

“The will to work of everyone in the country is the best guarantee of national survival.”

-- Bhumibol Adulyadej

Why does rural La Plata County need adult education?

April 15, 2009
 Ignacio, Colorado

Colorado’s rural areas are home to 20 percent of the state’s total population. Those same rural areas cover at least 80 percent of the state’s total land area.

It’s hardly a backwater, although much of the state’s identity, history, and industry are still portrayed in the agrarian ethos of farmers and ranchers. Values and styles remain largely conservative. Generations of hard-working families and native tradition infuse the natural landscape of Colorado, perhaps more than any urban vision.

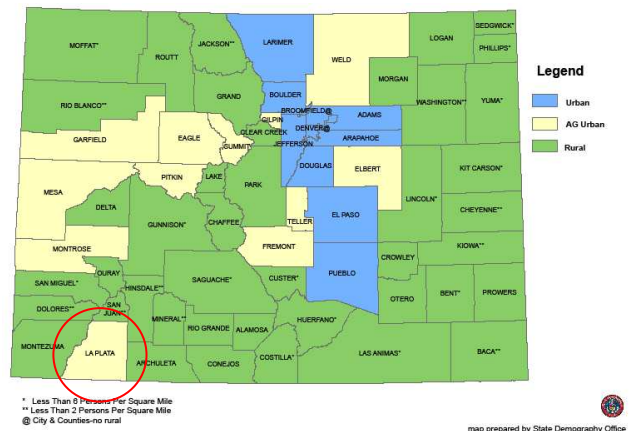
The average allocation in Colorado per adult-education student is \$361—for the whole year. By our estimates this covers less than 20% of a rural person’s learning need.

Yet rurality poses major challenges for workers, families, and youth. More than ever the economic opportunities are shrinking outside the city, living-costs are rising, commerce is truncated, and career mobility is nearly extinct. As the bellwether of Colorado’s social and civic wellbeing, the rural climate displays a tipping balance: deterioration and weakening of public resources even as the scope of citizen need expands. Fiscally trapped in the countryside, with ever-diminishing dollars to counter hardships or invest in improvement, many ruralites find themselves calloused but empty-handed, hungry for work but unemployable, doing their damndest to make ends meet but falling short.

And the grim patterns *precede* our nation’s latest financial crisis:

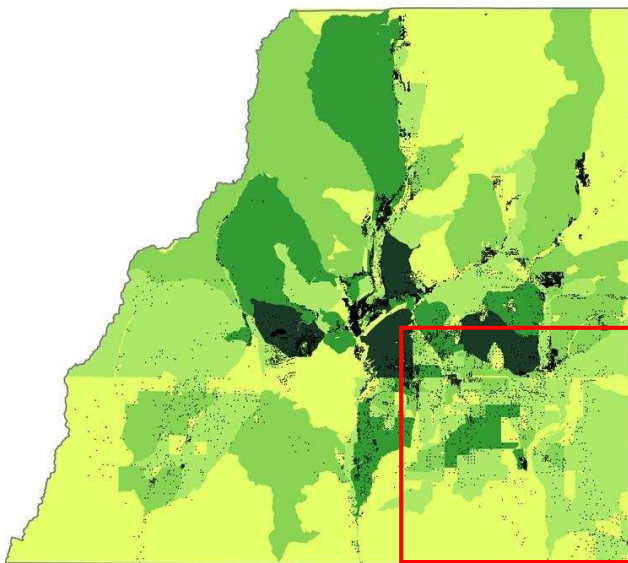
- National studies find that workers in rural areas earn about 23% less than their urban equivalents;

low-skill employment has been steadily declining, too, at rates twice that of metro areas.¹

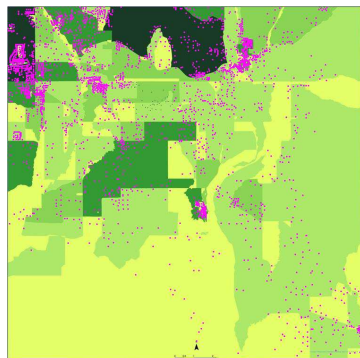
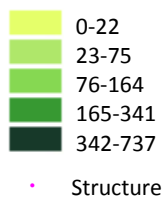


- Colorado rural employers tend to import technical or professional staffing from outside their areas,² leaving unskilled labor to locals—whose reliance on construction, conventional energy, and/or seasonal trades makes them especially vulnerable to market downturns.
- At the same time, what once offset the rural disadvantages are disappearing—a 2008 policy report shows, for example, that rural Colorado’s food costs have risen by 45% in the last 4 years, while wages have largely stagnated.³
- The number of schoolchildren living in poverty has risen dramatically in rural Colorado; in Ignacio alone, it’s more than twice the national average (21%).⁴
- Across Colorado, two-thirds of working families need childcare or preschool services. Up to 80% of families in La Plata County simply can’t get any at all.⁵

