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MILES TO GO
Rural school districts outnumber all others in the state, and most of them are miles away from cities or towns. Of the 266 districts in Kansas, 197 are rural, 68 are town, 11 are suburban and 8 are urban in classification.

RURAL DISTRICTS	FRINGE	DISTANT	REMOTE
11	68	118	
TOWN DISTRICTS			
34	22	12	

FRINGE RURAL DISTRICT
Covers rural land less than 5 miles from an urban area or less than 2.5 miles from an urban cluster.
Examples: Shawnee Heights in Shawnee County and Moize in Sedgewick County.

DISTANT RURAL DISTRICT
Covers land between 5 and 25 miles from an urban area or between 2.5 miles and 10 miles from an urban cluster.
Examples: Troy in Douglas County and Burlingame in Osage County.

REMOTE RURAL DISTRICT
Covers land more than 25 miles from an urban area and more than 10 miles from an urban cluster.
Examples: Thunder Ridge in Phillips County and Copeland in Gray County.

FRINGE TOWN DISTRICT
Covers an urban cluster up to 10 miles from an urban area.
Examples: Baldwin City in Douglas County and Salina in Cherokee County.

DISTANT TOWN DISTRICT
Covers an urban cluster between 10 and 35 miles from an urban area.
Examples: Harrison in Finney County and Ulysses in Grant County.

REMOTE TOWN DISTRICT
Covers an urban cluster more than 35 miles from an urban area.
Examples: Garden City in Riley County and Minersville in Clark County.

Urban area: City of more than 50,000 people. Urban cluster: Town of 2,500 to 50,000 people.

ISSUE

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Rural Majority: Education system in rural areas undergoing big change

Syracuse USD 494 one of many smaller districts experiencing challenges

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SYRACUSE — At 5:55 on an icy cold November morning, Larry Hirsch Jr. was warming up bus No. 34 next to Syracuse High School.

He turned on the radio to a mix of morning news and country music and pulled out of the parking lot as a few high-schoolers walked into a nearby gym — the basketball team had early morning practice.

Leaving town, he passed Syracuse’s one traffic light and headed east into a golden dawn.

Hirsch had just four stops to make on his morning route, to pick up eight kids.

But doing so took him about an hour and a half on dusty country roads — a 65-mile jaunt among fields of tender green winter wheat.

His school district, Syracuse Unified School District 494, covers just under a thousand square miles.

“I have a long day,” laughed Hirsch, who rises before 5 a.m., works during the school day as a special education aide, and drives this route again after school, finishing at 5 p.m.

As he turned north onto the dirt road that separates Hamilton County from its eastern neighbor, Kearny — and that marks the boundary between Mountain time and Central time — he got a call on his two-way radio, asking him to include another house on his route.

In terms of area, this southwest Kansas school district is the state’s largest, covering the whole of Hamilton County. But in other ways it is a typical Kansas district — rural and about 550 students, the state’s median enrollment.

More than two-thirds of Kansas’ school districts are classified as rural by the U.S. Department of Education, and another quarter are town districts. Together they educate just over half of the state’s students.

Yet many face challenges related to low enrollment, to their distance from cities or to serving wide swaths of land, and to budget cuts linked to the 2008 recession and the state's 2012 cuts to income tax.

Those challenges vary, but Syracuse has experience with many of them — from the struggle to recruit teachers and the housing shortages that make moving here difficult, to changing demographics and the logistics of busing students from far-flung farms.

Last year, Syracuse spent \$2,800 per student on the latter function alone. That is among the highest transportation costs in the state.

Sally Cauble, a member of the Kansas State Board of Education, represents most of the state's sparsely populated western half — 40 counties including Hamilton.

For Cauble, though these districts each are small alone, their contribution to the state as a whole is great, and their quality and performance therefore relevant for all Kansans.

"When you talk about how many students in western Kansas that we educate — they're not staying here," Cauble said, referring to the ongoing migration toward larger towns and cities in eastern and central Kansas. "They will be our leaders. We better have them educated."

Small schools

Sixteen-year-old Mallory Horton knows how to get the most out of high school. She is tied for the top of her class academically, but on a single day, might also tutor younger students after school, then attend a student council meeting, head to basketball practice and finish off the evening with rehearsal for her singing ensemble.

"Then Syracuse Singers practice gets out at 8:30, and then I'll go home," said Mallory, referring to her 25-mile drive back to the family farm, "and I'll actually eat dinner, and I'll go to bed."

Coaches at Syracuse High coordinate their practices and activities so students can attend as many as possible.

"We have to share kids," explained Lora Horton, the cheerleading coach and Mallory's mother. "If we're going to have all these things, we have to share."

That may sound demanding, but the Hortons, like many patrons of rural schools, see it as one of Syracuse's strengths. It has allowed the family's four children to engage not only in activities that come naturally to them, but also those that don't.

Mallory, a junior, is also a cheerleader and track and cross-country athlete, and a member of the honors society, the academic quiz team and the 4-H agricultural club.

"Syracuse High School has done our children very, very well," said Lora Horton, who has two children yet to graduate, Mallory and 12-year-old Ethan. "Being in a small school, and having the opportunity to be able to be in different things, I feel like that has taught them how to multi-task and schedule."

