



# Rural Education in Oregon

## Overcoming the Challenges of Income and Distance



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The Oregon Legislature has set an ambitious 40/40/20 education goal. It asserts that within 10 years, 40 percent of students will earn a bachelor's degree or more, 40 percent will earn an associate degree or certificate, and the remaining 20 percent will earn no less than a high school diploma. As the goal's endpoint approaches, it is critical to disaggregate data for key student groups, measure progress, and identify schools or districts where students are performing well beyond expectations.

Students in rural Oregon deserve special attention because they face two unique challenges: income and distance. The economies in many parts of rural Oregon never fully recovered from the twin recessions of the early 1980s, automation of the wood products manufacturing industry, and regulations that limit timber harvests on federally owned lands. In the mid-1970s, personal income per capita in non-metropolitan Oregon was as high as 96 percent of the metro-area average. In 2014, income per person in non-metro Oregon was only 83 percent of the metro average. Study after study find students from lower income households face educational headwinds that their higher income peers don't.

Distances in rural Oregon pose an additional challenge. For some students, distance can turn an occasional illness and doctor visits into long spells of absenteeism. Rural schools also have a harder time attracting and retaining teachers. For older students, distance limits exposure to college and university campuses, which translates into lower rates of enrollment.

Overcoming the twin challenges of income and distance in rural Oregon schools is an imperative if Oregon is going to meet its education goals.

Lower incomes in rural Oregon create a challenge for students and educators.

## PERSONAL INCOME PER CAPITA IN NON-METROPOLITAN OREGON EXPRESSED AS A SHARE OF THE OREGON METROPOLITAN AREA AVERAGE



Source: BEA

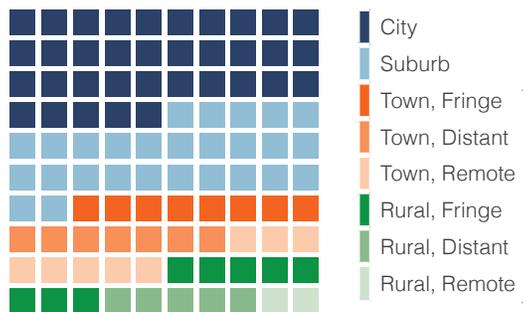
# Who are Oregon's rural students?

The U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) has developed a rural-urban taxonomy based on population densities and distances from major urban areas. Schools fall into one of four broad categories: city, suburb, town, or rural. Within the town and rural categories, USDA further distinguishes between remote, distant, and urban-fringe areas. Remote rural schools in Oregon include those in Enterprise, Gold Beach, and Fossil. Towns on the urban fringe include Sandy, Dallas, and St. Helens.

This study extends the “rural” definition to include the USDA rural and town categories. Applying that definition, 38 percent of Oregon students attend rural schools. School districts in our rural and town designations cover the large majority of the state’s geography: all areas east of the Cascades with the exception of Bend, the entire coast, and the majority of Southwest Oregon.

