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Equity-Focused Leadership in Rural California: Understanding Rurality, Indigenous Education, and Disaster Preparedness

Introduction

California is the most populous state in the U.S. and contains a significant number of rural districts serving a sizable, diverse population of rural students including recent immigrants, migrant students, emergent bilinguals, and Indigenous children. It is important to address the state's rural contexts from an asset-based perspective that both leverages their unique strengths and attends to their specific needs through localized and differentiated equity-centered leadership. Research and practice often frame rural contexts in direct comparison to urban contexts, creating a lens through which the inherent strengths and unique positionality of rural contexts become de-emphasized.¹ This is particularly true in educational settings within which strengths are often cited as secondary to or resulting from challenges and barriers.² Three key issues illustrate important assets embedded in rural contexts: terminology and definitions relevant to rural contexts, Indigenous education, and natural disasters. These issues have implications for equitable school leadership, professional learning, and rural education systems.

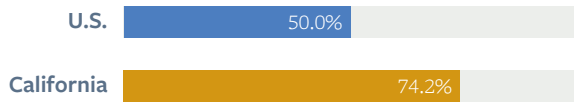
Professional learning is most effective when informed by local contexts; by better understanding the strengths and needs

of rural education in California, we can increase the quality of professional learning for equity-oriented rural leaders. In this brief, which is a follow-up to our previous brief *Equity-Driven Leadership in Rural Education*,³ we (1) articulate different definitions and conceptualizations of rural contexts, (2) explore the possibilities of equitable school leadership with Indigenous students in rural contexts, and (3) highlight leadership considerations related to natural disasters.

The diversity of California’s rural districts and students—including their strengths and needs—merits further examination in order to support equitable leadership in these contexts. According to a 2025 state-by-state analysis conducted by the National Rural Education Association, the demand for urgent prioritization of needs across California’s rural contexts has significantly risen in rank, from 23 in 2023 to 16 in 2025.⁴ California’s strengths in this analysis included a favorable educational policy context for rural schools, as well as its rural

education footprint (which compares measures of rural education to the quality of a state’s public education system as a whole). Areas designated “urgent” in their need for prioritization included student and family characteristics, an indicator encompassing key sociodemographic information; educational outcomes; and access to wellbeing and student supports in rural contexts.⁵ Almost 200,000 rural students attend California public schools. Notably, California’s rural students are diverse along racial/ethnic lines, 15% live in poverty, and 1 in 20 are unhoused.⁶ Figure 1 illustrates the extent of California’s rural education footprint and the diverse learners who make up rural schools. Given 21CSLA’s (21st Century California School Leadership Academy) commitment to improving access, opportunity, and inclusion via equitable leadership, this brief considers issues of definitions and features of rurality, opportunity and inclusion in Indigenous education, issues catalyzed by natural disasters, and the implications of these issues for leadership practices in California’s diverse rural contexts.

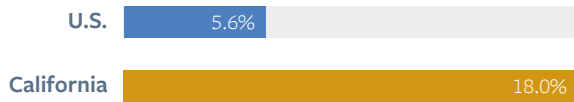
Figure 1
California’s Rural Education Footprint



Nearly three-quarters of California’s rural districts are small by enrollment, compared with half nationwide.



In a California rural school, there’s a 2 in 5 chance (44.2%) that two randomly chosen students are from different racial/ethnic groups.



California’s percentage of rural multilingual learners is more than 3 times the U.S.



More than 15% of rural California students live in homes with household incomes below the poverty line.

Definitions and Features of Rural Districts

This section provides an overview of the definitions and features of rural districts that have equity implications. By understanding how components of rural education are defined and thus impact students, families, and communities, we can better engage in systems leadership that is localized and integrated. The US Census definition of rural is limited and defined as any area, population, or housing that is not urban.⁷ Below, we provide descriptions of additional features and definitions. Given the size of the state, California is home to a diverse range of rural contexts from the northern part of the state to the central valley. Despite rural schools comprising 13% of California schools, we still lack a clear definition of what qualifies a school as rural (or small, suburban, urban, etc.).⁸

The National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) draws on urban and rural definitions developed by the U.S. Census Bureau.⁹ NCES establishes three rural locale classifications:

- ▶ **Fringe:** Census-defined rural territory that is less than or equal to 5 miles from an Urbanized Area, as well as a rural territory that is less than or equal to 2.5 miles from an Urban Cluster.*
- ▶ **Distant:** Census-defined rural territory that is more than 5 miles but less than or equal to 25 miles from an Urbanized Area, as well as rural territory that is more than 2.5 miles but less than or equal to 10 miles from an Urban Cluster.
- ▶ **Remote:** Census-defined rural territory that is more than 25 miles from an Urbanized Area and also more than 10 miles from an Urban Cluster.¹⁰

*The U.S. Census defined “Urbanized Area” as a statistical geographic entity type consisting of a densely settled core created from census tracts or blocks and adjacent densely settled territory that together have a minimum population of 50,000 and “Urban Cluster” as a statistical geographic entity type consisting of a densely settled core created from census tracts or blocks and contiguous qualifying territory that together have at least 2,500 persons but fewer than 50,000 persons. The terms were retired in 2020 and replaced with the term “Urban Area.”

One way that California classifies school districts as rural are those that (1) serve fewer than 600 students and (2) are located more than 25 miles from a city;¹¹ by this definition, more than one third of California school districts qualify as rural.¹² Definitions of rural contexts often rely on direct comparisons to urban areas, which can obscure the fundamental characteristics and strengths of rural communities.

Small and Rural Schools

While rural schools are defined by their geographic location, small schools are defined based on their student enrollment. Although there is no official definition of small schools, they are generally considered to have a significantly smaller student enrollment than the average school. California defines small districts as those that serve fewer than 1,000 students; “very small” districts serve fewer than 100 students.¹³ Small schools can also include charter schools or public schools in less populated suburban areas. Nearly 40% of California public school districts are considered small and many are located in rural areas.¹⁴

Small and rural schools share key features ranging from small class sizes and freedom and flexibility in leadership and instruction to a strong sense of community and closer connections with districts.¹⁵ When teachers and leaders live in the same rural community where they work, they can foster deeper relationships and interdependence between students, families, and community members.¹⁶ These relationships can extend beyond the classroom to include local sports teams, religious groups, and businesses. The interconnectedness of rural schools and communities informs an important asset: community members care deeply about their local schools and want to ensure that students are successful.¹⁷

There are several strengths inherent to rural educational contexts that can be leveraged to support equity. For example, rural communities often contain tight-knit relational networks and intergenerational systems that reinforce norms, values, and attitudes rooted in the collective that can be assets to schools and districts.¹⁸ Principals, superintendents, and other educational leaders are positioned as important agents of change in rural contexts, and they can draw upon community strengths to address deep-rooted equity issues as they pursue school reform and community development.¹⁹

Notable equity challenges for rural students include increased rates of mental health issues, limited access to mental health resources, lower rates of readiness for kindergarten, and lower rates of achievement in reading, math, and high school graduation.²⁰ As rural contexts become more racially and ethnically diverse, minoritized populations can experience “layers within layers of discrimination.”²¹ Rural leaders must consider equity issues both within and beyond rural communities and how they can build on the inherent strengths of rural contexts to address them.²² The next section considers rural Indigenous students, who can experience multiple forms of marginalization.

Equitable Leadership and Indigenous Education

Given that 90% of Indigenous students in the U.S. are educated in rural schools, rural education and Indigenous education are intrinsically linked.²³ California has about 26,000 Indigenous students in its K–12 schools, fewer than half a percent of the overall student population, although that is likely a significant undercount.²⁴ Most of California’s Indigenous students are concentrated in the northern part of the state, and approximately 24% attend rural schools, a rate significantly higher than

other racial or ethnic groups.²⁵ Indigenous youth often play important roles in sustaining cultural knowledge and traditions as they serve as the bridge between generations. Indigenous students speak native languages and carry traditional knowledge, stories, and customs into the future.²⁶ Similar to rural communities more generally, Indigenous groups maintain strong social ties rooted in mutual support. Furthermore, Indigenous communities prioritize spiritual, familial, and cultural connections to the land where they reside.²⁷

However, more than two thirds of Indigenous students in California are economically disadvantaged and nearly 75% attend high-poverty schools.²⁸ Indigenous students’ experiences are often rendered invisible in national- and state-level education conversations given their small population share of public school students. In this section, we highlight considerations for leaders serving Indigenous students equitably in rural communities.

