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Who's Backing Rural Ed? A Selection of Key Funders to Know

Connie Matthiessen | August 06, 2024



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IP [recently highlighted](#) some of the significant challenges facing rural education, and made the case for more philanthropic funding for rural schools and their students.



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Rural schools face many of the same challenges confronting schools everywhere in the U.S. today, including tight budgets, teacher shortages and high numbers of students experiencing poverty, but these problems tend to be more severe in rural areas. Rural schools typically have fewer resources than suburban and urban schools, so there is often less funding for things like school counselors, AP courses, STEM and computer equipment, and mental health supports. Many rural areas also face challenges attracting and retaining educators, administrators and other staff because of housing shortages, high transportation costs and fewer amenities.

At the same time, schools play an essential role in rural communities, not only providing community spaces in areas that have little infrastructure, but also serving as hubs for everything from internet access to vaccine distribution. Schools and the students they serve also represent the future for rural regions of the country. But even though rural students [graduate from high school at higher rates](#) than students in other areas, they have [lower college enrollment and completion rates](#) than their urban and suburban peers.

As recent elections have highlighted polarization in the U.S. and a growing [urban-rural divide](#), some in philanthropy have started paying more attention to rural issues. Winter Kinne, the president and CEO of the Community Foundation of the Ozarks, appreciates the increased interest, both from private funders and from the federal government, but has yet to see it translate into significant increased financial support.



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“I have been doing this for 19 years, and I think there is more conversation about [rural issues] now than there have been in the past,” she said. “So the conversation is great and we have to start somewhere. But I haven't seen the rubber meet the road.”

For funders who want to support rural communities, rural schools are a good place to start. What follows is a round-up of some of the funders that are already backing rural education, organized by their geographic focus – national, regional or community. It’s not a comprehensive list, but it provides a glimpse of some of the funders supporting rural ed, and how they’re doing it.

National Funders

Ascendium Education Philanthropy

While it’s not as well known as some other names on this list, [Ascendium Education Philanthropy](#) is a major rural education funder. It is the philanthropic arm of Ascendium Education Group, a federal student loan guarantor and college loan servicing company. Ascendium works to remove barriers to higher education, specifically for low-income students — support for rural postsecondary education and workforce training is one of its four primary funding areas. Between 2019 and 2023, Ascendium invested \$39.1 million in grants on rural postsecondary education and workforce training, according to its [2023 annual report](#).

Ascendium began focusing on rural education in 2019, and senior program officer Kirstin Yeado calls it a

San Francisco, CA
Assistant Director, Annual Giving Dana-Farber Cancer Institute - Brookline, MA
Lead Senior Science Writer/Proposal Writer Dana-Farber Cancer Institute - Brookline, MA
Vice President For Individual Giving Central Park Conservancy - New York, NY
Senior Major Gift Officer Centre College - Danville, KY
Principal Gift Officer Yale University - New Haven, CT
Major Gifts Officer Equality Now - New York, NY
Leadership Giving Officer Yale University - New Haven, CT
Director Of Development Gads Hill Center - Chicago, IL

“very data-driven decision. We know that disparities exist between rural students and their urban and suburban peers at every point along the postsecondary pipeline from enrollment to workforce entry. And we also know that philanthropic dollars overwhelmingly support urban and suburban communities.”

Ascendium is backing a [National Center for Inquiry and Improvement](#) (NCII) initiative with a cohort of 16 community colleges to implement a [guided pathway framework](#) that provides support for students. The goal is to improve college persistence and completion for rural students. The Ascendium board just approved another \$4 million investment to include 16 more community colleges in the cohort. “We’re excited to be able to work with NCII and these community colleges to think about how we do this well in a rural context, and how we then share the lessons learned from this work with other rural community colleges throughout the country,” Yeado said.

Ballmer Group

The [Ballmer Group](#) is one of several large national philanthropies led by living donors that have invested in rural education. As IP’s [Martha Ramirez](#) reported, it supports [Partners for Rural Impact](#), which works to improve outcomes for rural youth “from cradle to career.” Ballmer committed \$12,500,000 from 2024 to 2029 to support Partners for Rural Impact’s “efforts related to strengthening rural place-based partnerships,” according to its grants database. Ballmer is also supporting Save the Children Federation’s rural early learning network to boost kindergarten readiness.

Gates Foundation

Rural education and rural students aren't a specific program area for the Gates Foundation, but as a huge funder that focuses on students from low-income backgrounds, many of its grants reach rural areas — as well as urban and suburban ones. In 2021, Gates funded an influential FSG report, "[Rural America: Philanthropy's Misunderstood Opportunity for Impact](#)," which includes rural education in a list of priority areas for philanthropy.

Gates does focus specifically on rural students in its home state of [Washington](#), where it is working to increase the number of students who pursue postsecondary opportunities after high school. Today, just 50% of Washington's high school graduates enroll in a postsecondary program, although 90% would like to do so. The foundation's goal is for that number to reach 70% by 2035. Gates supports the [Limitless Learning Network](#), a postsecondary learning program; 28% of the districts in the network are located in rural communities, according to a foundation representative. And rural areas of Washington are included in a new, [\\$19 million Gates initiative](#), announced earlier this year, to increase postsecondary participation for students in Washington state.

