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The Impact of COVID-19 on Schools in California

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Out of Sight, Not Out of Mind: How State & Federal Resources Can Address the Challenges of COVID-19 & Wildfire Displacement in CA Rural Schools

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Out of Sight, *Not* Out of Mind

**How State & Federal
Resources Can Address
the Challenges of COVID-19
& Wildfire Displacement
in CA Rural Schools**

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Introduction

Nearly a quarter-million students in California attend school in rural areas.



Rural areas are considered locales with populations less than 50,000 or with a cluster of fewer than 2,500 people.¹ Existing scholarship suggests that rural schools and districts face a unique set of chronic challenges. Rural regions generally have high levels of poverty and fewer job opportunities relative to urban areas (*Tickamyer et al., 2017*). Because school enrollment drives public school funding, rural schools have been historically underfunded, contributing to underinvestment in physical and educational infrastructure (Romney, 2018). Rural schools tend to operate in communities with less access to healthcare, more significant teacher shortages, and heightened vulnerability to labor market shocks (*Bailey et al., 2014; Podolsky & Satcher, 2016; Tickamyer et al., 2017*).

The impact of these historic trends has been compounded by two distinctly modern challenges: COVID-19 and rampant annual wildfires. These challenges demand urgent action, and recent federal and state dollars represent an important investment to fund such action. If properly leveraged and made

accessible to rural communities, federal and state resources can support rural districts in harnessing their unique assets and mitigating their distinct challenges. This policy brief explores current state and federal resources available to support evidence-based solutions to the most pressing challenges facing rural California schools. These resources include funds from the American Rescue Plan, the American Families Plan, and the 2022-2023 California state budget.

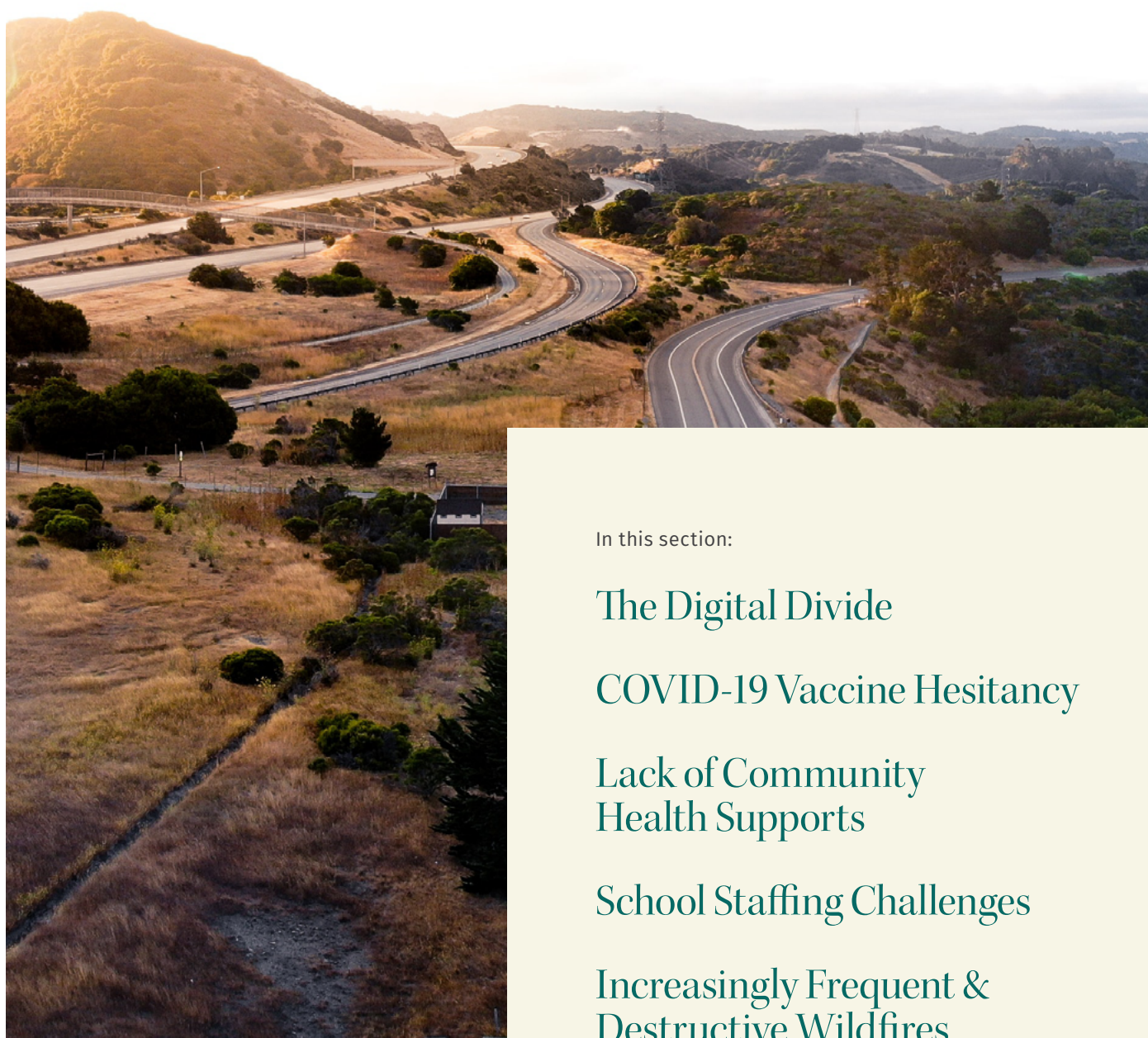
This brief presents research and funding opportunities relevant to answering two questions:

1. What are the distinct challenges rural schools face amidst the ongoing pandemic?
2. What does the research say about supporting rural schools? What are some solutions?

¹ This definition is used by the National Center for Education Statistics and the U.S. Census Bureau.

Challenges

What are the distinct challenges rural schools face amidst the ongoing pandemic?



In this section:

The Digital Divide

COVID-19 Vaccine Hesitancy

Lack of Community
Health Supports

School Staffing Challenges

Increasingly Frequent &
Destructive Wildfires

Challenges

The Digital Divide

Rural households in California have the lowest broadband subscription rates in the state, creating connectivity challenges that limit access to remote learning and telehealth resources (*Gao & Hayes, 2021*). For students in rural districts, these connectivity challenges are likely to be compounded by limited access to digital devices, as rural districts are less likely than urban districts to provide students with Wi-Fi hotspots or devices like Chromebooks and tablets (*Gross & Opalka, 2020*). This is likely to impact academic engagement and achievement. Students without reliable internet access have greater difficulties accessing learning supports, completing homework, and connecting with their peers and teachers. While state and local leaders made great efforts to increase access to technology and engage students in distance learning, this digital divide and the opportunity gaps it reinforces persist (*Saucedo, 2021; Vogels, 2021*). In an increasingly digital economy, digital exclusion can exacerbate economic, social, and political marginalization for rural populations, especially those with growing numbers of migrant workers, people of color, and families living at or near the poverty line.

Rural households in California have the **lowest broadband subscription rates in the state.**



COVID-19 Vaccine Hesitancy

Recent COVID-19 vaccination data highlights greater vaccine hesitancy in rural areas. Of the 15 counties with the lowest single-dose vaccination rates of residents 18 or older, 14 are considered rural districts.² This vaccine hesitancy poses unique challenges for rural schools in California. First, vaccine hesitancy in rural America threatens to prolong the pandemic, forcing school closures and putting communities at risk. The pandemic has had severe negative effects on unemployment, overall life satisfaction, mental health, and economic outlook in rural areas (*Mueller et al., 2021*). Rural communities provide the social support systems essential to



14/15

counties with the **lowest 18+ single-dose vaccination rates** are rural.



² According to the CDC's COVID Dashboard Data; as of November 19, 2019

students' well-being, safety, and ability to engage in their learning environments. Second, vaccine hesitancy is especially problematic given that rural districts have higher proportions of students living in the care of grandparents. In California, the statewide average is 3.1%. Yet in predominantly rural counties, this rate hovers around 5%.³ Vaccine hesitancy threatens these support systems, which are essential to student learning and well-being. They also threaten continued school closures and school disruption, which is likely to compound the impacts of other academic disadvantages, such as digital access issues and teacher shortages.

