

# North Carolina's Rural Communities Lose with Voucher Expansion as Dollars Flow to High-Income Families

*A proposed expansion of North Carolina's voucher program directs state dollars away from essential programs that benefit rural communities*

RALEIGH, NC, UNITED STATES, May 16, 2024 /EINPresswire.com/ -- North Carolina has [more rural](#)

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What the General Assembly is doing is devastating to rural communities. Our public schools are not only educating our children and future generations; they are economic engines for our communities.”

*Eva Clayton, Former U.S.  
Congresswoman, N.C. District 1*

[students](#) than every state except Texas, with 481,044 rural students making up 34.5% of our state's total number of students. But a bill moving through the state legislature spends millions on a program expansion for wealthy families primarily living in urban counties, despite the documented hardship facing North Carolina's rural communities.

According to the National Rural Education Association's report, [Why Rural Matters 2023](#), education in North Carolina's rural communities rank as in need of critical examination. Compared to rural students in other states, North Carolina's rural students are disadvantaged by low state education spending, and unlike in other states, have

lower high school graduation rates than non-rural students. They are also much more likely to live in a household with an income below the federal poverty line.

On May 2, the N.C. Senate passed HB 823 to increase funding for Opportunity Scholarship vouchers by nearly \$500 million over the next two years. Bill sponsor Senator Michael Lee stated that the additional funds are needed to clear the current waitlist and ensure that all applicants for the 2024-25 school year are offered a voucher. During the comment period, Senator Natasha Marcus pointed out that 70% of the families on the waitlist had annual incomes higher than \$115,000 and 23% had annual incomes higher than \$260,000. Yet according to the NC Rural Center, the most recent data (2021) shows that the median income for N.C. rural families is less than \$47,938/year, well below the income of voucher waitlist families.

Also striking is the lack of private school options in rural communities. Data from the North Carolina State Education Authority—the state entity in charge of administering the voucher

program— lists 626 private schools that accept vouchers, making up about 70% of the state's total number of private schools. But most voucher-accepting schools are far from rural communities. Sixteen of North Carolina's 100 counties have zero voucher-accepting private schools, while 14 have just 1 (nearly 100% religious schools). That's 30 counties with virtually no private school option. If voucher expansion passes into law, state funding that could be used to support programs in rural counties will be directed away from rural communities and public schools toward a voucher program that benefits wealthy residents in other counties. In many rural counties, public schools are a leading employer, providing an economic and social anchor for residents.

Many of the challenges facing rural communities could be alleviated by an influx of state funding. For example, educational attainment for rural residents lags behind urban and suburban communities. Only [41% of the adults \(25-44 years old\)](#) in North Carolina's rural counties have a postsecondary degree or credential. This is compared to 51% in suburban counties and 66% in urban counties.

Creating more postsecondary education options in rural communities would help businesses find employees with the right education and skills, contributing to economic growth. Reports show that 74% of rural small business owners struggle to find employees with the needed background and training for the job.

Communities across the state are facing child care shortages, with 30% of child care centers facing closure due to federal pandemic relief subsidies ending in June. With fewer options, these closures are particularly damaging in rural areas.

Another challenge in rural communities is access to affordable high-speed internet. Essential for education, it also plays a crucial role in helping businesses and economic growth in rural areas. In North Carolina, rural counties score much lower on broadband availability and quality.

Bolstering educational attainment, workforce readiness, access to high quality childcare, expanded mental health services, and broadband availability will all help support economic growth and community health in rural counties. This has the potential to start a positive cycle as community improvements and economic growth will enable counties to afford higher salary supplements to attract and retain the best educators and leaders. Currently, although many rural counties tax themselves at the highest rates in the state, their tax base isn't robust enough to support competitive salaries.

By sending tax dollars to private schools instead of addressing the many needs of public schools—which educate the overwhelming majority of North Carolina's students—legislators are sabotaging communities across the state, especially those in rural areas.

Heather Koons  
Public Schools First NC

publicschoolsfirstnc@gmail.com

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