

# College isn't in the plans for many rural students

Rural high school students are less likely to go to college than their urban and suburban peers

BY CAROLYN THOMPSON  
ASSOCIATED PRESS

PERRY, N.Y. — As a student in western New York's rural Wyoming County, Briar Townes honed an artistic streak that he hopes to make a living from one day. In high school, he clicked with a college-level drawing and painting class.

But despite the college credits he earned, college isn't part of his plan.

Since graduating from high school in June, he has been overseeing an art camp at the county's Arts Council. If that doesn't turn into a permanent job, there is work at Creative Food Ingredients, known as the "cookie factory" for the way it makes the town smell like baking cookies, or at local factories like American Classic Outfitters, which designs and sews athletic uniforms.

"My stress is picking an option, not finding an option," he said.

Even though rural students graduate from high school at higher rates than their peers in cities and suburbs, fewer of them go on to college.

Many rural school districts, including the one in Perry that Townes attends, have begun offering college-level courses and working to remove academic and financial obstacles to higher education, with some success. But college doesn't hold the same appeal for students in rural areas where they often would need to travel farther for

school, parents have less college experience themselves, and some of the loudest political voices are skeptical of the need for higher education.

College enrollment for rural students has remained largely flat in recent years, despite the district-level efforts and stepped-up recruitment by many universities. About 55% of rural U.S. high school students who graduated in 2023 enrolled in college, according to National Clearinghouse Research Center data. That's compared to 64% of suburban graduates and 59% of urban graduates.

College can make a huge difference in earning potential. An American man with a bachelor's degree earns an estimated \$900,000 more over his lifetime than a peer with a high school diploma, research by the Social Security Administration has found. For women, the difference is about \$630,000.

### A SCHOOL TAKES CUES FROM FAMILIES' HOPES AND GOALS

A lack of a college degree is no obstacle to opportunity in places such as Wyoming County, where people like to say there are more cows than people. The dairy farms, potato fields and maple sugar houses are a source of identity and jobs for the county just east of Buffalo.

"College has never really been, I don't know, a necessity or problem in my family," said Townes, the middle of three children whose father has a tattoo shop in Perry.

At Perry High School, Superintendent Daryl McLaughlin said the district takes cues from students like Townes, their families and the community, supplement-



Lauren Petracca/AP

**Devon Wells, a junior at Perry Central High School, welds a metal calf feeder at Halo Farms, where he works, on March 12 in Perry, N.Y.**

ing college offerings with programs geared toward career and technical fields such as the building trades. He said he is as happy to provide reference checks for employers and the military as he is to write recommendations for college applications.

"We're letting our students know these institutions, whether it is a college or whether employers, they're competing for you," he said. "Our job is now setting them up for success so that they can take the greatest advantage of that competition, ultimately, to improve their quality of life."

Still, college enrollment in the district has exceeded the national average in recent years, going from 60% of the class of 2022's 55 graduates to 67% of 2024's and 56% of 2025's graduates. The district points to a decision to direct federal pandemic relief money toward covering tuition for students in its Accelerated College Enrollment program — a partnership with Genesee Community College. When the federal money ran out, the district paid to keep it going.

"This is a program that's been in our community for quite some time, and it's a program our community supports," McLaughlin said.

About 15% of rural U.S. high school stu-

dents were enrolled in college classes in January 2025 through such dual enrollment arrangements, a slightly lower rate than urban and suburban students, an Education Department survey found.

Rural access to dual enrollment is a growing area of focus as advocates seek to close gaps in access to higher education. The College in High School Alliance this year announced funding for seven states to develop policy to expand programs for rural students.

### HIGHER EDUCATION'S IMAGE PROBLEM IS ACUTE IN RURAL AMERICA

Around the country, many students feel jaded by the high costs of college tuition. And Americans are increasingly skeptical about the value of college, polls have shown, with Republicans, the dominant party in rural America, losing confidence in higher education at higher rates than Democrats.