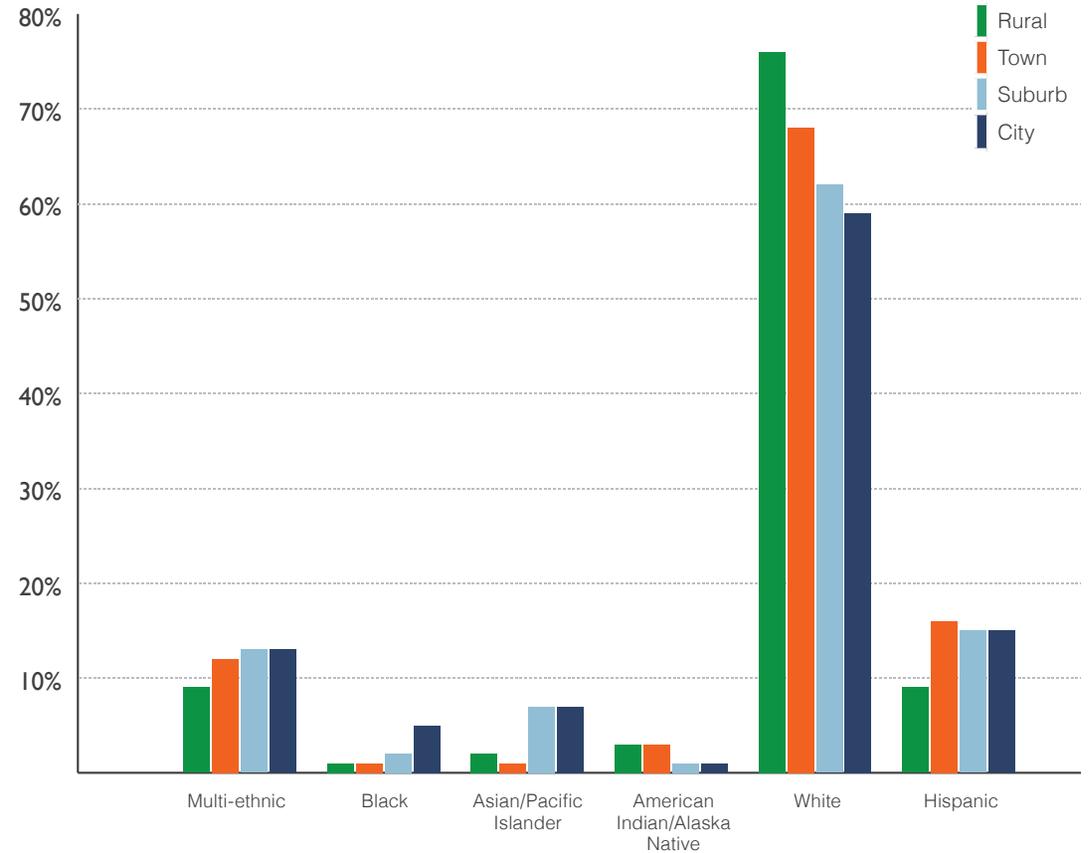
Rural students are less racially/ethnically diverse than their urban and suburban peers and a smaller share of rural students are English-language learners.