- USDA’s research service reports that rural children are likelier to have poorer school performance compared with metro children, less parental involvement or support in learning, even higher mortality and injury rates, greater obesity factors and socio-emotional disorders.
- La Plata census figures (2000) cite that at least 9% of adults had no high school diploma, and as many as 25% had tried but not completed college—in effect, more than a third of the county population unable to reach educational goals. The same figures for Ignacio indicate a nearly 50% total shortfall.⁶



Southeast
La Plata County
Persons per Census Block



In a 10-mile radius of Ignacio, demographic patterns show about 40 persons per square mile—well within parameters for a noncore “rural” area according to U.S. Census Bureau definitions—although La Plata County is classified broadly as Ag-Urban or Micropolitan.

- For the last decade, Colorado has witnessed gradual but accelerating high school dropout rates—now estimated at greater than 25%. This translates to earnings potential of \$3.4 billion lost in the state each year.⁷

In the same way that a plan for giving out a nickel for every \$100 in bank savings would benefit mainly the affluent and not those who are already broke, a system based on population density is liable to underfund rural groups.

- In one respect rural areas do *not* lag far behind metro areas: crime. While in sum lower than cities, rural violence, domestic assault, and property crimes between 1988-1991 rose at rates almost triple that of urban areas. Rural districts’ greater proportion of working families living in poverty, more “at risk” youth, and quickening dropout rates are cited as leading factors.⁸
- While Internet access is nearly universal to the state, rural residents still suffer a shortage of computers and digital skills—and when hardware is available must rely generally on dial-up ISP’s. Initiatives to increase “distance learning” options thus stall due to lack of broadband access; in eastern La Plata County, outside of townships, direct-line high-speed internet is virtually nonexistent.

With poorer classrooms, fewer students are willing to devote much time or money to making a trip at all.

- Multiple research studies show that education (or lack of) is perhaps the most significant factor in rural disparities⁹—the absence of both post-secondary graduates and the programs to produce them explains simultaneously the trends in job outsourcing, under- or dys-employment of skilled personnel, youth outmigration, advancing poverty thresholds, intergenerational illiteracy,

and household financial stress.

- Despite major gains over the last 30 years in the nation, as well as significant economic reforms, rural Americans show consistent gaps in literacy and educational competencies as against their urban or suburban peers.¹⁰

For more than a decade the patterns have been consistent, yet relief has been slow to absent. Despite repeated efforts to prop up college budgets and metro services in the state, or redesign public educational performance, or reenergize workforce directives, policymakers have seemingly been unable to change significantly the retention problems of these institutions or halt the steady increase in failing students. The near-bottom ranking of the state's overall support of education certainly doesn't help, particularly as enrollment demand grows. Average annual tuition for a Colorado community college is now \$4,376—more than double what it was five years ago—and public school education exceeds \$11,000 per student annually.¹¹

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Unlike colleges or public schools, Adult Education in Colorado receives no state underwriting whatever. By means of federal grants, channeled through the Colorado Department of Education, it clings to life—providing adults and their families free, efficient, goal-specific learning.

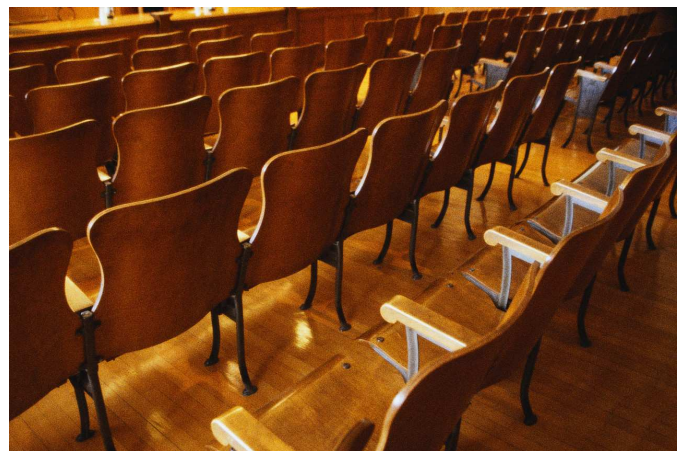
For a learner to make real progress, of course, it costs much more than a few hundred dollars: the point is the funding priorities are skewed away from programs which might be having the broadest impact for improvement. More money is now spent on incarcerating a person, for example, than preparing her for graduation or work.