Lack of Community Health Supports

Students in rural California report chronic and persistent health concerns at higher rates than their urban and suburban peers. Rural adolescents were more likely to report they had asthma and more likely to describe their general health condition as “fair or poor.”⁴ Rural adolescents were more likely to report a delay or failure to access the medical care they believed they needed.⁵ Rural adolescents were also more likely to report they had no primary source of care or that their primary source of care was an emergency room or urgent care.⁶ Finally, rural adolescents with asthma were less likely to report receiving an asthma management plan from a health professional.⁷ These statistics underscore a reality for many rural areas, where there are far fewer institutional social safety nets to alleviate the impact of health challenges, school closures, and economic shocks. In many of these communities, schools operate as central places for receiving care for basic needs such as health and nutrition. This places strain on schools and educators to mitigate the impacts of unmet health needs.

These needs are likely to be greater given that COVID-19 and the transition to distance learning likely exacerbated student difficulties receiving healthcare (*Loades et al., 2020*). Distance learning isolated students from school nurses and school-based mental health professionals. Given the low density of community health organizations in rural areas, these health professionals often serve as a primary point of care. For students with unmet health needs, this could have a long-term negative impact on student achievement, attendance, and engagement (*Moonie et al., 2008; Maughan, 2018*).

Rural adolescents were more likely to report **asthma, their health as “fair or poor”, a delay or failure to access medical care, and no primary care.**



School Staffing Challenges

Teacher shortages are more frequently reported in rural districts compared to suburban districts (*Podolsky & Satcher, 2016*). These persistent shortages have been compounded by challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic (*Carver-Thomas et al., 2021*). The California State Teachers' Retirement system reported a 26% increase in the number of teacher retirements in the second half of 2020, compared to the same period the year prior (*Lambert,*

Teacher shortages are more frequent in rural districts, compounded by a 26% increase in retirements in the second half of 2020.



³ According to the CDC's COVID Dashboard Data; as of November 19, 2019

⁴⁻⁷ According to California Health Survey data from 2019

2021). Staffing shortages likely impacted rural schools' ability to offer certain supports during virtual learning and throughout COVID. Rural schools were less likely than urban and suburban schools to offer one-on-one or small group tutoring to mitigate the impact of learning and school engagement difficulties (*Schwartz et al., 2021*). As staffing shortages persist, educators, administrators, and superintendents in rural ecosystems are expected to fulfill multiple roles, leading to burnout and low rates of staff retention (*Preston, 2018*).

Increasingly Frequent & Destructive Wildfires

In recent years, the impact of wildfires in rural California communities has increased exponentially. According to Cal Fire data, an estimated 2,568,948* acres were burned during the 2021 wildfire season, with the majority of the devastation being experienced in Northern and Central rural California counties (*2021*). To date, annual wildfires in California have led to the displacement of tens of thousands of families and the destruction of hundreds of schools (*Levin & Taylor, 2020*). The growing number of wildfire-impacted counties has increased the urgency of providing rural populations with proactive community-rebuilding resources. Dr. Lisa Patel of the Stanford School of Medicine advocated that improving air quality in rural communities is an urgent matter given that the dual effect of COVID-19 and the annual wildfire impact could lead to significant health consequences for rural residents (*Digitale, 2021*).

For example, given the higher incidence of asthma amongst rural youth, wildfires are particularly consequential. Asthma symptoms are often aggravated amongst youth when wildfires occur due to the inhalation of smoke and toxins that pollute the air during fire devastation (*Aguilera et al., 2021*).

Recent state and federal initiatives aim to implement a sustainable infrastructure in rural California counties that strive to set measures to minimize the detriment of wildfires in the upcoming years. The annual impact of wildfires in rural California has revealed the urgent need for policy solutions that mitigate the impact of rural student displacement and support the holistic well-being of rural residents. Because recovery efforts are often interrupted by new fires, measures must be devised ahead of time to mitigate the devastations caused by these disasters. Nevertheless, most rural schools and districts have limited resources at their disposal to be proactive in making long-term infrastructure plans to deal with the impact of catastrophic wildfires.



