diversity level during this time. Only Hispanic Majority districts became less diverse, due to the large increases in the overall share of Hispanic students.

**Figure 3. Mean Diversity by Rural School District Type, 2000 and 2019**



Source: EDGE NCES Census 2000; CCD 1999-00 and 2018-19.

Note: Diversity here is measured by entropy (a measure illustrating the extent that ethnoracial groups comprise equal shares of the unit's population), which we calculated using public school enrollment of White, Black, Hispanic, and AIAN students. A value of 0 means complete homogeneity and a value of 100 means complete diversity (an equal share of each group).

## Ethnoracial and Economic Segregation within Rural School Districts Persists, especially for Minoritized Groups

Rural districts with more than one school per grade span—which enroll 76% of all rural public school students—experienced little overall change in levels of within-district segregation since 2000.<sup>11</sup> However, districts with higher shares of minoritized students were consistently more segregated than those with higher shares of White students. The most segregated schools are found in AIAN Majority districts, which is likely due to having Bureau of Indian Education/tribal schools (schools here are 19% more segregated than their districts). The second most segregated district types are No Majority districts and the third are Black Majority districts (each with schools that are about 9% more segregated than their districts).

<sup>11</sup> This comparison is based on Theil's H using White/non-White enrollment. As used here, Theil's H is an evenness measure that compares school-level composition to the district-level composition. Its values are from 0 (complete evenness or integration) to 1 (complete segregation). Here an H value of 0.08 means that schools in a district are, on average, 8% less diverse than the district.



At the school-level across all rural districts, we find differences in students' cross-racial exposure and same-race isolation.<sup>12</sup> Due to White students comprising the vast majority of rural enrollment (72% in 2019), they have the most absolute isolation with same-race peers (Table 3). For instance, in 2019, the average White student attended a school that was more than 80% White, and less than 20% students of other ethnoracial groups. Students of all other ethnoracial groups had isolation that was less than 50% on average. And, with the exception of Asian students, every ethnoracial group became less isolated between 2000 and 2019.

We also compared minoritized students' exposure to White students with the total rural White enrollment. In 2019, the average Black, Hispanic, and AIAN students attended schools that were 43%, 47%, and 36% White, respectively, which is significantly lower than the 72% share that White students have of the overall public rural enrollment. However, although same-race isolation declined, we find that Black and Hispanic students have actually become less exposed to White students from 2000 to 2019, and that their drops in isolation were due to being more exposed to one another (Black students to Hispanic students and vice versa). This is true even as overall rural Black enrollment declined during this time.

When accounting for differences in the various ethnoracial groups' share of the total rural enrollment, minoritized students are most isolated. For example, only 9% of all rural public students were Black in 2019, but 40% of the average Black student's schoolmates were Black, a gap of 31 percentage points. On this gap-based measure, the most segregated students are AIAN students, followed by Black students, then Hispanic students.

**Table 3. School-Level Ethnoracial and Poverty Exposure of the Average Rural Student by Ethnicity/Race, 2000 and 2019**

		Isolation (% of Same Race Peers in Student's School)	Total Rural Enrollment (% of Student's Ethnoracial Group)	Isolation – Enrollment Gap	Exposure to Poverty (% of Peers Receiving FRL in Student's School)
2000	White	89.4	78.6	10.8	30.4
	Black	48.0	9.9	38.1	56.4
	Hispanic	41.5	4.6	36.9	49.2
	Asian	3.0	0.6	2.4	28.2
	AIAN	51.8	2.1	49.7	50.6
2019	White	81.1	72.0	9.1	43.3
	Black	40.3	9.0	31.3	66.8
	Hispanic	39.5	12.6	26.9	60.2
	Asian	6.8	1.1	5.7	36.2
	AIAN	49.7	2.0	47.7	69.9

Source: NCES CCD, 1999-00 and 2018-19.

<sup>12</sup> This analysis is based on the exposure index, which measures contact that a student from ethnoracial group A has with a given group B (expressed as the average percentage of students from group B attending the school of the average student from group A). Isolation is the exposure to others in the same group. We also use this index to understand the extent to which students of different ethnoracial groups are exposed to students receiving FRL. In the full study, we present all 5 ethnoracial groups' exposure to every other group but we only show ethnoracial isolation and poverty exposure here.

Likely as a consequence of this ethnoracial segregation, and similar to national patterns,<sup>13</sup> exposure to poverty in rural America's public schools is more pronounced among minoritized students than White students (Table 3). Even though every ethnoracial group is exposed to more students from low-income households in 2019 than they were in 2000, only the average Black, Hispanic, and AIAN students attended schools where a majority (over 60%) of their peers were low-income in 2019. These patterns illustrate how segregation by race often also means segregation by income as well.

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## Recommendations

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As rural communities continue to ethnoracially diversify, school integration efforts are *more* important, not less so. Given the disproportional disadvantages of rural minoritized groups and the growing economic challenges facing rural communities, it is more important than ever to work towards rural district integration. To that end, we recommend the following:

- Rural districts' and local leaders must critically examine and identify policies that may be inexplicitly harming minoritized students; and work towards changing policies or countering their effects.
- Districts and district leaders must recruit, prepare, support, and retain teachers and staff of color, as well as adopt a more culturally relevant curriculum for this changing demographic of students.
- States must not only support but galvanize interdistrict cooperation and regional approaches to desegregation (integrating across districts), utilizing housing and transportation agencies.

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<sup>13</sup> Reardon, S. F. (2016). School segregation and racial academic achievement gaps. *The Russell Sage Foundation Journal of the Social Sciences*, 2(5): 34-57.

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## About the authors

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**Maraki Kebede** is a researcher based in Montreal, Canada. Her research areas include the educational experiences of minoritized and immigrant students in rural communities and educational equity in international development efforts.

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**Erica Frankenberg** is a professor of education and demography at the Pennsylvania State University, and director of the Center for Education and Civil Rights. Her research interests focus on racial desegregation and inequality in K-12 schools and the connections between school segregation and other metropolitan policies.

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## About the Center for Education and Civil Rights (CECR)

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The Center for Education and Civil Rights seeks to be a hub for the generation of knowledge and coalition-building among the education and civil rights communities to promote research-based actions that address the complicated nature of racial and ethnic inequality in the 21st century. The Center's collective work is intended to promote equity across the educational pipeline by supporting efforts that facilitate integration through an inter-disciplinary approach. CECR is directed by Erica Frankenberg. For more information, see [cecr.ed.psu.edu](http://cecr.ed.psu.edu) or follow [@psu\\_civilrights](https://twitter.com/psu_civilrights).

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## About the Center on Rural Education and Communities (CREC)

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The Center on Rural Education and Communities (CREC) conducts and supports both research and outreach activities that address rural education and community-related issues in Pennsylvania, the nation, and the world. Current research initiatives under the center include charter school's impacts on rural school developments and rural high school student aspirations and college success for rural youth. The center also houses the Journal of Research in Rural Education (JRRE), which can be accessed at [jrre.psu.edu](http://jrre.psu.edu). CREC is directed by Kai Schafft. For more information, see [ed.psu.edu/academics/departments/department-education-policy-studies/eps-centers-councils-and-journals/center-rural-education-and-communities](http://ed.psu.edu/academics/departments/department-education-policy-studies/eps-centers-councils-and-journals/center-rural-education-and-communities).