"Whenever you have this narrative that 'col-

lege is bad, college is bad, these professors are going to indoctrinate you,' it's hard," said Andrew Koricich, executive director of the Alliance for Research on Regional Colleges at Appalachian State University in North Carolina. "You have to figure out, how do you crack through that information ecosphere and say, actually, people with a bachelor's degree, on average, earn 65% more than people with a high school diploma only?"

In much of rural America, about 21% of people over the age of 25 have a bachelor's degree, compared to about 36% of adults in other areas, according to a government analysis of U.S. Census findings.

### SOME RURAL EDUCATORS DON'T HOLD BACK ON PROMOTING COLLEGE

In rural Putnam County, Florida, about 14% of adults have a bachelor's degree. That doesn't stop principal Joe Theobald from setting and meeting an annual goal of 100% college admission for students at Q.I. Roberts Jr.-Sr. High School.

Paper mills and power plants provide opportunities for a middle class life in the county, where the cost of living is low. But Theobald tells students the goal of higher education "is to go off and learn more about not only the world, but also about yourself."

"You don't want to be 17 years old, determining what you're going to

do for the rest of your life," he said.

Families choose the magnet school because of its focus on higher education, even though most of the district's parents never went to a college. Many students visit college campuses through Camp Osprey, a University of North Florida program that helps students experience college dorms and dining halls.

In upstate New York, high school junior Devon Wells grew up on his family farm in Perry but doesn't see his future there. He's considering a career in welding, or as an electrical line worker in South Carolina, where he heard the pay might be double what he would make at home. None of his plans require college, he said.

"I grew up on a farm, so that's all hands-on work. That's really all I know and would want to do," Devon said.

Neither his nor Townes' parents have pushed one way or the other, they said.

"I remember them talking to me like, 'Hey, would you want to go to college?' I remember telling them, 'not really,'" Townes said. He would have listened if a college recruiter reached out, he said, but wouldn't be willing to move very far.

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### Notification of Right to Request Teacher Qualifications

Dear Parent or Guardian:

The educators in Caldwell County are committed to providing a quality instructional program for your child. This letter is just one of the ways of keeping you informed of the educational commitment of our schools and our district.

Our district receives federal funds for Title I, Part A programs as a part of the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA). Under ESSA, you have the right to request information regarding the professional qualifications of your child's teacher(s). If you request this information, the district will provide you with the following:

- Whether the teacher has met the state requirements for licensure and certification for the grade levels and subject matters in which the teacher provides instruction;
- Whether the teacher is teaching under emergency or other provisional status through which state qualification or licensing criteria have been waived;
- The baccalaureate degree major of the teacher and any other graduate certification or degree held by the teacher, and the field of discipline of the certification or degree; and
- Whether your child is provided services by paraeducators, and if so, their qualifications.

If you would like to request this information, please contact Laura Lee White by phone at 270-365-8000 or by email at [laura.white@caldwell.kyschools.us](mailto:laura.white@caldwell.kyschools.us). Please include your child's name, the name of the school your child attends, the names of your child's teacher(s) and an address or email address where the information may be sent. Thank you for your interest and involvement in your child's education.

Sincerely,

Laura Lee White  
Federal Programs Coordinator

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# BACK TO SCHOOL

Dear CCMS Families,

As the new school year begins, we extend a warm welcome back to our students and families! We are excited to see Caldwell County Middle School buzzing with energy again and are ready for a year of high academic achievement and personal growth.

This year our theme is **"Level Up."** Every class, every assignment, every learning experience is an opportunity to move to the next level. We are challenging everyone to **level up their academic achievement** by putting in consistent effort, asking questions when they don't understand, and studying for mastery, not just a grade.

Let's also **level up our attendance** by being in school every day, on time and ready to learn. You can't play the game if you aren't in the game! Finally, let's **level up our personal responsibility** by being respectful, kind, and accountable for our actions.

Each school year is a journey, and every student has the potential to succeed. By working together - students, caregivers, teachers, and staff - we can make this a year of outstanding achievement for everyone.

We look forward to partnering with you to make this the best school year yet!

Thanks,  
Pollyanne Kimmel  
CCES Principal