## DISTRIBUTION OF OREGON STUDENTS BY LOCALITY, 2011-12 THROUGH 2013-14 SY



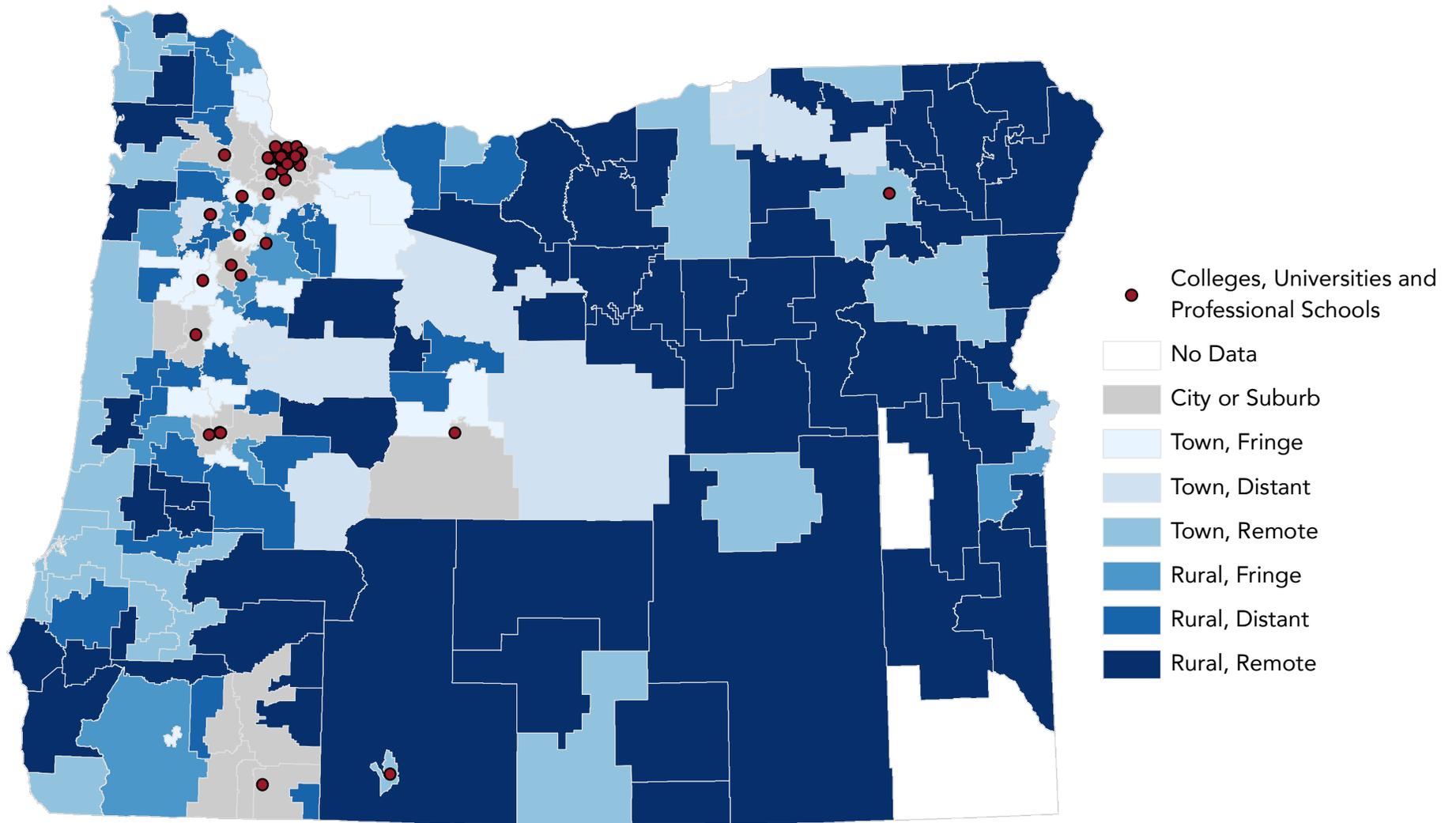
The report is focused on students in town and rural locales.

## RACE AND ETHNICITY OF OREGON STUDENTS, BY LOCALITY, 2011-12 THROUGH 2013-14



Source: ECONorthwest analysis of ODE data

## LOCALITY DESIGNATIONS FOR OREGON SCHOOL DISTRICTS



Source: ESRI, National Center for Education Statistics, ECONorthwest. Locality designations from USDA's Rural-Urban Commuting Area Codes

# How do rural Oregon students perform relative to their peers across the country?

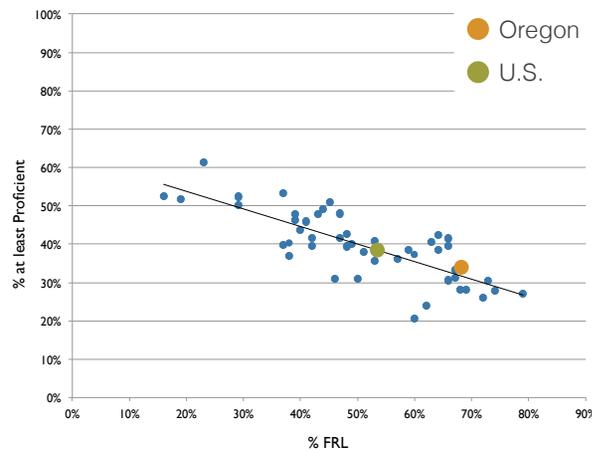
A recent Urban Institute report concluded that Oregon's student achievement (after controlling for the state's socioeconomic conditions) is solidly average. The story is the same in an analysis of rural schools.