Because programs in urban areas can synergize their efforts with partner agencies, host significantly larger student populations, economize workloads and draw from myriad sponsors (besides federal) in their area, they've been able to stretch their funds for remarkable results. Rural programs fare poorer: while they *can* obtain qualified professionals to teach, provide cutting-edge curriculum and even state-of-the-art digital technologies, the costs of doing so can raise their price 2 to 3 times the average. When funds are distributed per capita—that is, body by body—ruralites come up short. Rural populations are often too small, too scattered, to

achieve an efficient classroom density. And with poorer classrooms, fewer students are willing to devote much time or money to making a trip at all.

In the same way that a plan for giving out a nickel for every \$100 in bank savings would benefit mainly the affluent and not those who are already broke, a plan based on population density is liable to underfund rural groups. Current guidelines for adult education programs in Colorado (rural or otherwise) follow similar criteria. Ultimately rural programs must spend more per person in order to gain results equal to urban counterparts, but they still rate fewer dollars because of smaller overall populations. Like a wrapping that contained the bread before it was eaten, in rural adult classrooms often only the scent of something nutritious remains.

In one arena has the American education system arguably made both expanding and consistently upward strides: adult education. While elementary and high schools will be measured this year in hundreds of billions of dollars, and university institutions and subsidies in billions more, adult education continues to rate only in the thousands. Some might say the pride we cherish in our lands and tradition, the intimate connections and small town ways, and the ultimate sanity of our natural environments, seems incredibly cheated by this imbalance. However, in the country we know that “doing the next right thing” is not only a reflex of hope, but essential to any good crop.



Acknowledgments:

Initial map design with demographics with help of La Plata County GIS Department.

U.S. Census Bureau [for definitions of demographic “Rural” and its classification see www.census.gov/geo/www/ua/ua_2k.html

¹ “Rural Labor and Education: Nonmetro Earnings and Low-Wage Workers” USDA Economic Research Service, 2007 [<http://www.ers.usda.gov/Briefing/LaborAndEducation/earnings.htm>] and “Education’s Role in the Metro-Nonmetro Earnings Divide” *Amber Waves*, Feb. 2008. USDA. “Assuming returns to educational attainment remain constant, if educational attainment in nonmetro areas were the same as in metro areas, nonmetro earnings would be more than 5 percentage points (\$31 per week) higher, closing about one-fourth of the metro-nonmetro earnings gap.” <http://www.ers.usda.gov/AmberWaves/February08/Features/EducationRole.htm>

² A noteworthy feature of Four Corners rural economies, collectively. *Rural Colorado – Real Colorado*, An Annual Report on the Status of Rural Colorado 2008. 14

³ Colorado Fiscal Policy Institute, “Self-Sufficiency Standard for Colorado 2008: A Family Needs Budget” 1. (Averages for six selected counties show increases in healthcare-costs of 63% and childcare-costs of 27%)

⁴ Source: Ed.Gov (2008 Common Core Data). See also, David Boston, “Poverty Rates in Colorado: Critical Poverty in Rural Areas Tends to be Overlooked” 2008. http://poverty.suite101.com/article.cfm/poverty_in_colorado

⁵ Region 9 Economic Development District of Southwest Colorado. “Education and Early Childhood Care” in the 2008 Southwest Colorado Index, 7-8. <http://www.scan.org/Education%20&%20Early%20Childhood%20Care%2008.pdf>

⁶ “Table DP-2. Profile of Selected Social Characteristics: 2000 “ and “Table DP-1. Profile of General Demographic Characteristics: 2000.” U.S. Bureau of Census.

⁷ Cited by CollegeSummit “Colorado Children’s Campaign study: Children At Risk,” 2007. <http://www.collegesummit.org/regions/colorado>.

⁸ Joseph F. Donnermeyer, Ohio State University. “Crime and Violence in Rural Communities” 1995. <http://www.ncrel.org/sdrs/areas/issues/envrnmnt/drugfree/v1donner.htm>

⁹ See for example, “Rural Labor and Education: Nonmetro Education” USDA Economic Research Service, 2007. <http://www.ers.usda.gov/Briefing/LaborAndEducation/education.htm> and . *Rural Colorado – Real Colorado*, An Annual Report on the Status of Rural Colorado 2008; also, USDE’s *Status of Education in Rural America*, p68-71.

¹⁰ Refer note 1; also, *Status of Education in Rural America*, 68f.

¹¹ See College In Colorado, http://www.collegeincolorado.org/Apply/Compare_Colleges/Undergrad_Compare_Colleges.aspx and 2008 Southwest Colorado Index, <http://www.scan.org/Education%20&%20Early%20Childhood%20Care%2008.pdf>

¹² Source: Colorado Department of Education Adult Education and Family Literacy, FY08 data figures.