

Voices from Rural Oklahoma: Preparing Students for College and Career

In the report “Voices from Rural Oklahoma” we conducted a series of focus groups and interviews with students, parents, and business leaders throughout the state in order to understand their perspectives on public education. We spoke to more than 80 individuals living in 47 rural communities, many of whom expressed deep concern that students in rural Oklahoma do not have sufficient educational and economic opportunity.

Preparing High Schoolers for Their Next Steps

Community members raised three common concerns about how rural high schools prepare students for their next steps:

- Guidance counselors are crucial to help students navigate the college application process. However, few schools have full-time guidance counselors. In schools where counselors do exist, they often have many roles and lack the time and resources necessary to support students in pursuing higher education.
- Students and parents value Oklahoma’s robust career-tech program. They see it as a viable way for students to gain important skills relevant to many career options.
- Community members feel that there is sometimes an overemphasis on sports at the expense of academics. Some adults expressed concern that the emphasis on sports limits the value and attention dedicated to their academics. Some students expressed concern that teachers are there to be coaches rather than to teach, and classroom instruction suffers.

Navigating the Workforce

In many rural towns, banks and schools are often the only employers where a college graduate could use his or her degree. Because of these limits, organizations that help students learn about job opportunities and connect graduates with employers are vital. Examples of such programs include:

- Roots, a program in Enid, connects top high school students with local business leaders
- Local career-tech centers have designed new programs to fill gaps in the local workforce
- Community colleges have helped place students in local industries
- The Oklahoma Educated Workforce Initiative and Governor Fallin’s Oklahoma Works Initiative are engaged in getting schools and businesses to work together

While some programs and organizations do exist, their efforts tend to be isolated. State and local leaders should work to develop a more coherent and deliberate strategy to help students learn about job opportunities in their communities and create a pipeline of talent for Oklahoma’s industries.

Oklahoma Education QUICK FACTS

- 1 in 3 students attends rural schools
- 390 of 513 districts are rural
- 18% of rural eighth-graders score proficient or higher on NAEP math (compared to 32% nationally)
- 27% of rural eighth-graders score proficient or higher on NAEP reading (compared to 33% nationally)
- 19% of rural families live in poverty (compared to 14% in Oklahoma City and 16% in Tulsa)
- 51% of high school graduates enroll in a college or university (compared to 68% nationally)
- 46% of public four-year university students graduate within six years (compared to 58% nationally)

Sources: National Center for Education Statistics Common Core of Data, National Assessment of Educational Progress, 2010-2014 five-year American Community Survey estimates, Oklahoma State Regents for Higher Education, The Chronicle of Higher Education

CONTACT US www.bellwethereducation.org

juliet.squire@bellwethereducation.org, kelly.robson@bellwethereducation.org

BELLWETHER
EDUCATION PARTNERS