The children also have access to gifted education through a regional educational service center and access to dual-enrollment, college-level math, science and English classes taught by local teachers but accredited by a community college two counties away.

Despite these advantages, there are limitations, and those have become more pronounced in recent years.

After the recession hit, Gov. Mark Parkinson slashed Kansas' base aid per pupil — the figure used to calculate much of schools' operating budgets — from \$4,400 to \$3,937 over a two-year period.

The reductions became increasingly controversial after Gov. Sam Brownback took the reins in 2011, further lowered base aid to \$3,780 and signed into law sweeping cuts to state income

tax. Base aid hadn't fallen below \$3,800 since 2000. Today, it is about the same level as in 2001.

Even including other sources of funding, USD 494's revenue hasn't kept pace with inflation. Last year, the district spent about \$14,030 per student, including all funding sources — local, federal and state. That is \$240 higher than six years ago, when the recession hit, but about \$1,200 behind the consumer price index.

Since the recession, USD 494 has shed three teachers, its librarian and its elementary school counselor, three of seven teacher aides, and six of 13 special education aides. Meanwhile, the district has grown from 500 to 550 students.

Kenneth Bridges, superintendent in Syracuse, says he is worried about what the future will bring. Last month, Brownback announced emergency, mid-year cuts to school spending. The cuts were a response to the state's budget deficit, projected at \$700 million by the end of fiscal 2016.

This week, lawmakers sent a bill to Brownback's desk that adjusts but ultimately retains current-year cuts for most districts, and overhauls the 2016 and 2017 budgets, throwing out the state's 23-year-old school finance formula. The bill increases dollars for the state's sorely underfunded pension system, but reduces key operating aid for most of the state's poorer school districts, while shielding most of the wealthiest.

"What happens in Syracuse next is we lose programs — art, music — start charging fees for athletics," Bridges said. "The next step is to eliminate teachers and increase class sizes."

In an attempt to absorb the impact, USD 494 is considering a switch next school year to four-day school weeks, which Bridges estimates could save \$100,000 to \$120,000 a year. That may be relatively modest savings for such a significant change, but Bridges said it could help the district avoid cutting another teacher and cover cost increases such as the insurance hikes USD 494 saw this year.

The district also will postpone textbook purchases next year, cut student travel, and may merge two of its bus routes into one, he said.

"It's going to get worse," said Bridges, adding that he believes his district can remain solvent next school year by spending its contingency funds, but that he fears for the year after that. "Bottom line is, costs for everything are going up. Something has got to give."

Rural landscape

"Rural" is a term with many definitions.

The U.S. Department of Education's National Center for Education Statistics bases its interpretation on the distances between schools and populated clusters such as towns and cities.

By its definition, 197 of Kansas' 286 districts are rural. Almost all of these are considered distant or remote — such as Syracuse — because of their isolation from larger populations. Another 68 are classified as town districts, with half of these also labeled distant or remote — such as Garden City.

According to NCES, as of 2012, rural and town schools educated 37 percent of the nation's public school students. Rural schools alone educated about a quarter.

In many ways, rural and town schools — especially remote ones — face similar challenges and conditions, such as the difficulty of recruiting teachers.

Rural districts spend more per pupil, however, than towns do, have smaller student-teacher ratios, and are less likely to have full-time superintendents. Statewide, about a quarter of school districts have part-time superintendents, almost all of them rural.

The rural student population in Kansas is also shrinking, though nationally it is growing.

About three-quarters of Kansas' rural districts have lost population over the past six years.

Experts like Shelly Billig, who leads rural research at the Denver-based educational lab REL Central, say these schools are underrepresented in studies because of small sample sizes.

"There's actually not a lot of published research that specifically looks at rural issues," Billig said.

The National Rural Education Association and Rural School and Community Trust, meanwhile, argue these schools also are easily overlooked in policy decisions.

On the federal level, the Rural School and Community Trust has found the formula for allocating money for low-income students favors large school districts. As a result, some low-poverty suburban schools receive more money per low-income pupil than high-poverty rural schools receive.

On a state level, too, trends in rural education aren't always easy to spot. Kansas schools have today about 400 fewer certified employees — such as teachers and administrators — than before the recession, according to staffing data collected by the state education department.

In reality, rural and town schools have lost much more — almost 1,000 — but these losses are masked by growth at city schools. Rural schools lost about 6 percent of their certified staff, compared to 2 percent loss in student enrollment. Town schools shed 3 percent of staff but grew 1 percent in enrollment.*

A quarter of Kansas school districts don't have librarians, almost all rural. This includes Syracuse, where students volunteer as library aides.

"It's not very effective," said Bridges, adding that without someone to review the materials in the district's two libraries, USD 494 has postponed book purchases.

Despite the losses, student-teacher ratios are still smallest at rural school districts, where the median is 12 students per teacher (including general and specialized teachers). That is compared to 15-to-1 in towns, 17-to-1 in suburbs and 16-to-1 in cities, state data show. It is one reason the average rural district spends about \$1,100 more per student than town districts, \$2,900 more than suburbs and \$1,500 more than cities.