The National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) offers the best apples-to-apples comparison of student outcomes across states. In rural Oregon and elsewhere, household incomes show a strong correlation with achievement. Oregon's rural students perform close to expectations on the core NAEP exams given the economic conditions of their households. The exception is eighth grade reading, where a higher share of Oregon students is proficient than economic conditions would predict.

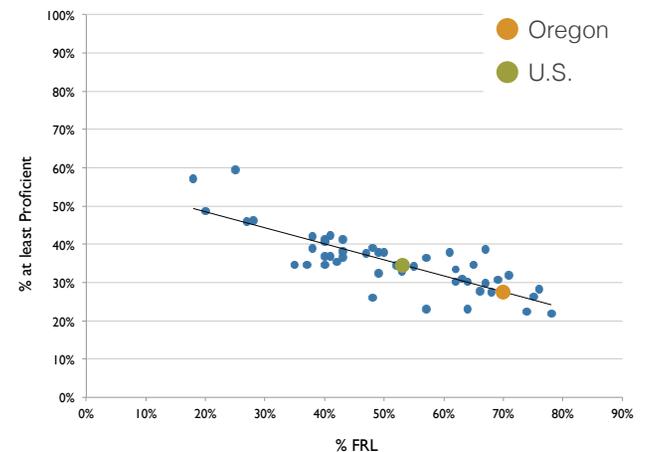
These figures imply that successful economic development that lifts families out of poverty would also translate into better school performance.

## NAEP PROFICIENCY AMONG RURAL STUDENTS, 2015

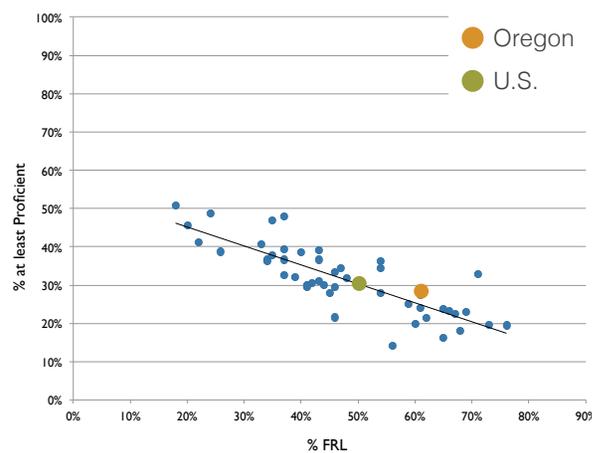
### FOURTH GRADE MATH



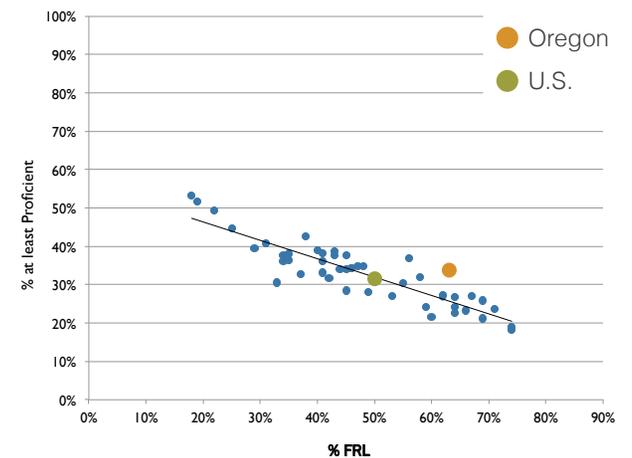
### FOURTH GRADE READING



### EIGHTH GRADE MATH



### EIGHTH GRADE READING



Source: National Center for Education Statistics, NAEP Data Explorer, 2015

Notes: Share who were proficient and share eligible for FRL were calculated using the NAEP Data Explorer for Town and Rural areas, combined.