2.6M

acres have burned
during this year's
wildfire season.

Solutions

To support rural schools is
to support rural communities.

Given the impacts of COVID-19 and chronic displacement by wildfires, addressing the challenges discussed is essential to support and sustain thriving rural communities. Though the challenges of teaching and learning in rural districts are significant, researchers and practitioners have highlighted evidence-based solutions. For example, the CA Multi-Tiered Systems of Support (MTSS) initiative has partnered with rural educators and stakeholders to design, refine, and implement interventions promoting individual and community wellness.⁸ To ensure that proactive efforts are being effectuated, current state endeavors such as MTSS can serve as a gateway to bridging rural regions with supplementary resources and collaborative relationships. Recent state and federal funding represent a significant opportunity to invest in and pursue these solutions.

8 In partnership with Orange County Department of Education and Butte County Office of Education, UCLA's Center for the Transformation of Schools is leading a 5-year statewide pilot and strategy to test out school-based models for addressing school suspension disparities apparent by race across 35 school sites, 7 districts and 7 geographic areas using a co-designed CA MTSS model.

1. Expand our Notion of Safety in Rural Schools

Given the challenges that increasingly frequent and destructive wildfires present to rural communities, it is imperative to provide proactive aid to mediate the annual devastations caused by annual wildfires. Dealing with two simultaneous public health crises, wildfires and COVID-19 calls for an increased need to widen perspectives on rural school safety that promote rectifying physical school infrastructure that aligns with the health-based needs of students, educators, and community members. For example, preventative measures for rural California communities could include ventilated buildings for healthier air quality, support for community risk reduction and adaptation planning, integration of forest management into state climate and biodiversity programs, and enhanced protection for wildfire-prone neighborhoods (*Forest Management Task Force, 2021*).

State Resources

In April 2021, a few months before the peak of wildfire season in California, Governor Gavin Newsom signed a landmark \$536 million wildfire relief package to provide protection to high-risk communities. The legislative package includes support for the restoration of the ecological health of forests, providing fuel breaks to vulnerable communities, fire prevention grants, and resources for home hardening.

Federal Resources

In 2021, President Biden approved Governor Gavin Newsom's request for federal aid of \$1.5 billion to assist State, tribal, and local recovery efforts following California's wildfire devastation. This support includes emergency grants for temporary housing, low-cost loans to provide families with monetary assistance after experiencing property losses and damage, and additional financial assistance for business owners affected in these communities. The 2022-2023 budget proposes an additional \$1.2 billion to support wildfire resilience programs.

2. Foster Educator Pipelines, Competitive Compensation, and Credentialing Support

Evidence from research and practice supports three policy solutions for addressing staffing shortages:

A. Invest in “Grow Your Own” programs and teacher residencies for rural areas.

As highlighted in a recent policy brief published by the UCLA Center for the Transformation of Schools, teacher residencies and “Grow Your Own” programs represent a viable and impactful solution for building a robust and diverse educator workforce (*Mathews et al., 2020*). “Grow Your Own” programs recruit community members, such as parents and paraprofessionals, who tend to have long-standing ties to the community (*Latterman & Steffes, 2017*). These residency programs integrate masters-level education with the practical experience of a classroom internship in a public school. Though most residency programs operate in urban and suburban areas, there are a growing number of rural teacher residencies across the state and promising early research to support their effectiveness (*Guha et al., 2017*). Moreover, there is some evidence that residency models are effective in recruiting and training teachers and retaining teachers (*Learning Policy Institute, 2016*). Considering the cost of replacing a teacher in a rural school is roughly \$9,000, residencies and ‘Grow Your Own’ pathways represent an important pathway to addressing rural teacher shortages. Because rural districts may be many miles away from the closest teaching college, such programs represent a way to overcome geographic isolation.

State Resources

\$450 million one-time Proposition 98 General Fund over five years (for a total of \$550 million) has been set aside to support approximately 22,000 candidates in grow-your-own teacher credentialing programs and teacher residencies. Candidates in rural districts must have access to these funds. Given their geographic isolation and the historic difficulties they’ve faced in securing adequate funding, the institutions that serve rural teacher candidates may be less aware of how to qualify and access this money.