Indigenous ways of being and knowing—embodied by resilience, community, and collective action—have historically been challenged by education in the U.S. given that schools were sites of colonization and tools to estrange Indigenous children from their culture and community.²⁹ This context is essential when considering Indigenous students’ and families’ engagement with schooling and the continued forms of invisibilization they experience. For example, in California, many Indigenous students still do not receive federal recognition of their tribal affiliation; without federal recognition, these students do not receive federally designated support.³⁰ Relatedly, Indigenous students experience disproportionate rates of discipline in the form of out-of-school suspensions that result in lost instruction and become an equity issue given the access implications.³¹

After AB167 passed in 2021, California started crafting a comprehensive K–12 Native American

curriculum apart from what is already included in Ethnic Studies courses or U.S. history standards.³² San Diego and Humboldt County offices of education are leading the effort and collaborating with tribes, teachers, curriculum experts, and Native American studies professors. The optional curriculum will integrate Indigenous history and culture into all subjects.³³ Research suggests that rural leaders should leverage the strengths of rural communities—strong connections between home, family, and community—to develop school–community partnerships rooted in trust and reciprocity that address equity issues particular to a local context.³⁴ Leaders serving Indigenous communities must consider the historical and cultural legacies that shape the dynamics between school, home, family, and community.

Relatedly, culturally responsive education is another approach that equity-minded leaders can leverage and adapt when supporting Indigenous students. Culture-based education programs have six critical elements:

1. Recognition and use of Native American (i.e. American Indian, Alaska Native, and Native Hawaiian) languages
2. Pedagogy that emphasizes traditional cultural characteristics and adult–child interactions as the starting place for education
3. Pedagogy in which teaching strategies are congruent with traditional culture as well as with contemporary ways of knowing and learning
4. Curriculum that is based on traditional culture, recognizes the importance of Native spirituality, and places the education of young children in a contemporary context
5. Strong Native community participation
6. Knowledge of the use of social and political mores of the community³⁵

Leaders can catalyze commitments to culturally responsive education across district entities. For example, leaders can support teachers with their

own professional learning and training in culturally responsive education and also in developing their communication, curriculum integration, and relevant language skills. This investment is critical in rural contexts given that educators in these places often have limited access to sufficient professional development and resources.³⁶ Some examples of deep integration of Indigenous education into school curricula include: the Klamath-Trinity model of subject-by-subject, grade-by-grade infusion of cultural relevance in K–8; including culturally relevant curricula and materials in classrooms and school libraries through community partnerships; and offering Indigenous language instruction.³⁷ Research suggests that students who strongly identify with their Indigenous culture experience the greatest benefits from culturally relevant educational programs.³⁸ Given the multidimensional and intersectional nature of culture, rural leaders must be place-conscious when striving to be contextually responsive to Indigenous students.³⁹ Critical place-conscious leadership emphasizes the interconnectedness of schools and communities and asserts that both must work collaboratively to pursue social and ecological justice.⁴⁰ Rural school leaders can address issues of access, opportunity, and inclusion through culturally responsive education that not only considers indigeneity but also the nuance of being Indigenous and living in a rural area.

In addition to culturally responsive curriculum and instruction, leaders must consider family and community engagement when supporting Indigenous students. Building authentic relationships with families should inform all leadership decisions, especially given the tight-knit, intergenerational, and relational nature of rural communities.⁴¹ There is no one-size-fits-all approach to culturally responsive education, so it is essential to center family and community partners to better understand the local context and the Indigenous population's assets and needs that