# How does performance stack up within the state?

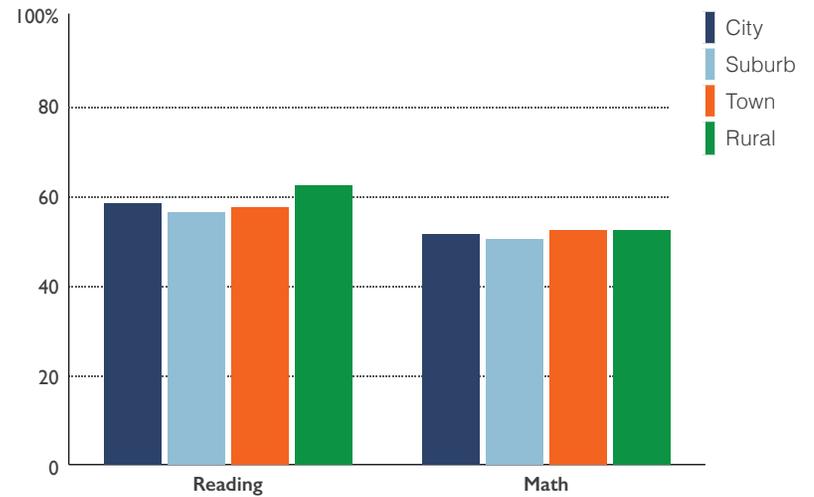
Outcomes on third grade standardized tests show only small urban/rural differences when the analysis is limited to low-income students (see top right). In fact, the only noticeable difference is a higher share of low-income rural students who are proficient in reading.

Bigger differences appear in an analysis of students who are ineligible for free or reduced-price lunch. Here, students in urban and suburban areas outperform their rural and town peers in both reading and math. The leading hypothesis for the differences would be the relative affluence of these non-poor students: urban and suburban areas will include students from higher income households in the Portland region.

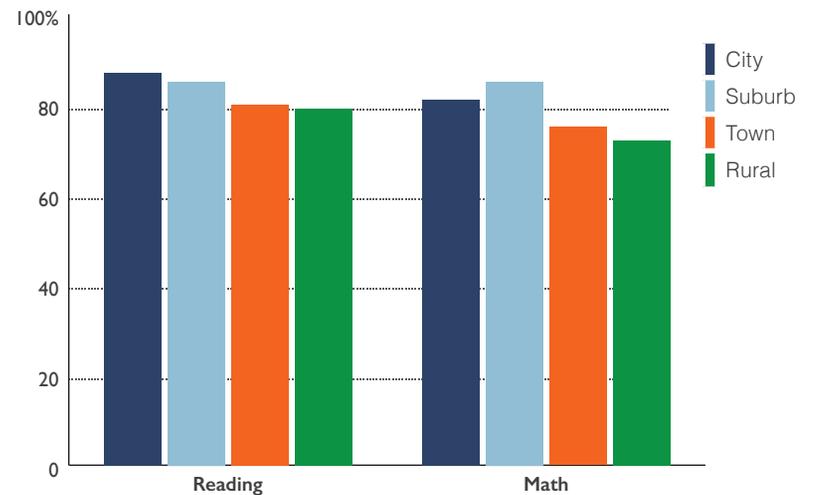
The takeaway is that school districts in rural Oregon are faring no worse than urban districts in driving achievement for their poor or near-poor students. But rural districts, on average, aren't pulling the achievement of middle class students up to levels attained by their more affluent urban and suburban peers.

