

The Status of Rural Education

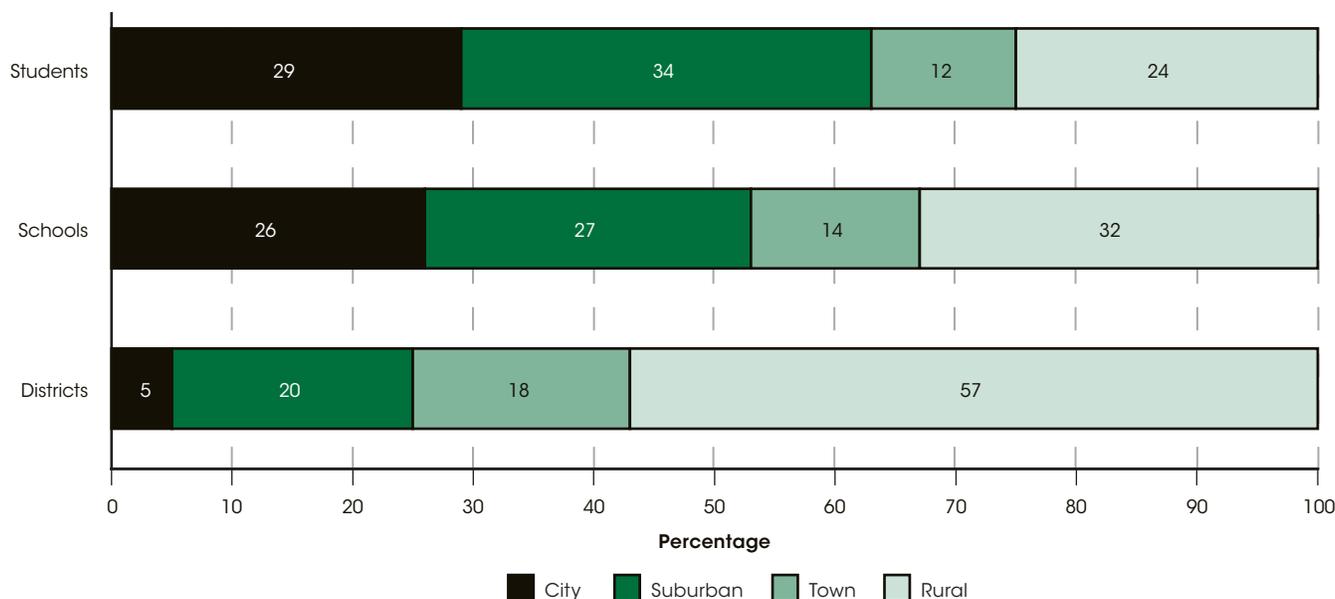
In school year 2010–11, over half of all operating regular school districts and about one-third of all public schools were in rural areas, while about one-quarter of all public school students were enrolled in rural schools.

The National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) revised its definitions of school locale types in 2006 after working with the Census Bureau to create a new locale classification system. This urban-centric classification system has four major locale categories—city, suburban, town, and rural—each of which is divided into three subcategories. Cities and suburbs are subdivided into the categories *small*, *midsize*, or *large*; towns and rural areas are subdivided by their proximity to an urbanized area into the categories *fringe*, *distant*, or *remote*. Unlike the previous classification system, which differentiated towns on the basis of population size, this system differentiates towns and rural areas on the basis of their proximity to larger urban centers. This key feature allows NCES to identify and differentiate rural schools and school districts in relatively remote areas from those that may be located just outside an urban center.

In school year 2010–11, some 99,000 public elementary and secondary schools, located in 14,000 school districts, served over 49 million students in the United States (see NCES Rural Education in America website, tables A.1.a.-1, A.1.a.-2, and A.1.a.-3). The distribution of districts, schools, and students across locales highlights some key differences in the size and nature of education in rural America, compared with towns, suburbs, and cities.

In 2010–11, more than half of all operating regular school districts were located in rural areas (57 percent), while 20 percent of districts were located in suburban areas, 18 percent in towns, and 5 percent in cities.

