

A Perfect Storm

Declining enrollment, increasing student poverty and rising operational costs are putting pressures on rural schools

Sarah Kemp

In Wisconsin, aging population and declining births have meant a decrease in rural school district enrollment.

In addition to declining enrollment, poverty increased during the recession of the late 2000s, especially among children. This increase is evident by the increasing number of students qualifying for free or reduced-price lunch.

Meanwhile, fixed costs like transportation and food services have increased. Many rural school districts responded by cutting variable costs including instruction and

support staff and by delaying facility improvements.

Faced with these challenges, rural school districts have been placed in a perilous situation. As a researcher at the University of Wisconsin-Madison's Applied Population Laboratory, I have been exploring these trends including enrollment decline, increasing costs and rising poverty, and their effects on rural schools.

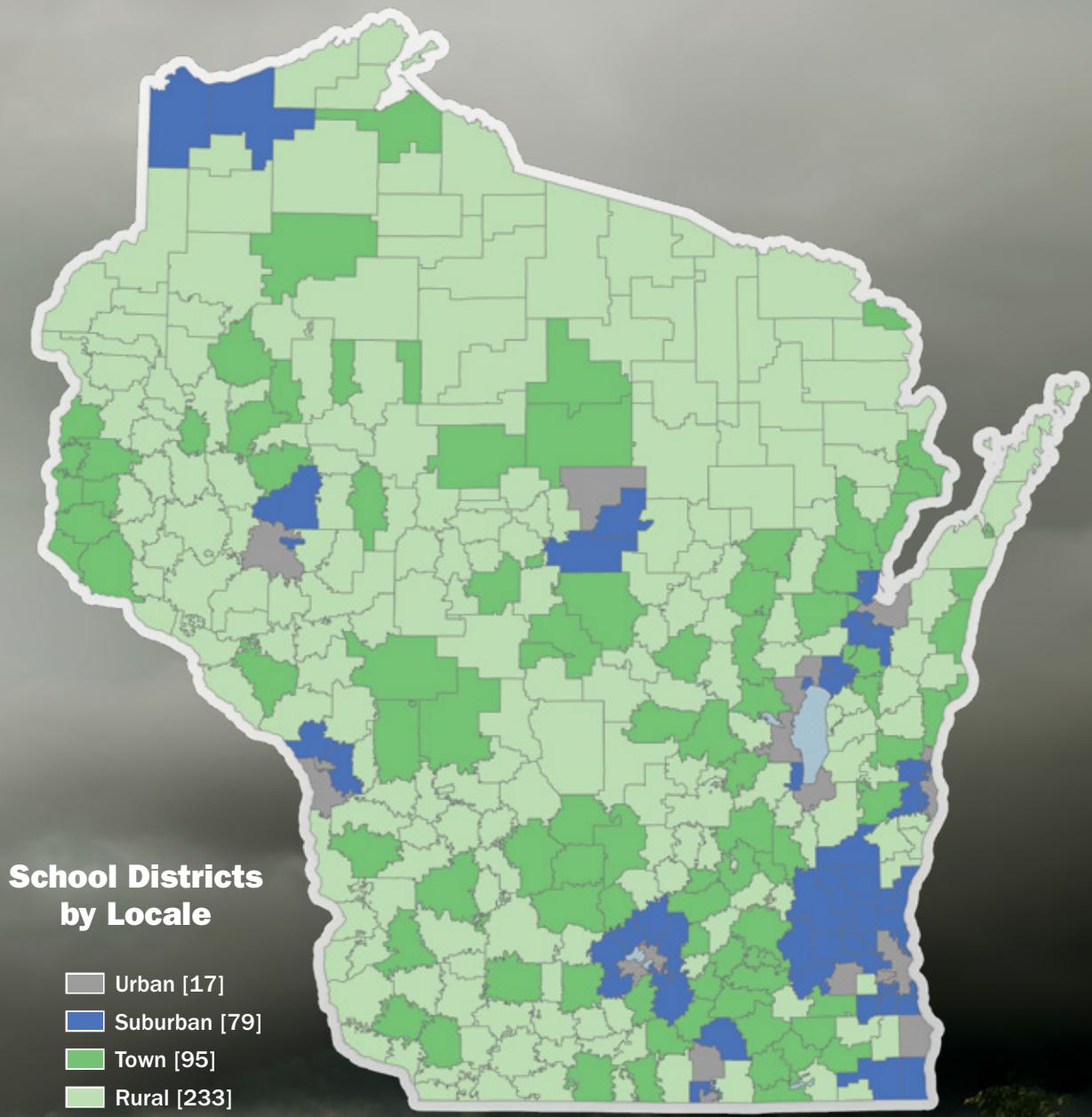
Enrollment, Costs, and Poverty

Of the trends mentioned above, rural schools have been hit especially hard.

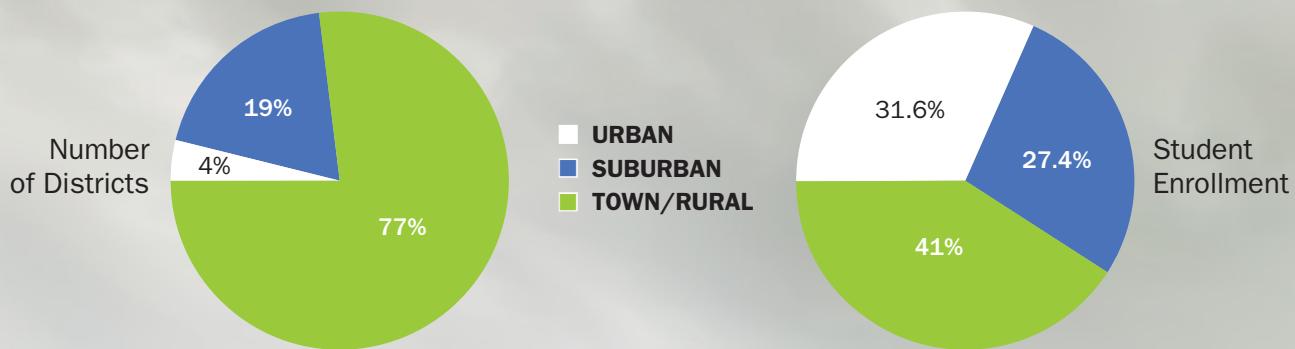
The study analyzed data from the Department of Public Instruction (DPI) for the 2008-09 and the 2013-14 school years and focused on three data sources of fundamental concern: change in enrollment, change in costs per pupil, and change in free and reduced-price lunch eligibility.

Over this five-year period, total statewide student enrollment declined by 0.43 percent. However, enrollment change has affected rural, town, urban and suburban districts differently. Enrollment increased for 65 percent of urban districts,

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53 percent of suburban districts, and 45 percent of town school districts. However, only 26.5 percent of rural school districts saw an increase in enrollment (73.5 percent declined).

Change in costs per pupil also affected rural school districts more dramatically. During this five-year period (2008-09 to 2013-14), rural school districts saw the greatest percentage of districts with increasing costs per pupil than any other locale.

According to data from the DPI, increases in the student eligibility for the free and reduced-price lunch program grew considerably since

2008-09 for all categories of school districts. However, one slightly positive observation showed that rural schools experienced the smallest percent of districts with an increase in the number of students' eligible for the program. Conversely, nearly all suburban school districts experienced an increase in student eligibility.