## SHARE OF THIRD GRADERS THAT MET OR EXCEEDED OAKS STANDARDS

### STUDENTS ELIGIBLE FOR FREE OR REDUCED-PRICE LUNCH\*



### STUDENTS NOT ELIGIBLE FOR FREE OR REDUCED-PRICE LUNCH



Source: ECONorthwest analysis of ODE data, 2012-14 SY

\*FRL eligibility serves as a proxy for poverty in our analysis. Students are eligible for free- or reduced-price lunch if their families make 130% or 185% of the federal poverty level, respectively.

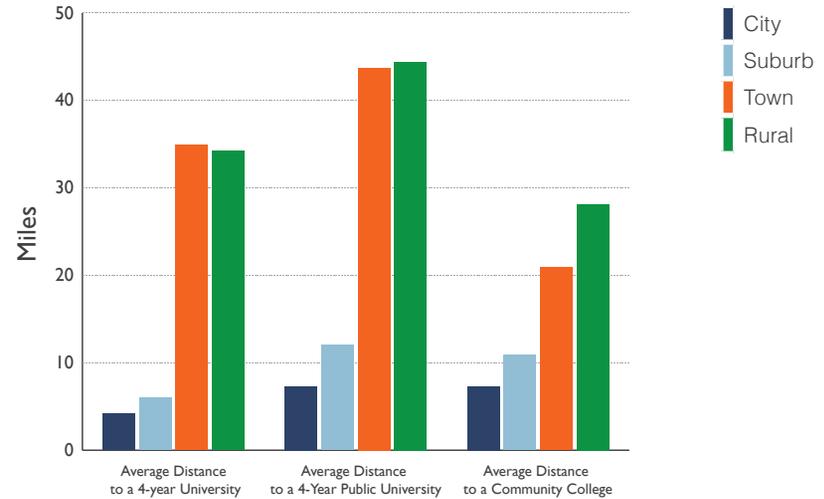
# What is the role of distance in rural education?

The challenges of distance show up in at least two indicators: postsecondary enrollment and chronic absenteeism.

College going is affected by a range of factors, from academic readiness to affordability. Exposure to campuses also plays a role. The typical urban or suburban student lives within five to ten miles of a university or college. By contrast, rural students live three to four times as far from postsecondary campuses (see top right). This translates into lower rates of postsecondary enrollment. If all rural students were located in close proximity to campuses—specifically within two miles—we estimate enrollment would increase by 4 percentage points. Put differently, the independent effect of distance keeps about 500 rural students from enrolling each year.

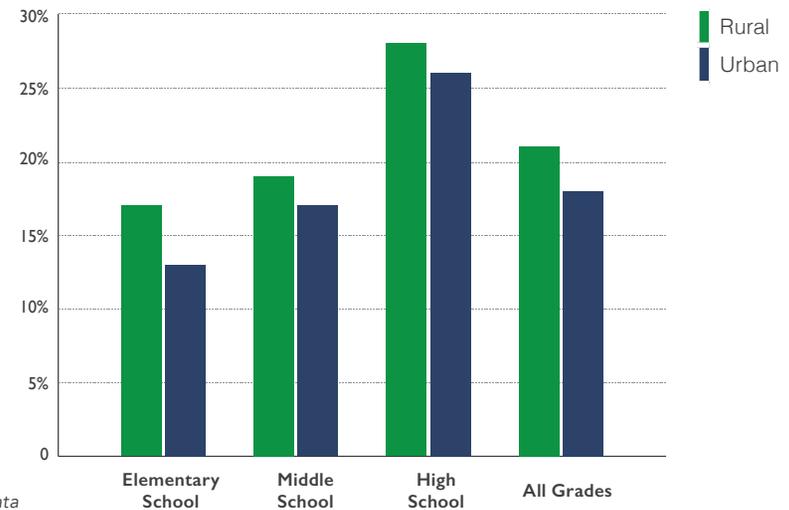
Chronic absenteeism may also have a tie to distance. Across all grades, more than 1 in 5 rural students miss more than 10 percent of school days. Missed school buses and medical appointments have different consequences for rural students than for their urban peers. National experts who study absenteeism have yet to pinpoint the impact of distance, but Oregon data are suggestive of a problem.