Figure 1. Percentage distribution of public elementary and secondary students, schools, and districts, by locale: School year 2010–11



NOTE: Regular districts exclude regional education service agencies and supervisory union administrative centers, state-operated agencies, federally operated agencies, and other types of local education agencies, such as independent charter schools. Schools with no reported enrollment are included in school totals but excluded from student totals. Detail may not sum to totals because of rounding.
SOURCE: U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, Common Core of Data (CCD), "Local Education Agency Universe Survey," 2010–11 (versions 1a and 1b); "Public Elementary/Secondary School Universe Survey," 2010–11 (version 2a). See tables A.1.a.-1, A.1.a.-2, and A.1.a.-3 at <http://nces.ed.gov/surveys/ruraled/>.

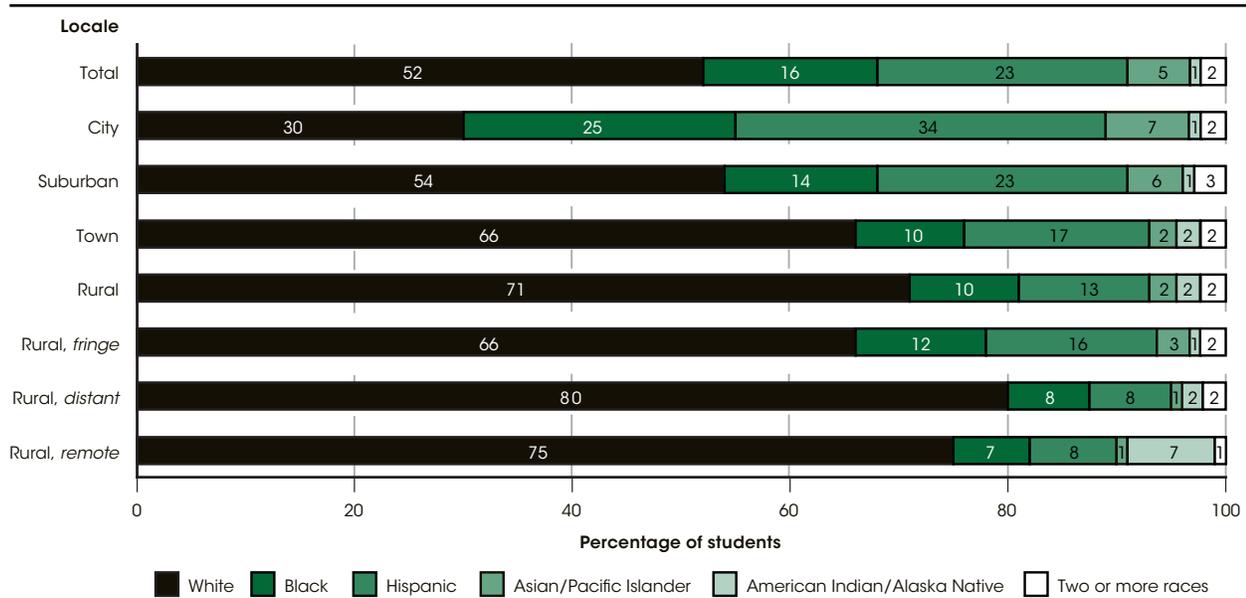
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About one-third of the approximately 100,000 public schools in the United States in 2010–11 were located in rural areas (32,000), more than in suburbs (27,000), cities (26,000), or towns (14,000). Fewer students, however, were enrolled in public schools in rural areas than in suburbs and cities. Public schools in rural areas enrolled 12 million students, representing 24 percent of total enrollment, compared with 17 million in suburban areas (34 percent of enrollment) and 14 million in cities (29 percent of enrollment). The smallest share of enrollment in 2010–11 was in towns, which enrolled 6 million students, or 12 percent of total enrollment.

Rural public school systems differ from those in other locales in terms of the population they serve. In the

2010–11 school year, 52 percent of all public elementary and secondary school students were White, 16 percent were Black, 23 percent were Hispanic, 5 percent were Asian/Pacific Islander, 1 percent were American Indian/Alaska Native, and 2 percent were of two or more races (see NCES Rural Education in America website, table B.1.b.-1). In rural areas, 71 percent of public school students were White, 10 percent were Black, 13 percent were Hispanic, 2 percent were Asian/Pacific Islander, 2 percent were American Indian/Alaska Native, and 2 percent were of two or more races. These data do not include students in Bureau of Indian Education (BIE) schools.