■ Change in Enrollment and its Affects

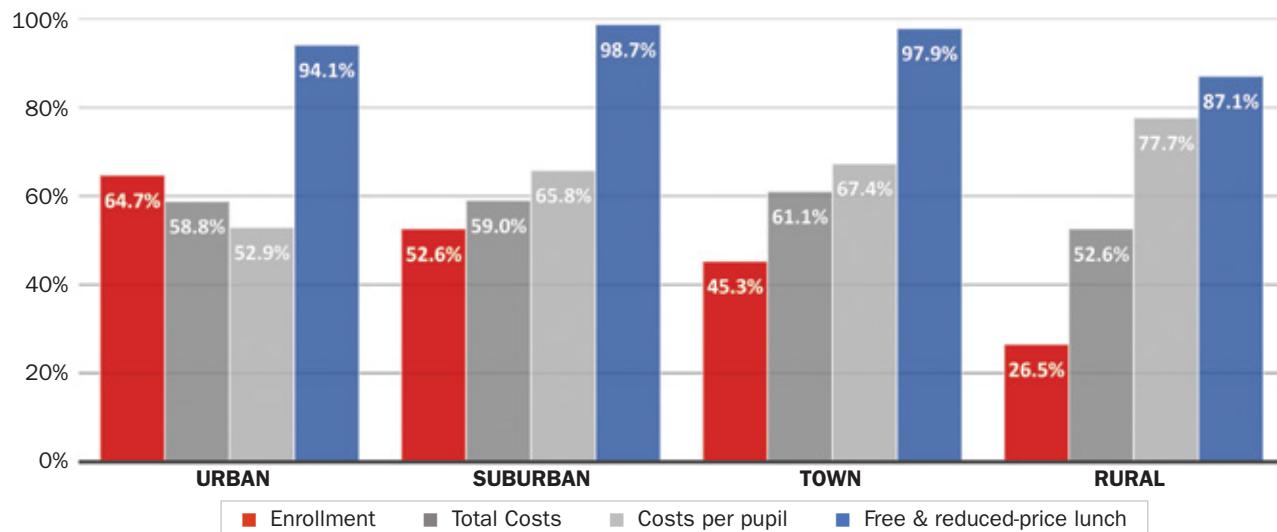
Focusing specifically on rural schools, this study revealed that declining enrollment has the greatest impact on town and rural school districts.

Change in enrollment had the strongest correlation to cost per pupil, free and reduced-price lunches, and staff FTEs (full-time equivalency). As student enrollment decreased, the number of students in the lunch program and the number of staff FTEs decreased.

Another finding revealed that as town and rural student enrollment decreased, the costs per pupil increased. Rural school leaders know this equation all too well. If a district has less students, the cost of services such as transportation and food service doesn't necessarily decrease at the same rate.

Percent of Districts with Increases in Enrollment, Costs, and Poverty

By Locale, 2008-09 to 2013-14



Other factors are working against rural school districts. Generally speaking, there are fewer children per household in rural areas. The population in rural areas also tends to be older than in other parts of the state.

Looking Ahead

Two years ago, the Applied Population Laboratory completed statewide enrollment projections that indicated that rural school district enrollment would decline. In evaluating these projections, rural student enrollment did decrease, but not as dramatically as the projections indicated. However, when updating the projections for rural schools, the continued drop in the number of births will mean rural school districts will continue to decline, especially in the elementary grades.

In rural school districts, we project a 3-5 percent decline in the next five years. However, the decrease could be more dramatic in lower grades. Some rural districts likely could see an 8-10 percent decline in their elementary school enrollment.

Future research will continue to monitor these trends and assess whether these changes are affecting the quality of the education as indicated by test scores and graduation rates. Also, a more careful examination will be carried out to determine whether these correlations are stronger for school districts that are further from urban centers. Future research may also include analysis of the effects of private schools and voucher programs on rural public schools. ■

Sarah Kemp is a researcher for the University of Wisconsin-Madison's Applied Population Laboratory.

Learn More about

Population Trends AT CONVENTION

Sarah Kemp, a researcher for the University of Wisconsin-Madison's Applied Population Laboratory, will present data on population trends and projections and how they affect public schools in Wisconsin.

A Perfect Storm: A Case Study of Wisconsin's Rural Schools

Thursday, Jan. 21
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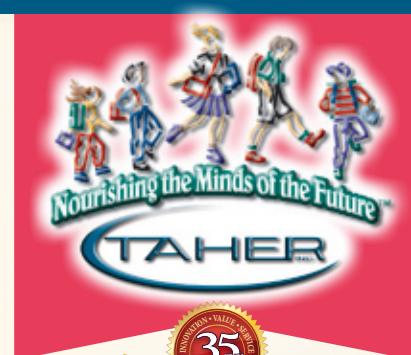
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