Blue Meridian Partners

The big, donor-backed funding collaborative [Blue Meridian Partners](#) supports [Partners for Rural Impact](#) as part of its [Place Matters](#) portfolio. Blue Meridian works to identify, make large investments, and scale initiatives to combat poverty across the nation; it

counts major funders among its partners, including Ascendium Education Group, Ballmer Group, the Duke Endowment, the Gates Foundation, Charles and Lynn Schusterman Family Philanthropies and MacKenzie Scott.

ECMC Foundation

The [ECMC Foundation](#) is the philanthropy of another student loan guarantor, ECMC Group. Its mission is “to improve higher education for career success among underserved populations through evidence-based innovation.” Rural education specifically is a newer focus for ECMC: Earlier this year, it unveiled a [nationwide initiative](#) “to address the postsecondary needs of rural learners.” ECMC will be committing \$25 to \$30 million over the course of the five-year initiative.

ECMC Foundation Program Officer Stephanie Sowl, who is leading ECMC’s Rural Impact Initiative, said one of the early goals of the initiative is to learn more about approaches that work to boost college persistence and completion rates for rural students. As she wrote on the [ECMC website](#), “There is a shocking dearth of reliable data available on rural learners and institutions, or on the results of strategies to encourage college graduates to return.” The foundation recently released an RFP for research to identify programs that are showing success.

ECMC is also supporting a [CivicLab](#) initiative to strengthen education and employment partnerships in 10 rural communities and an effort by the Institute for Evidence-Based Change to expand its [Caring Campus](#)

model to include up to 18 additional rural community colleges.

Sowl sees many opportunities for funders to have an impact on rural education. “Postsecondary education is our runway, but there are so many barriers to education in rural areas, like affordable housing, broadband, internet, childcare, transportation. Health is a huge problem in rural America,” she said. “I’d like to see a holistic approach, bringing in multiple different funders to the table to work together.”

ECMC president Jacob Fraire reiterated this point in an emailed statement: “To achieve systemic change for rural learners, our work requires collaboration with philanthropic leaders across sectors and geographies. We recognize that many factors affect postsecondary outcomes, and we will only achieve our North Star goal of eliminating equity gaps in postsecondary completion by 2040 by standing shoulder to shoulder with our peer funders.”

Trott Family Foundation

The [Trott Family Foundation](#) is the philanthropy of banker Byron Trott, who grew up in a small Missouri town. The foundation established the [STARS College Network](#), which works with colleges and universities to recruit and support rural students. It provided \$20 million to establish STARS in 2023 and recently invested another \$150 million over 10 years to expand the program, according to [Bloomberg](#). The philanthropy will also increase funding to prepare high school students for college.

Wallace Foundation

School leadership is one of the priority program areas of the [Wallace Foundation](#), a major K-12 funder, which also supports out-of-school programs (after- and summer school programs), particularly in underserved areas of the country. One Wallace Foundation initiative works to strengthen [school principal leadership](#), including in [rural school districts](#).

Walton Family Foundation

The [Walton Family Foundation](#) is among the nation's larger philanthropic funders, and education is one of its priority areas, along with conservation and the Walton family's home region of Northwest Arkansas. Rural education isn't a specific funding focus, but the foundation's education and home region funding often reaches rural communities. Rural students are benefiting, for example, from Walton efforts to increase college and career pathways, as [IP reported](#). Walton has supported career pathways programs in rural [West Texas](#) and workforce development programs in [Northwest Arkansas](#).

Regional Funders

Blandin Foundation

The [Blandin Foundation](#)'s focus is rural Minnesota; its founder, Charles Blandin, was the son of a Wisconsin farmer. He later became a teacher, managed several newspapers and ran the Blandin Paper Company. The [Blandin Community Broadband Program](#) is working to boost broadband access in rural communities — and

rural schools — across Minnesota. Since 1956, the foundation has awarded close to 20,000 college scholarships totalling over \$30 million; it boosted its scholarship budget to [\\$1.5 million](#) last year “to build strong rural workforce.”

Claude Worthington Benedum Foundation

Michael Benedum made his fortune in the oil and gas business; he and his wife named the [Claude Worthington Benedum Foundation](#) after their only child. The foundation’s grantmaking is focused on the couple’s home state of West Virginia, as well as Pittsburgh, where they lived much of their lives. Education is a priority funding area. In 2023, the Benedum Foundation provided grants to West Virginia University Foundation for an entrepreneurship program for high school students. It also supported a West Virginia University Foundation program to recruit and retain teachers, and another that increases enrollment, persistence and graduation rates for underrepresented students.

Ford Family Foundation

Not to be confused with the Ford Foundation, the [Ford Family Foundation](#)’s tagline is “We believe in the power of rural communities.” This regional funder supports rural areas in Oregon, where it’s based, and in California’s Siskiyou County. The foundation is built on the fortune Kenneth and Hallie Ford made with their timber company, Roseburg Lumber. [Education](#) is a priority giving area and spans early childhood education through postsecondary completion. The foundation provides [scholarships](#) to high school

students, community college students transferring to four-year colleges, and parents and adult learners.