Figure 2. Percentage distribution of public elementary and secondary students, by locale and race/ethnicity: Fall 2010



NOTE: Race/ethnicity information was not reported for 58,721 students. Race categories exclude persons of Hispanic ethnicity. Detail may not sum to totals because of rounding. Asian students and Pacific Islander students are shown separately in the reference table, but were combined into a single category for the purpose of this Spotlight. Students who identified as both Asian and Pacific Islander would be part of the "two or more races" group. SOURCE: U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, Common Core of Data (CCD), "Public Elementary/Secondary School Universe Survey," 2010–11 (version 1a). See table B.1.b.-1 at <http://nces.ed.gov/surveys/ruraled/>.

The percentage of students in public elementary and secondary schools who were White was higher in rural areas (71 percent) than in cities (30 percent), suburban areas (54 percent), and towns (66 percent). Conversely, the percentages of these students in rural areas who were Black, Hispanic, and Asian/Pacific Islander were lower than the corresponding percentages in cities and suburban areas. A higher percentage of students in rural areas and towns were American Indian/Alaska Native (2 percent each) than in cities and suburbs (1 percent each).

Within rural areas, a lower percentage of students in fringe rural areas were White (66 percent) than in remote rural (75 percent) and distant rural (80 percent). A greater proportion of students attending public schools in fringe rural areas were Black (12 percent), Hispanic (16 percent), and Asian/Pacific Islander (3 percent) than in distant rural and remote rural areas. However, 7 percent

of students attending schools in remote rural areas were American Indian/Alaska Native, compared with 1 percent in fringe rural areas and 2 percent in distant rural areas.

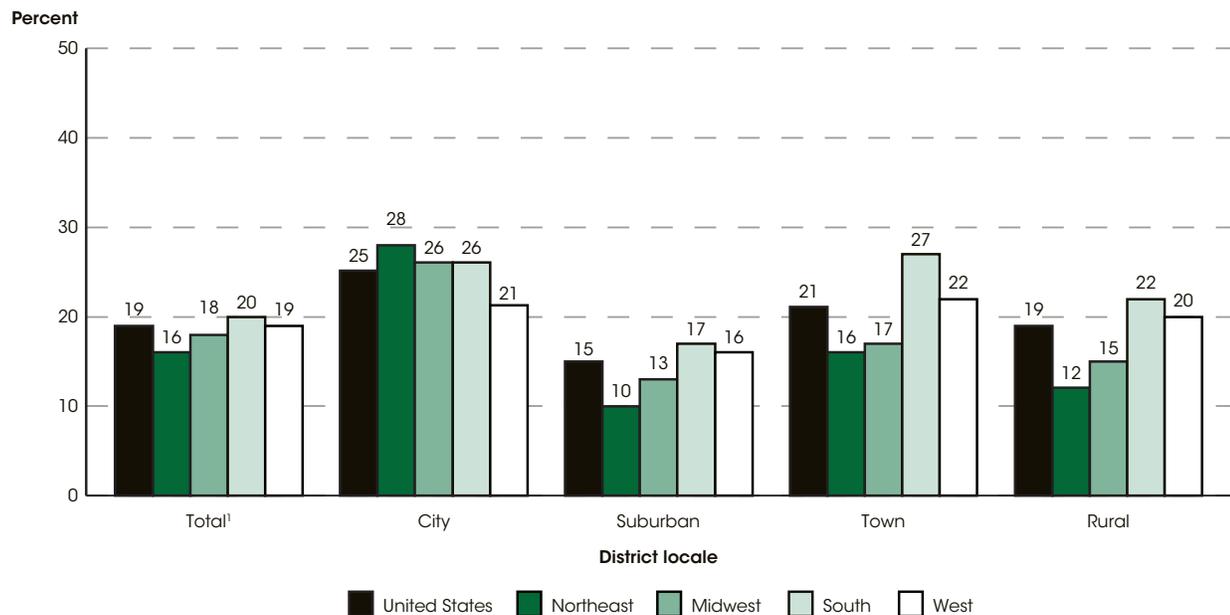
A smaller percentage of school-age children in rural areas live below the poverty threshold than those in cities or towns. Using annual household income data collected by the American Community Survey (ACS), households in poverty are defined as those with an annual income below the poverty threshold. In 2009, that poverty threshold for a family of four was \$22,050. In 2010, some 19 percent of children between the ages of 5 and 17 were living in families below the poverty threshold (see NCES Rural Education in America website, table A.1.a.-6). The percentage of children ages 5 to 17 in rural areas who were living in families in poverty (19 percent) was smaller than in cities and towns (25 and 21 percent, respectively).