**AVERAGE DISTANCE BETWEEN HIGH SCHOOLS AND POSTSECONDARY INSTITUTIONS, BY LOCALITY**



Source: ECONorthwest analysis of ODE data and geocoded IPEDS data

**SHARE OF STUDENTS CHRONICALLY ABSENT, BY GRADE LEVEL AND LOCALITY, 2011-12 THROUGH 2013-14 SY**



Source: ECONorthwest analysis of ODE data

## Which school districts overcome the challenges of poverty and distance?

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In this section, we identify rural districts that are statistically “beating the odds”—that is, producing measurably better student outcomes than would be expected given socioeconomic conditions such as family income, mobility, special education status, English fluency, and other observed characteristics.

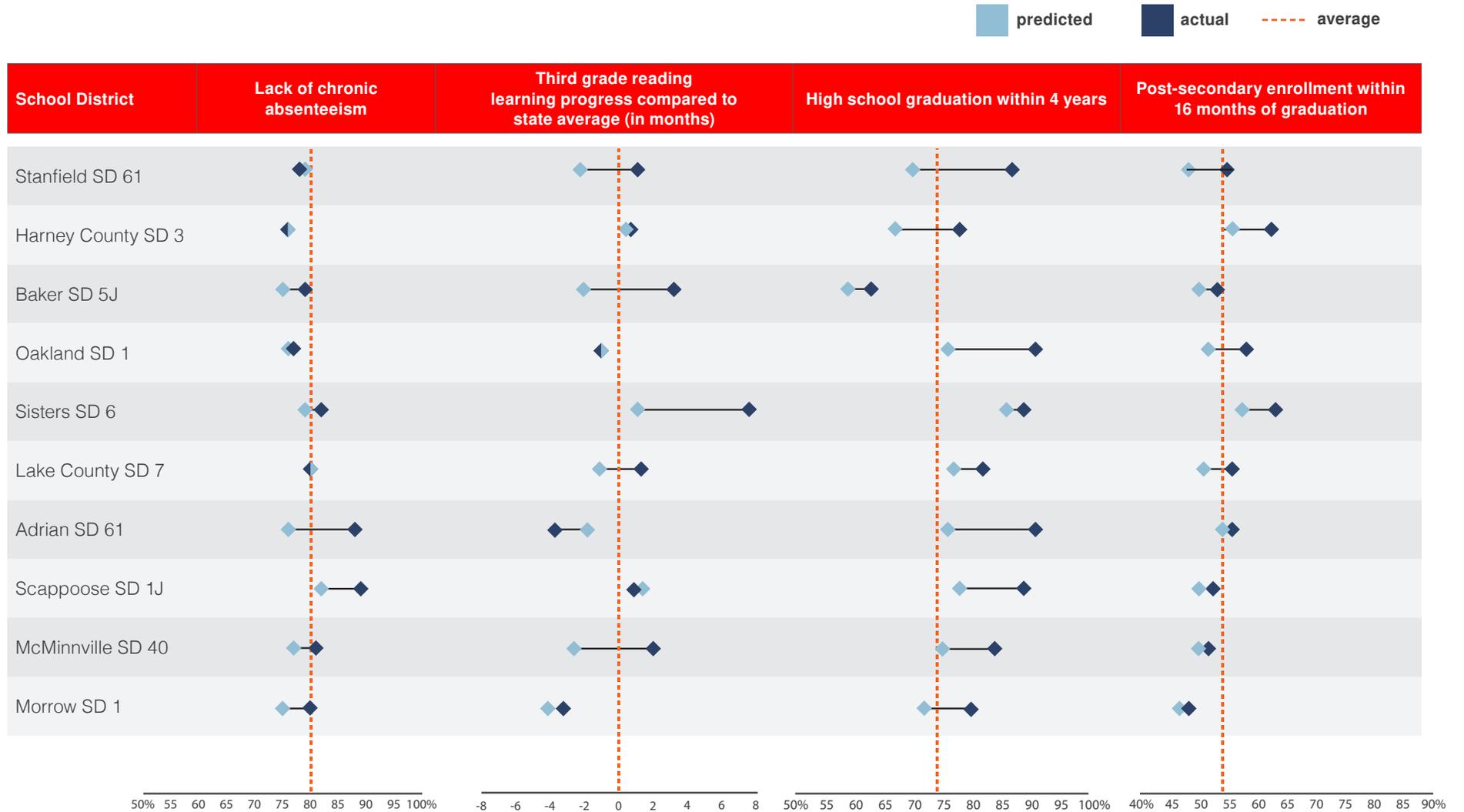
The analysis considered district performance on five outcomes: chronic absenteeism in kindergarten, reading achievement in third grade, math achievement in third grade, high school graduation, and postsecondary enrollment. No district is an over-performer in every category. Rather, overall strong performers may land in the top tier for three outcomes and exhibit average outcomes for two others.

