



Entrepreneurship Education in Rural Communities: Bridging Opportunity Gaps and Building Local Innovation Ecosystems



Across rural America, young people grow up surrounded by examples of creativity and problem-solving. Family farms adopt new technologies to stay competitive, small businesses evolve to meet community needs, and neighbors collaborate to solve shared challenges. This spirit of ingenuity is deeply woven into the fabric of rural life, and increasingly, schools are finding ways to bring that same energy into the classroom.



National winners Adrian Bautista and Evan Perez from Providence, RI shake the judges hands before presenting at NFTE's National Youth Entrepreneurship Challenge in October 2025.

Rural regions comprise more than 70% of the U.S. landmass and nearly one-fifth of its population. Between 1969 and 2007, self-employment in rural areas rose from 14% to 21% of total employment, reflecting a growing reliance on small enterprise to sustain local economies. Yet much of this activity has been necessity-based rather than opportunity-driven, constrained by limited access to capital, mentorship, and infrastructure.¹

Entrepreneurship education (EE) provides a powerful framework for developing those important skills. By helping students recognize opportunity, think critically, and take initiative, EE connects learning to the real-world challenges and possibilities of their hometowns. It allows students to see themselves not only as future employees,

Ebut as innovators and community builders. For rural youth, entrepreneurship education can turn local insight into local opportunity—preparing them to lead the renewal of their own communities.

¹ Goetz, S. J., Partridge, M. D., Deller, S. C., & Fleming, D. A. (2010). Evaluating U.S. rural entrepreneurship policy. *Journal of Regional Analysis & Policy*, 40(1), 20-33.

About NFTE

The Network for Teaching Entrepreneurship (NFTE) is a global education nonprofit that empowers partners to integrate entrepreneurial education across curricula and equips youth in under-resourced communities with the skills, connections, credentials, and real-world experiences needed to lead change and own their futures. Since 1987, NFTE has reached more than a million learners worldwide.

Entrepreneurship as Rural Revitalization

Traditional entrepreneurship policies have often mirrored urban innovation ecosystems, emphasizing venture capital and high-growth startups. But as the OECD notes, innovation in rural areas “is often about practical, localized problem-solving” rooted in community ties and resourcefulness.² The challenge is not a lack of ideas but a lack of systems designed to nurture them.

Entrepreneurship education can meet this need by equipping students with both the mindset and the methods to innovate within their local context. A Finnish study of rural EE programs found that combining classroom instruction, skill-building, and enterprise creation effectively strengthened community connections and civic engagement.³ However, the researchers also noted that impact fades when learning is disconnected from local identity. Programs that align entrepreneurship education with regional industries—agriculture, manufacturing, healthcare—produce deeper engagement and longer-lasting outcomes.

NFTE’s own experience across rural districts in states including Georgia and Florida reinforces this. When entrepreneurship is taught through local relevance, students not only gain business acumen but also see their education as a pathway to community leadership. A student developing a digital marketing plan for a family farm or creating a mobile service for local artisans is not just learning about entrepreneurship, they are practicing it as a civic act.



Q'Vaunda Curry

In Gadsden County, Florida, Q'Vaunda Curry, a teacher at Gadsden County High School, helps students explore the economic potential of their own hometown. The region, she explains, “is in a great position to grow.” Two major transportation routes, Highway 90 and Interstate 10, run directly through the county, offering prime opportunities for logistics and small business development. While a few local businesses thrive, most youth employment still centers on fast food or short-term summer jobs with county departments. “There’s plenty of space and opportunity here,” Curry says. “But students have to see themselves as part of that growth story.”

She connects entrepreneurship learning directly to local industries by encouraging students to identify needs that are currently being met in nearby cities, whether it is small retail, creative services, or trades, and imagine how they might fill those gaps locally. “If they can start businesses that meet customer demands right here in Gadsden

County,” she explains, “they are strengthening the local economy and building stronger résumés for the future.” One of her former students, Tremaine Robinson, turned this approach into a reality. What began as a class assignment grew into Robinson Productions, a full-time photography business serving local clients. “He’s the go-to photographer in our community,” Curry says. “Every time he posts a new shoot, I’m reminded of what’s possible when students realize entrepreneurship isn’t just a project; it’s real.”