Federal Resources

Of the \$9 billion provisioned in the American Families Plan to boost the educator pipeline, \$2.8 billion is available for districts to fund the development of yearlong paid “Grow your Own” residency programs.



B. Better fund teaching positions in rural areas to make them more attractive for teacher candidates and disincentivize attrition.

Rural educators are often paid less than suburban and urban educators. By increasing compensation packages, either by raising salaries or offering compensation incentives like student loan forgiveness, rural districts may better incentivize teachers to work in geographically isolated areas (*Latterman & Steffes, 2017*).

State Resources

The 2020-2021 state education budget reserved \$915 million for staff development and recruitment. The 2022-2023 budget proposes an additional \$54.4 million investment enhancing schools' ability to hire qualified teachers and substitutes. Additional funds were allocated to a new California Teacher Credential Award program which requires teachers to support schools situated in high poverty areas, rural regions that have approximately 5% of school staff working outside of their credential, or areas that have had a declining teacher population of more than 20% over a three-year time period.

Federal Resources

In 2019, the U.S. Department of Education awarded the California Center on Teaching Careers two federal grants, totaling in \$9.4 million, to support teacher and mental health specialist recruitment efforts in rural California communities (*Lambert, 2019*). Part of the grant includes collaborating with surrounding university educational leaders to create a sustainable system that allows for the recruitment and retention of educators and mental health specialists for students in rural schools.

C. Support rural teacher candidates through the credentialing process.

Between 2012 and 2019, the number of California educators working with emergency or provisional credentials increased from 4,724 to roughly 14,000 (*California Commission on Teacher Credentialing, 2020*). Educators on provisional credentials are typically only able to teach for one year and have higher attrition rates than credentialed teachers. Yet, these educators are an important pipeline to addressing chronic teacher shortages in rural areas if adequately supported. There are several barriers to earning a teaching credential, including passing required tests and accessing financial assistance to complete educator preparation programs (*Lambert, 2021*). Pre-pandemic data suggests that roughly 40% of teacher candidates failed to pass one of the multiple required tests for earning a teaching credential from the state of California (*Commission on Teacher Credentialing, 2018*). These tests are expensive, costing up to \$250 every time they are taken (*Lambert, 2021*). By better supporting these staff through the credentialing process and providing fee waivers, the state of California can help address the expensive cost of teacher attrition and alleviate the impacts of chronic teacher shortages (*Cahape Hammet et al., 2005*).

State Resources

The 2021-2022 California Budget has four main provisions to support teachers through the credentialing process:

1. \$350 million one-time Proposition 98 General Fund over five years to support teacher preparation residencies and other grow-your-own teacher credentialing programs
2. \$125 million one-time Proposition 98 General Fund over five years for the Classified School Employee Teacher Credentialing Program to support more than 5,000 classified school staff in becoming credentialed teachers.
3. \$20 million one-time General Fund to provide a credential fee waiver in 2021-22 for individuals entering the K-12 educator workforce.
4. \$500 million one-time General Fund over five years for the Golden State Teacher grants, which will support a combined total of at least 25,000 grants for teacher credential candidates who commit to teaching

at a priority school, in a high-need subject, for four years. Hundreds of rural schools in Lassen, Ventura, Tulare, San Bernardino, and Fresno counties qualify as priority schools.

The 2023-2023 budget builds on this investment by allotting:

5. \$24 million one-time General Fund to waive certain teacher examination fees.
6. \$12 million one-time General Fund to extend the waiver of select credentials fees.
7. \$1.4 million General Fund to establish career counselors for prospective educators at the Commission on Teacher Credentialing (CTC).

Federal Resources

The American Families Plan includes \$1.6 billion earmarked to support the certification of educators in high-demand subject areas, like special education and bilingual education. If made available to rural districts, these funds can support rural educator credentialing in these subjects.



On their own, each of these policy solutions is likely to be ineffective in dramatically impacting staffing shortages in rural California (*Monk, 2005*). Yet together, they represent a comprehensive agenda for addressing rural educator shortages in both the short and long term. Recent evidence from rural districts has already demonstrated progress. Counties like Tulare are using federal dollars and forging partnerships to increase the number of teachers and mental health professionals, both by supporting them through the credentialing process and offering them new residency pathways (*Zinshteyn, 2019*).