John M. Belk Endowment

The North Carolina-based [John M. Belk Endowment](#) was created by the chairman of Belk, Inc., a department store chain. Belk also served four terms as mayor of Charlotte, his hometown. The endowment is committed to creating pathways to postsecondary education for underrepresented students in North Carolina, including those from rural areas.

Patterson Family Foundation

The [Patterson Family Foundation](#), based in Kansas City, serves rural areas of Kansas and western Missouri. It was started by Jeanne and Neal Patterson, who built Cerner Corporation, a health information technology company that was acquired by Oracle Health in 2021. The foundation, which calls itself “[rooted in rural](#),” counts education as one of its three strategic funding areas. In 2023, it provided over \$11 million for rural education. Its Rural School District Educator Development grant helps rural districts build their workforce.

T.L.L. Temple Foundation

The [T.L.L. Temple Foundation](#) is named after Thomas Lewis Latané Temple, who started the Southern Pine Lumber Company. It works “alongside rural communities to build a thriving East Texas and to alleviate poverty, creating access and opportunity for all.” The foundation’s grantmaking is focused on 23

counties in East Texas and one county in Arkansas.

Education is one of the foundation's funding areas. It supports quality pre-K and early grade programs, as well as the [Deep East Texas College and Career Alliance](#), which works to increase the number of students who graduate from high school with a postsecondary credential. It also committed \$3 million to Partners for Rural Impact to bring its cradle-to-career model to East Texas, as my colleague Martha Ramirez [reported](#).

Community Foundations

Community foundations are well positioned to assess the needs of local school districts, and a number, including these two examples, are developing innovative programs to address those needs.

Community Foundation of the Ozarks

The Missouri-based [Community Foundation of the Ozarks](#) launched the [Rural Schools Partnership](#) in 2009, which helps school districts create foundations to raise money for local schools. Close to 100 school districts have created education foundations through the community foundation. The Ozarks Teacher Corps, another foundation initiative, is a college scholarship program that supports aspiring teachers in their third and fourth years of college if they commit to teaching in a rural community for three years. Ninety percent of the students who participate in the Teacher Corps, which has become a model for other regions, continue teaching in a rural area after the three years, according to Winter Kinne, the foundation's president and CEO.

Vermont Community Foundation

The [Vermont Community Foundation](#), which has a statewide focus, also makes rural education a priority. The [Curtis Fund](#), a supporting organization for the Vermont Community Foundation, provides scholarships to low-income and at-risk Vermont students, many of them first generation. Another partner, the J. Warren and Lois McClure Foundation, has developed a [free early college degree program](#) through the Community College of Vermont. The McClure Foundation is also supporting a [high school mentorship program](#) to promote college persistence for low-income students, English language learners and students with disabilities.

Other National Nonprofits

Some nonprofit organizations that are focused specifically on rural education provide some funding, as well. For example, the National Rural Education Association has its own foundation, the [National Rural Education Foundation](#), which grants the Rural Teacher of the Year Award.

The [Rural Schools Collaborative](#) (RSC), based in Galesburg, Illinois, touches rural communities and school districts across the country through its network of [regional hubs](#). Among other initiatives, RSC has helped support and grow the Rural Teacher Corps through its [Catalyst Fund](#). In partnership with the National Rural Education Foundation, it awards [place-based grants](#) to rural teachers and launched the [I am a Rural Teacher](#) project, which highlights educators'

stories and offers networking opportunities, support and a [Rural Teacher Resiliency Guide](#).

Taylor McCabe-Juhnke, who heads RSC, said her organization is happy to provide advice or act as a sounding board for funders who want to support rural education. “We’re a collaborative, and our goal is to connect funders directly with programs that could use their support,” she said. “That's a role we're really happy to play: connecting people and answering their questions.”

This is the second of a two-part series; previously, we looked at [some of the key challenges and opportunities facing rural ed funders](#).

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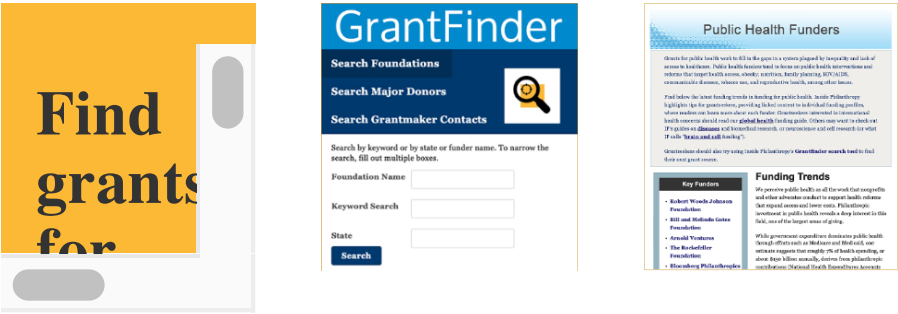
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