Curry also highlights the persistent barriers rural students face. “The biggest challenge is mindset,” she explains. “They think entrepreneurship is just for class credit, not something they can actually be paid for.” Limited startup resources deepen that challenge because students can design products in theory but often lack funds to

2 Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD). (2023). Enhancing rural innovation in the United States (OECD Rural Studies). OECD Publishing. <https://doi.org/10.1787/22a8261b-en>

3 Filback, R., Krop, C., & Noguera, P. (2023, November 3). Finnish lessons revisited: What we learned about one of the best education systems in the world. USC Rossier School of Education. <https://rossier.usc.edu/news-insights/news/finnish-lessons-revisited-what-we-learned-about-one-best-education-systems-world#:~:text=A%20systemic%20focus%20on%20social,happy%20to%20be%20in%20school>

produce and sell them. Reliable broadband access is another barrier. “Our students spend so much time just waiting for pages to load, and at home, many only have a cell phone for assignments.” She emphasizes that mentorship and infrastructure are key to closing these gaps. “I can guide students on fitness or leadership,” she says, “but if a student wants to launch a food truck, they need someone who’s done it.”

This approach is gaining traction nationwide through the work of the Coalition of Entrepreneurship Education Organizations—a collective effort led by NFTE alongside partners such as BUILD.org, the CAPS Network, and Project Lead The Way. Together, these organizations are advancing a shared goal: to make high-quality entrepreneurship learning accessible to every student, in every type of community. Through their programs, teacher networks, and shared advocacy, the coalition is demonstrating how entrepreneurship education can be embedded across subjects, geographies, and school models.



CAPS Network's Rural Initiative school partners

Within this network, the CAPS (Center for Advanced Professional Studies) Network's Rural Initiative offers a compelling model. CAPS reimagines high school through profession-based learning—students work directly with local organizations to solve real problems, pitch ideas, manage client relationships, and iterate solutions like entrepreneurs. Its Rural Initiative helps smaller districts apply this approach by aligning projects with local industries and resources. Entrepreneurship is woven throughout: students take ownership of their learning, design personalized goals, and apply creativity to authentic challenges in fields ranging from agriculture and healthcare to media and information technology. In this model, business

partners act as mentors and collaborators, helping students see how their ideas can make tangible contributions to community life.

For teachers like Lacey Holloway in Osborne, Kansas, the Rural Initiative has been transformative. “By connecting with CAPS’ staff and other educators, my perspective on education completely shifted,” she says. In her media and math classes, students now produce projects for real clients—creating community event videos, documenting local stories, and developing solutions for regional partners. When a beloved teacher passed away, her students were asked to film and produce a memorial tribute so the entire town could honor his legacy. “The emotional stakes were high, and the students stepped in with professionalism, empathy, and urgency,” Holloway recalls. “When students are trusted with authentic work, they don’t just gain skills—they contribute.”



Lacey Holloway

These experiences reveal the promise—and the ongoing challenges—of bringing entrepreneurship education to rural communities. Strong community trust and close industry ties create meaningful opportunities for students, yet limited broadband, travel distances, and rigid funding structures can make it difficult to sustain or scale these programs. As Holloway notes, “Our community is incredibly supportive. The issue is time and flexibility.” Her insight underscores a central policy need: rural educators and their students don’t lack creativity or commitment

—they need adaptable, long-term investment to make experiential, entrepreneurship-based learning possible in every small town.

Policy Recommendations

To unlock the full potential of entrepreneurship education for rural students, policymakers must move beyond short-term grants and urban-focused innovation models toward place-based, flexible, and equitable systems of support.

Invest in Knowledge Infrastructure



Students work on their business plans alongside their teacher.

A policy brief from Penn State University’s Center for Rural Education and Communities notes that “business-class” broadband service remains limited in rural areas, underscoring that connectivity must be viewed as part of a broader place-based development strategy.⁴ States are addressing this through initiatives like the National Conference of State Legislatures’ Broadband Policy Toolkit, which outlines strategies to expand rural infrastructure and affordability.⁵ The National Educational Technology Plan (2024) similarly calls on states to modernize teacher training and technology policies to close rural equity gaps. Investing in broadband and professional development ensures entrepreneurship education can thrive anywhere students live and learn.⁶

Fund Flexible Community-Connected Learning

Rural schools need adaptable funding for mentorship, transportation, and project-based learning—needs often excluded from traditional grants. The federal Small Rural School Achievement (SRSA) Program allows flexible use of Title V funds to support local innovation, including entrepreneurship initiatives.⁷ Advocacy groups such as the American Association of School Administrators emphasize that flexible dollars are essential for rural innovation, helping



(Pictured right) A NFTE student showcases her business.