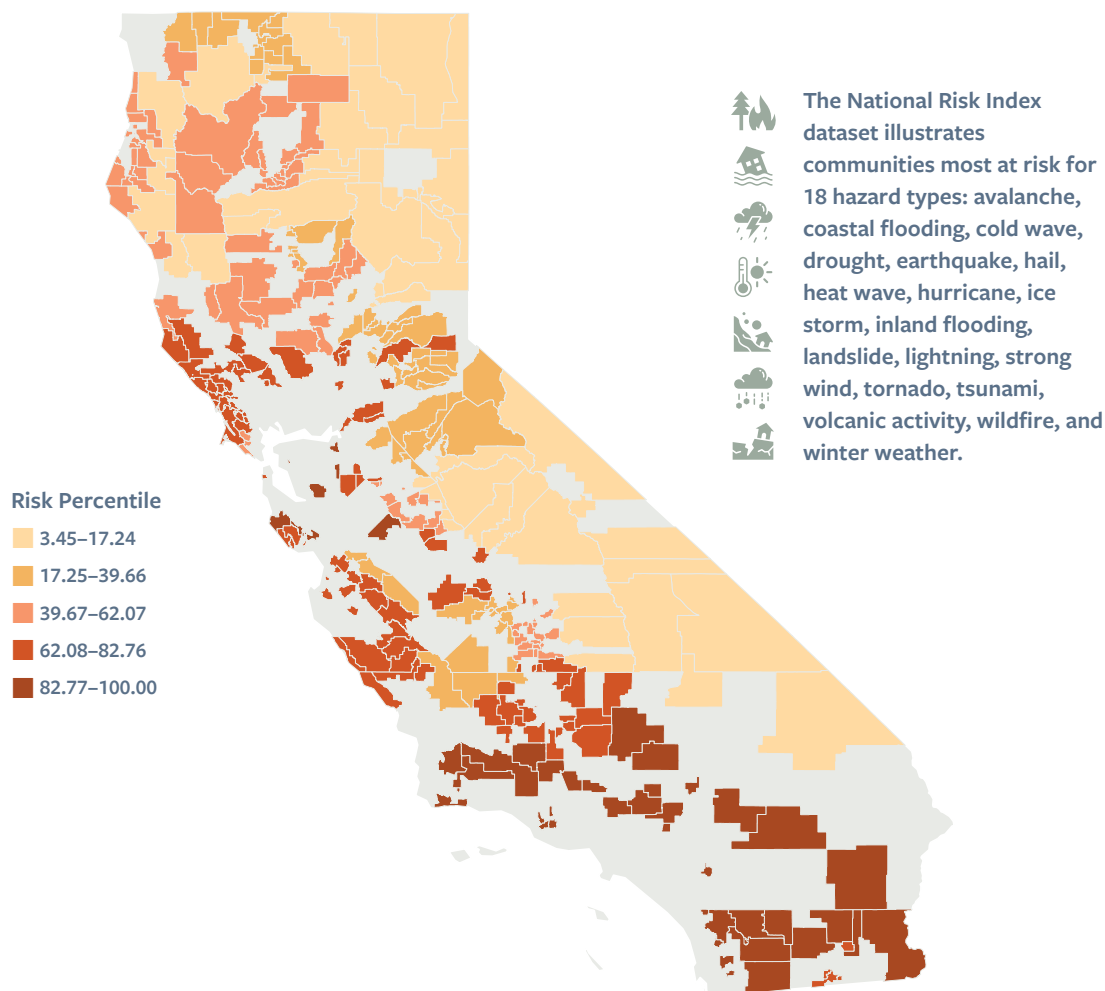
inform collective norms, values, and attitudes. For example, in one rural California study, the strongest relationship between educational opportunities and Indigenous student achievement was found in parental involvement in program design and implementation.⁴²

Ultimately, rural leadership must foster support systems that maintain a safe and positive school

climate. Supportive personnel (i.e., leaders, teachers, and staff) are key factors in students' and families' perceptions of their school climate and, when coupled with quality instruction, can have the largest effect on students' educational outcomes.⁴³ As mentioned previously, investing in high-quality professional development is one way to increase the quality and preparedness of educators as well as reduce turnover in rural schools. Support can

Figure 2

Natural Disaster Risk for Rural School Districts in California



Data from Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) National Risk Index Dataset. The Federal Government or FEMA cannot vouch for the data or analyses derived from these data after the data have been retrieved from the Agency's website(s).