Ten top performing districts are highlighted on the following page. For example, the Stanfield School District boosts high school graduation rates and postsecondary enrollment by 17 and 8 percentage points, respectively. In Adrian, local conditions would predict that only 75 percent of kindergartners would have strong, consistent attendance, but 88 percent do. And in Baker City, young readers are about four months ahead of expectations.

Over-performance and best practices aren’t limited to these districts. However, these districts are a good place to start in understanding how educators are overcoming the challenges of income and distance that are unique to rural Oregon.



# Which school districts overcome the challenges of poverty and distance?



Source: ECONorthwest analysis of ODE data

## Conclusions and recommendations for policy

Oregon's education goals are ambitious and the self-imposed deadline for meeting them is approaching. A deeper look at educational achievement doesn't find dire circumstances or unsolvable problems. In fact, student outcomes (holding economic conditions constant) are on par with rural students across the U.S. and with urban and suburban students within Oregon. That leads to one broad conclusion: development efforts that strengthen rural economies in the short-run should strengthen student outcomes as well. Beyond improved economic opportunities for rural families with children, a rural education agenda should:

- **Mitigate the role household income plays in student achievement.** Oregon's urban/rural income divide is much larger today than it was four decades ago. In addition to economic growth, schools, early childhood providers and community partners have a number of different avenues to pursue. First, stakeholders should get a sense of student and family participation in the federal free and reduced price lunch program and other federal meal programs, early childhood services and safety net programs. Participation in the lunch program is similar across the state's geography, but income and poverty data would suggest higher rates in rural Oregon. Communities should also look into participation in Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC), Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), and Women, Infants and Children (WIC)—all have been tied to better outcomes for students.  
  
With rural free and reduced price lunch eligibility understood, state lawmakers should revisit the state funding formula and its poverty weight—which is based on lunch program participation. Schools in rural and urban Oregon are operating in different economic environments, and a case could be made that an updated formula could better take that into account. A similar review could be done for early childhood program costs.
- **Identify factors that drive higher rates of chronic absenteeism.** Schools in rural Oregon consistently report higher rates of chronic absenteeism. Anecdotes point to transportation challenges and the



need to leave home for healthcare as contributing factors. But more needs to be known, and the mix of reasons will vary from school to school. Bottom line: rural Oregon will struggle to improve school outcomes if more than 1 in 5 students is missing 10 percent or more of the school year.

- **Overcome the role distance plays in college going.** Each year, about 500 rural students fail to enroll in postsecondary education because of a lack of exposure to college campuses. It's not just an income or readiness issue. Outreach efforts are already in place in many schools. It's time to evaluate what's working where and more intentionally disseminate best practices. Higher education isn't the only public service less accessible because of distance. Finding what's working to overcome distance across services would benefit children and families in rural Oregon.