4 Penn State University, College of Education. (n.d.). Broadband access and rural school and community development. Center on Rural Education and Communities. <https://ed.psu.edu/academics/departments/departments-education-policy-studies/eps-centers-councils-and-journals/center-rural-education-and-communities/broadband-access-and-rural-school-and-community-development>

5 National Conference of State Legislatures. (2025, August 2). Broadband policy toolkit. <https://www.ncsl.org/technology-and-communication/broadband-policy-toolkit>

6 Fallon, J. (2024, September). Connecting the National Educational Technology Plan to state policy: A roadmap for state boards. National Association of State Boards of Education. <https://www.nasbe.org/connecting-the-national-educational-technology-plan-to-state-policy-a-roadmap-for-state-boards/>

7 U.S. Department of Education. (n.d.). Small, Rural School Achievement Program. <https://www.ed.gov/grants-and-programs/formula-grants/rural-insular-areas/small-rural-school-achievement-program>

districts expand course offerings and technology access.⁸ States can build on these models by creating long-term, locally controlled funds that empower schools to connect entrepreneurship learning directly to community priorities.

Incentivize Regional Collaboration



Judges score student pitches at a regional competition.

Collaboration among rural schools, colleges, and industries creates shared mentorship and innovation networks that individual schools cannot sustain alone. In California, the K–12 Strong Workforce Program funds partnerships between districts and community colleges that align with regional economic needs.⁹ North Carolina’s Rural Postsecondary Practices Partnership (RP3) similarly builds K–12–industry pipelines through shared regional projects.¹⁰ Research from the McKinsey Institute for Economic Mobility confirms that such partnerships are key to rural economic resilience, urging “schools and employers to work together at scale.”¹¹ Incentivizing these collaborations helps turn isolated programs into sustainable regional ecosystems for entrepreneurship.

Conclusion

Rural America possesses abundant creativity, resilience, and community strength—but these qualities often go underleveraged without access to the networks, infrastructure, and learning models that convert innovation into opportunity. Entrepreneurship education offers a pathway to bridge that divide by transforming rural classrooms into engines of local problem-solving and civic renewal. When students learn to identify challenges, design solutions, and mobilize resources, they gain the confidence and capacity to shape the economic and social future of their communities.

NFTE and its partners in the Coalition of Entrepreneurship Education Organizations are working to make this vision a reality by embedding experiential, community-connected learning into education systems nationwide. Expanding entrepreneurship education is not just a matter of curriculum reform—it is a strategy for inclusive growth and rural sustainability. With sustained investment and collaborative policy leadership, states can ensure that every student, no matter how remote their hometown, has the opportunity to innovate, contribute, and lead.

9 California Community Colleges Chancellor’s Office. (n.d.). K12 Strong Workforce Program (K12 SWP) – Program overview. [Arsen, D., Delpier, T., Gensterblum, A., Jacobsen, R., & Stamm, A. \(2021\). Rural communities need better state education policies. Phi Delta Kappan, 103\(4\), 8-13. <https://doi.org/10.1177/00317217211065820>](#)

10 North Carolina Community College System. (2025, May 22). North Carolina Community College System launches toolkit to strengthen rural advanced manufacturing workforce. <https://www.nccommunitycolleges.edu/news/north-carolina-community-college-system-launches-toolkit-to-strengthen-rural-advanced-manufacturing-workforce/>

11 Pinder, D., Gardner, N., Tucker-Ray, S., & Nowski, T. (2025, August 5). Manufacturing in rural America: A plan for K–12–industry partnerships. McKinsey Institute for Economic Mobility. <https://www.mckinsey.com/institute-for-economic-mobility/our-insights/manufacturing-in-rural-america-a-plan-for-k-12-industry-partnerships>

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