3. Bridge the Digital Divide

In an information-rich economy, digital exclusion comes with high social and economic costs, digital access is a right for rural communities and students. In the short term, advocating for and forming partnerships with private organizations can provide additional services to students and families in high-need rural communities. But relying on private investment is likely to contribute to a historic precedent of corporate consolidation of rural land, services, and small businesses (*Ajilore & Willingham, 2020*). Rural communities need public support, including a weighted funding allocation for federal dollars targeting districts and communities with the most significant digital divides and the weakest information infrastructures. Moreover, schools and districts need targeted professional development and technology support in effectively integrating technology and digital resources into curriculum, instruction, and school operations.

State Resources

In 2021, California introduced bill SB767 which commits to providing learning communities across California with adequate technologies to support students during distance learning education. The bill aims to support the establishment of the Digital Education Equity Program (DEEP) in an effort to meet the needs of schools and community-based educational agencies when implementing curricular content dependent on sustainable and reliable educational technology. The bill requires locally situated educational agencies to implement an equitable technology plan in the communities they serve on or before December 1, 2024.

Federal Resources

After a long period of advocacy from hundreds of stakeholder organizations and students and families, Congress appropriated \$7.1 billion to the E-Rate program to enable home broadband connectivity for K-12 students, and spending on technology and connectivity is an allowable use of overall education funding for districts. This funding will be an essential step to connecting all students and closing the homework gap for good, and the FCC should ensure that this funding is deployed equitably in support of high-speed home broadband and devices for underserved students.

4. Community Schools

Rural community schools support physical well-being and access to community health services, which are especially necessary for rural communities with sparse community support services for medical, dental, and mental health. School models emphasizing wraparound services have grown in prominence and popularity over the years. Such schools provide several services for supporting rural students and community members, including physical and mental health care, after-school programming, and educational resources for parents, which help address students' basic and academic needs. Several state and federal funding sources are available when districts and schools adopt a full-service community school model.

State Resources

The 2021-2022 California Budget has set aside \$264.9 million one-time Proposition 98 General Fund to establish new community schools and expand existing networks of community schools. The 2022-2023 budget builds on this commitment by proposing \$596 million to fund universal access to subsidized school meals.

Federal Resources

The federal Full-Service Community Schools program supports full-service community schools' planning, implementation, and operation. In particular, the program supports high-poverty schools, including high-poverty rural schools, through competitive grants. Recent federal funding packages underscore the increasing federal support for community schools models; the American Rescue Plan lists full-service community schools as an allowable use of ARP funds. Yet, when schools provide a host of holistic services, including mental, physical, and dental services, they may position themselves to gain access to other funds not earmarked only for schools. The American Rescue Plan and American Families plan include additional funds and waivers for program requirements for community centers that provide nutritional assistance, mental health services, and primary healthcare (HRSA, 2021).

Summary

Now more than ever, we must prioritize students, families, and community members in rural California regions vulnerable to wildfires and COVID-19 hesitant localities. California rural communities have received financial support from various state and federal sources. Directly investing in the alignment of the physical school infrastructure with the environmental risks that affect these rural areas annually will require consistent support from state and federal sources. This financial support can be used to pursue evidenced-based solutions for school safety, student health and wellbeing, staff retention, and community development. CA MTSS is a current statewide effort that collaborates with select rural education stakeholders and communities to create needed systemic change through intentional design and redesign of services and supports

that quickly identify and match the needs of all students (*California Department of Education, 2020*). Rural state educators and stakeholders participating in the MTSS framework implementation currently engage in conversations that highlight the urgency to explicitly fund upgrades to introduce school architectural interventions, such as ventilation systems that promote student, educator, and staff prosperity in their learning spaces.

The students of today are the leaders of tomorrow. To ensure these students and their communities are holistically supported we must endeavor to expand safety measures in the face of COVID-19 and increasingly destructive wildfire seasons, to bolster the educator pipelines, to bridge the digital divide, and to build community schools.

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