These ratios differ from class sizes. Syracuse's ratio, for example, is 14-to-1. Bridges estimates elementary and junior high class sizes range from 20 to 25 per class, depending on the grade, and high school about 15 students, depending on the class.

Welcome to

Syracuse

Last year was a year of many firsts for 7-year-olds Cameron and Carlos Yocupicio Gonzalez, and their 9- and 11-year-old sisters, Casandra and Carol.

It was their first time seeing snow, first time living abroad and first time attending school in English. Sitting in their home in Syracuse on a Wednesday evening, they recounted the adventure in Spanish.

"It's fun!" Carlos said with a grin, throwing his hands above his head and leaning in against his mother, Hilda Lourdes Gonzalez Terrazas. "I have friends and they speak Spanish!"

His twin sister, Cameron — missing three teeth, just like him — boldly declared she didn't miss their hometown of Caborca, in northwest Mexico.

"The house here is bigger," she explained.

Then there is the experience of playing in snow. All four children giggled as they told of making their first snowman and destroying it.

But life in a new country isn't always easy. School is in a language they haven't yet mastered,

and so are their Bible lessons at church. On top of that, the children said, they miss their grandfather, cousins and aunts and uncles.

Carlos, Carol, Casandra and Cameron aren't alone in their experience. A little more than half of the students at their school, Syracuse Elementary, are learning English as a second language, and some are new to the United States.

A decade ago, about a fifth of the school's students were English language learners. Districtwide, demand for ELL services at USD 494 has more than tripled.

Billig, who researches achievement gaps among low-income children and English language learners in rural areas, says increasing diversity at small schools isn't unusual.

"The English language learner challenge is going to get harder," she said.

In Hamilton County, the change accompanied the rise of dairy production over the past few decades. The area has attracted mega-dairies, which have helped the county grow in population and buffered it against the depletion of natural gas that is hurting tax bases and employment numbers in some counties.

Gonzalez and her husband, Carlos Alberto Yocupicio Duarte, moved here to work as large-animal veterinarians — a profession in short supply in many rural areas.

For them, the move was a chance to have more time with their children. They earn about the same as they did running their own veterinary clinic in Caborca, Gonzalez says, but that was almost nonstop work.

"We didn't have time for our kids," she said. "Here I get done early, so it gives us more quality time."

She and her husband also would like their children to learn English.

"Speaking two languages is really important," Yocupicio said. "There's a lot of demand right now for people who speak Spanish and English — companies are looking for bilingual professionals."

Helping children learn English is a high priority for staff and administrators at USD 494. Many of the teachers have pursued university coursework in teaching English as a second language — and have done so on their own time with only partial reimbursement from the district.

"We do the best that we can," said Becky Clark, principal at Syracuse Elementary, "but still, we're missing a level of support."

Clark would like to hire a full-time ELL teacher, as many larger school districts do, to give students the opportunity for one-on-one or small-group sessions with a teacher who specializes in language acquisition.

Bridges says budget limits and the difficulty of recruiting staff to rural areas are obstacles.

"It's difficult for us even to hire qualified paras," he said, referring to para-educators, or teacher's aides. "It would be nice if we could have bilingual paras in every classroom."

Recruiting

teachers

USD 494 offered Tanner and Kendal Smith a place to work and a home to live in.

Their jobs at Syracuse High are their introduction to the world of K-12 teaching. Tanner is the P.E. coach and computer teacher, and his wife, Kendal, teaches English while working on her teaching certificate through a transition-to-teaching program.

They rent a three-bedroom house from the school district for \$225 a month — one of nine homes that USD 494 owns to attract teachers and assist with their move, and that it offers to

them rent-free for the first year.

“It’s definitely very attractive,” said Kendal, who, together with her husband, has student loans to repay and a baby to care for, 1-year-old Ryker. “We love it here.”

Nevertheless, Bridges said he fears USD 494 will lose the Smiths, possibly even this year. Both graduated from The University of Kansas on the east side of the state in Kendal’s hometown of Lawrence, and they are keeping an eye on jobs in that region for family reasons.

“There’s rural Kansas and then there’s extreme rural Kansas,” said Bridges, adding that recruiting and retaining teachers is a challenge for USD 494. “Anybody really along the Colorado border – we’re so isolated.”

So far the Smiths have been here three years.

“We took this job with the intention that it would be just a few years,” Tanner said. “But there are people who came here intending to stay a year, and it’s their 30th year teaching.”

If they leave, they said, it wouldn’t be an easy decision. Syracuse’s tight-knit feel and the close collaboration among its staff helped them grow as teachers, and the community rallied to support them when they dealt with the loss of a family member and a difficult pregnancy.

“I think whoever starts out here is going to be spoiled by the staff and the students they work with,” Kendal said. “I can’t imagine being happier with the staff anywhere else.”

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*The Capital-Journal excluded a handful of rural and town districts from staffing and population calculations where dissolutions or mergers resulted in changes to geographical classifications in recent years. Dissolutions and mergers that didn’t result in classification changes weren’t excluded.

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