



Could “Education Preserves” Save Schools From Choice Sprawl?



When it comes to the growth of charter schools and voucher programs, rural areas may be the final frontier.

Approximately one in five public school students (9.8 million students) are classified as rural. “The percentage of students whose parents considered other schools [other than their neighborhood public school] was lower in rural areas (28 percent) than in suburban areas (35 percent) and in cities (43 percent),” according to the most [recent federal data](#). Urban students are more than four times as likely as rural students to attend charter schools and nearly three times as likely to attend private schools.

Republicans are significantly [more likely](#) than Democratic voters to support school choice and are [over-represented](#) by large margins in rural counties. Yet the nation’s rural school systems are still virgin territories that have been largely exempt from the frenzied development of new choice schools that have drained urban and suburban public-school classrooms and coffers as birth rates plunged by more than 50 percent over the past four decades.

In a new [*Idaho Law Review* article](#), NEPC Fellows [Preston C. Green III](#) of the University of Connecticut, [Christopher M. Saldaña](#) of the University of Wisconsin-Madison, [Bruce D. Baker](#) of the University of Miami, and [Julie F. Mead](#) of the University of Wisconsin-Madison suggest that rural schools remain free from the frenzy.

“The shuttering of rural school districts would have severe impacts on the communities they serve,” they write. Educational harms, they suggest, “would be only part of the story. Rural schools are the hub of community life, and they are often the primary employer for these communities. Indeed, for some communities, the loss of rural school districts could be their death knell.”

To combat the uncontrolled sprawl of choice options that many rural communities have said they do not want and do not need, the researchers borrow a concept from environmentalists’ successful campaigns to establish nature preserves that protect ecosystems, wildlife, plants, and natural resources that—like public schools—serve the public good. They call their solution “education preserves.”

“The aim of education preserves is to sustain public education in small and sparse school districts,” they write. “Protecting these districts enables rural communities to maintain access to quality education while allowing school choice in areas with sufficient population density to support multiple schools.”

This concept would require that state legislatures amend current voucher and charter school laws so that districts could be designated education preserves. These amendments might prohibit district residents from participating in voucher programs or limit the number of students who could do so. Private schools located in these zones might also be prohibited from accepting vouchers. Similarly, charter schools would be banned in these zones. Existing charters could be grandfathered in and renewed or nonrenewed over time, according to criteria developed by the state.

The researchers note that this concept aligns with many existing state educational policies that provide for additional funding or alternative procedures tailored to rural districts. They compare it to state laws that permit hunting—but regulate where and when it is allowed and specify

the types and numbers of species that can be killed.

Although proposed as a benefit to rural school districts, education preserves could, in theory, be applied to other areas that face negative consequences from school choice sprawl. To draw upon the hunting analogy, hunting bans may protect both remote areas and dense cities, but with the goal of avoiding different negative consequences. For instance, in remote areas, it might be limited in order to protect sensitive ecosystems. In cities, it might be banned in order to prevent bystanders from being unintentionally killed by stray bullets.

Similarly, although the goal of educational preserves in cities and rural areas would be the same (protecting public education), the negative consequences they address might vary. In rural communities, the focus would be on preventing them from becoming ghost towns if their schools disappear. In urban communities, the focus might be on preventing choice from shutting down public schools in certain neighborhoods or zones.

In the end, the authors explain, education preserves are about protecting vulnerable communities from unsustainable, chaotic, and poorly planned choice sprawl that would endanger the very existence of public schools.

NEPC Resources on School Choice

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