also look like institutional transition programs (e.g., from middle schools to high schools) and attendance policies that accommodate Indigenous ceremonial and cultural observations.⁴⁴ For example, California passed legislation requiring excused absences for students participating in cultural ceremonies and events.⁴⁵ It is essential that leaders weave support for Indigenous students throughout county, district, and school policies and practices so that it is not a separate add-on or limited in scope given the history of marginalization of Indigenous communities in schooling.⁴⁶

Leadership Considerations During Natural Disasters

School communities across geographic contexts can learn key lessons of risk reduction, disaster planning and preparedness, and communal support from rural communities' resilient responses to natural disasters. Natural disasters are an increasing challenge that schools across the world face. In California, wildfires, air quality, mudslides, and flooding are just some of the issues schools have faced. Even low-attention disasters involving the closing of schools for as few as one to five days (as with the Mountain Fire in Ventura County in 2024) can negatively impact students.⁴⁷ Rural communities experience unique challenges during natural disasters: they often have fewer resources and designated personnel to respond to disasters, limited internet and cellular service can impede communication, remote locations and challenging terrain can slow response and support, and there is often less housing available to those displaced by natural disasters.⁴⁸ Figure 2 illustrates the various risk levels of natural disasters in rural school districts throughout California.

Educational leaders have to prepare for and mitigate the harms that such disasters visit on children and their education. In addition to presenting physical and mental challenges, natural disasters can have deleterious impacts on students' educational attainment and

Insights from a Rural Wildfire

As wildfires become increasingly frequent and destructive across California, the 2018 Camp Fire and the community of Paradise offer some insight into how natural disasters impact rural education. The fire not only destroyed schools throughout the area but also disrupted students' academic progress and threatened the tight-knit nature of the community.⁴⁹ Students and families were left traumatized in the aftermath of the fire, especially those who lost their homes. Given limited access to mental health resources in rural areas, natural disasters can increase mental health issues in already vulnerable communities.⁵⁰ Rural leaders must contend with addressing the mental and emotional needs of students, families, and educators while meeting academic goals and obligations. In the seven years since the Camp Fire, many insights have emerged that are relevant to rural leaders preparing for future natural disasters:

- ▶ Invest in mental health resources that serve everyone in the school community.
- ▶ Identify temporary school locations in the event schools are damaged.
- ▶ Endeavor to avoid these disasters in the first place (through fire risk reduction, for example).
- ▶ Engage in critical and collaborative dialogue during recovery planning.⁵¹

It is essential that rural leaders respond to the unique histories of their communities while simultaneously envisioning a future rooted in educational equity.

achievement. Furthermore, their impacts are not equally distributed, often magnifying inequities at the intersection of pre-disaster physical and sociodemographic vulnerabilities.⁵²

One way the ambiguity in definitions of small, rural, suburban, and urban schools can impact rural schools is that, sometimes, communities are rural enough to be impacted by forest fires and flooding, but do not meet classifications under one or more definitions (e.g., proximity to a city) to make them eligible for relief funds for natural disasters. For example, some of California's rural schools have been damaged during forest fires but are not considered far enough from cities to qualify for funding to address natural disasters.⁵³

Implementing policies that respond to climate change could help mitigate natural disasters now and in the future. For example, California called for statewide carbon neutrality by 2045, but left school districts to do climate planning on their own. By developing a Master Plan for Climate-Resilient and Sustainable Schools, the state can marshal school facility and infrastructure funds and ensure that all counties and districts are equitably resourced to build climate resilience. Furthermore, a master plan would ensure that all school funding is aligned with California's climate and health goals, whether that funding is from state appropriations or other sources, and respond to infrastructure updates

and other needs. Responding to climate change requires investment: California should allocate \$15 billion per year over the next decade to achieve climate-resilient schools.⁵⁴ Funding can also support schools to make up instructional days lost to emergencies, like wildfires, in the event of five or more canceled school days. This financial support is essential in mitigating the negative impacts of missing school.⁵⁵

Guidance for School and District Leaders

Research on disaster planning and response in educational contexts offers guidance on how to prepare and recover after crises. Figure 3 includes insight on infrastructure, communication, mental health and social support, and academic recovery that leaders should consider before disaster strikes.

Implications and Applications

California's rural schools demonstrate the ways in which tight-knit, intergenerational communities can support schools and leaders that are resilient and committed to collective success. However, more can be done to support rural schools as they continue to address issues of access, opportunity, and inclusion. In addition to increasing funding and grants that would address those unique challenges, California should consider the ways in which it might streamline bureaucratic

Figure 3

Pre- and Post-Disaster Guidance for School and District Leaders

Pre-Disaster Planning and Preparation	Post-Disaster Response and Recovery
Infrastructure and Physical Preparation • Assess school facilities to enhance resilience and invest in improvements⁵⁶ • Maintain emergency supplies on campus⁵⁷	Immediate Aftermath • Activate emergency communication channels⁵⁸ • Implement modified educational programs, adjusting schedule, routines, and content (shorter lesson plans, reduced homework, additional opportunities for personal expression)⁵⁹ • Establish support systems, coordinating with community partners, hosting whole-school activities when possible⁶⁰ • Consider needs of most vulnerable populations (e.g., those who might not have access to federal supports)⁶
Communication Systems and Emergency Planning • Create comprehensive emergency communication protocols: both internal (e.g., alert systems) and external (e.g., ParentSquare, communication with county offices, neighboring districts, first responders)⁶² • Create emergency contact database for all partners • Develop detailed emergency response plan with clear roles for all staff⁶³ • Map evacuation routes and safe zones⁶⁴	Mental Health and Social Support⁶⁵ • Establish support groups • Have counselors and teachers monitor students for signs of trauma or PTSD • Implement peer mentoring programs • Create spaces for discussion and processing for students and staff • Communicate with new districts of displaced students to encourage social and academic supports⁶⁶ • Partner with local organizations for additional support and sustained support (at least two years)⁶⁷
Educational Continuity Planning • Create plans for alternative instruction (e.g., temporary remote learning) • Address curriculum and resource needs (e.g., prepare emergency educational materials, make a plan for continued meal service)⁶⁸ • Integrate disaster awareness into the curriculum where appropriate⁶⁹	Academic Recovery • Extend learning opportunities as needed (before/after school, during the summer, etc.)⁷⁰ • Provide targeted additional supports • Use flexible attendance policies • Assess and address learning gaps in low-stakes ways⁷¹
Staff Training and Support • Provide comprehensive staff preparation trainings, including trauma-informed practices, disaster response, and emergency protocols⁷²	Moving Forward • Establish a sustainable recovery process through enduring collaboration with community partners and external organizations • Monitor and address equity considerations

practices and increase flexibility of regulations that constrain rural schools.⁷³ For example, the Secure Rural Schools Act, introduced in the U.S. House of Representatives by Rep. Doug LaMalfa (R-California) in February 2025, would provide about \$250 million per year for more than 700 rural counties, many located in California; this funding would support both schools and relevant infrastructure.⁷⁴ This kind of investment is essential to rural California's school districts and the essential services they provide.⁷⁵

While marginalized communities are becoming increasingly targeted by shifting political contexts, there are ways in which state and federal policies can protect and advocate on behalf of these groups. To support Indigenous students in rural communities and address the educational equity issues many of these children face in California public schools, a first step would be to grant recognition to the more than 50 tribes that are currently unrecognized by the federal government so that schools would be able to access federally designated supports.⁷⁶ Other federal policy recommendations include:

- ▶ **Increase Federal Intervention:** The U.S. Department of Education should create regulations to proactively enforce the rights of English learners; includes increased monitoring of state-level English learner programs through comprehensive audits.
- ▶ **Mandatory Federal Intervention:** If audits reveal discriminatory policies, inadequate standards, or poor academic outcomes for English learners, the U.S. Department of Education should mandate that states implement corrective measures.
- ▶ **Develop Standardized Curriculum:** The federal government should establish a national curriculum (similar to common

core standards) for English learners, moving beyond basic instruction to include programs that preserve Indigenous students' cultures and languages, such as bilingual education and the incorporation of Indigenous traditions.

- ▶ **Incentivize Implementation:** The federal government should incentivize states to adopt the standardized curriculum through set-aside funds. The curriculum should focus on integration rather than assimilation, helping students develop English proficiency while maintaining their cultural identities.⁷⁷

In addition to adopting federal policies that would support Indigenous students across the country, state- and local-level policies can also address equity issues by attending to cultural competency and community engagement aspects of education.

- ▶ **Cultural Competency Integration:** State and local policies should integrate cultural competency into the education of Indigenous students and recognize their intersectional identities.
- ▶ **Collaborative Curriculum Development:** Curriculum development should be a collaborative effort, involving experts, community members, elders, and language keepers from Indigenous communities.⁷⁸
- ▶ **Increased Community Engagement:** State and local policies should emphasize community engagement, including hosting community forums, seeking input on educational initiatives, and establishing partnerships to empower Indigenous families in their children's education.⁷⁹
- ▶ **Accessible Communications:** School districts should make information, resources, and translators available in multiple languages, including Indigenous languages and Spanish. They should also allocate sufficient Title I, Part A funds to reach Indigenous communities.

State agencies should develop translated websites and resources in any language for which the student population reaches the 15 percent enrollment threshold

- **Expand Staffing:** School districts should expand staffing to include Indigenous community liaisons and school site personnel fluent in Indigenous languages.⁸⁰

As elaborated throughout the brief, rural schools, Indigenous students, and natural disasters are interconnected in ways that impact access, opportunity, and inclusion. It is essential that rural leaders respond to the unique histories of their communities while simultaneously envisioning a future rooted in educational equity. Investing in professional development that supports culturally responsive education for Indigenous students in rural communities is one way to address issues of access, opportunity, and inclusion while also increasing the quality of teachers and leaders. Planning ahead for natural disasters and committing to reducing the frequency of these disasters also has important implications for access and opportunity for rural students. Cultivating and sustaining mental health resources rooted in the school community is a leadership practice that will pay dividends in all aspects of rural education.

Reflection Questions

- **Professional Context** What are the unique strengths and needs of the rural schools in your district or county?

- **Leadership Capacities** How does professional learning, in your context, support leaders to address Indigenous education? How are leaders supported to respond to natural disasters and mitigate their impact on students and instruction?

- **Equity in Schools** Beyond Indigenous education and natural disasters, are there other equity issues unique to rural schools or districts in your region? What are some ways school leaders might address those issues?

Additional Resources

21CSLA Research–Practice Webinar: Equitable School Leadership in California’s Diverse Rural Contexts

<https://21cslacenter.berkeley.edu/rural-education-webinar>

California’s Rural Populations Map

<https://www.library.ca.gov/crb/quick-hits/rural-populations/>

Rural California Factsheet

<https://www.ppic.org/wp-content/uploads/rural-california.pdf>

FEMA National Risk Index

<https://hazards.fema.gov/nri/map>

National Rural Education Association Official Podcast

<https://nrea.simplecast.com/>

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21CSLA Equity Statement

Leaders for equity transform education to improve access, opportunity, and inclusion for students and adults, especially those who are systemically marginalized and historically underserved, so that they can thrive.

About 21CSLA

21CSLA (21st Century California School Leadership Academy) is dedicated to the professional learning and support of California's educational leaders—teacher, site, and district—to create more equitable learning environments that improve success for underserved students. A key member of California's Statewide System of Support, 21CSLA is headquartered at UC Berkeley School of Education and works in partnership with UCLA School of Education and Information Studies, California Subject Matter Project, and seven 21CSLA regional academies throughout the state.

The 21CSLA initiative provides high-quality, equity-centered professional learning for educational leaders of schools and districts in California. Programs are provided at no cost to participants and include leadership coaching, communities of practice, and localized professional learning to improve outcomes for historically marginalized students.

Bridging Research and Practice

21CSLA seeks to bridge the gap between research and practice in education for educational leaders. We coordinate and facilitate Research–Practice Partnerships among California educational leaders and educational researchers by creating connections and providing research support. The briefs compile and present current research in a concise format, including reflection questions to help leaders adapt and adopt the information into their own practice. 21CSLA regularly produces Research–Practice Webinars in which scholars and practitioners engage in conversations about timely issues. We also curate a variety of resources for educational leaders to learn about current and important topics in education (e.g., webinar video recordings and highlights, briefs, podcasts). For more information, visit 21cslacenter.berkeley.edu/research.

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