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However, a larger percentage of rural children lived in poverty than suburban children (19 vs. 15 percent). There were regional differences in the percentages of rural children living in poverty in 2010. The percentage of

rural children living in poverty was highest in the South, at 22 percent, followed by the West (20 percent), Midwest (15 percent), and Northeast (12 percent).

Figure 3. Percentage of 5- to 17-year-olds in families living in poverty, by district locale and region: 2010



¹ Total includes data for children in local education agencies that do not have urbanicity designations.

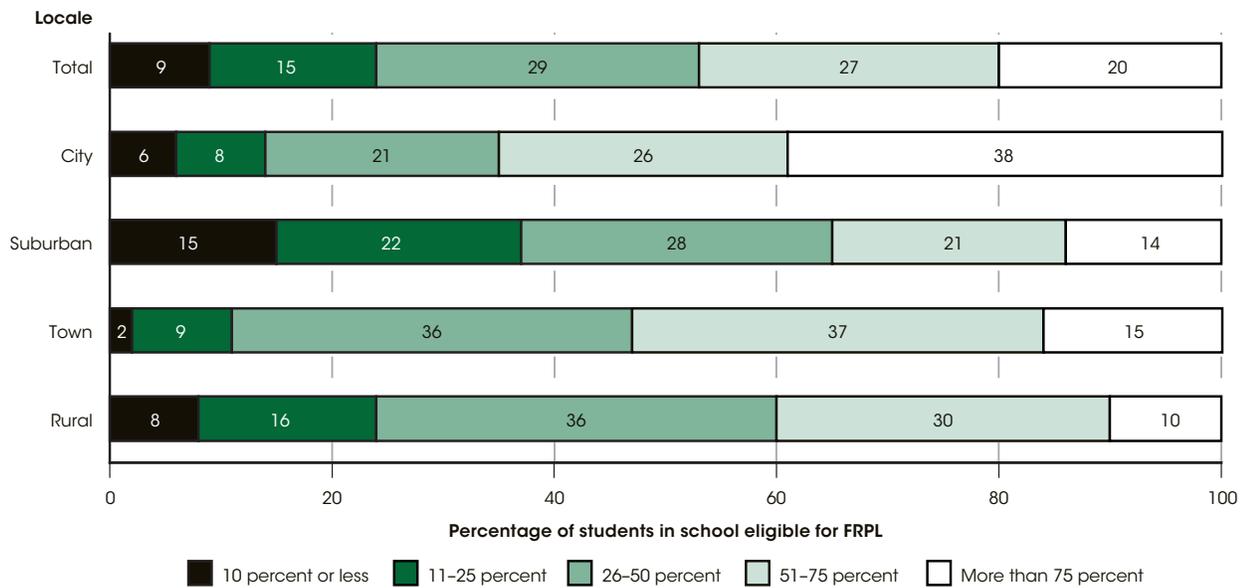
NOTE: Households in poverty are defined as those with an annual income below the poverty threshold. In 2009, that poverty threshold for a family of four was \$22,050.

SOURCE: U.S. Department of Commerce, Census Bureau, "Small Area Income and Poverty Estimates." LEA dataset 2010; and U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, Common Core of Data, 2009–10, version 2a. See table A.1.a.-6 at <http://nces.ed.gov/surveys/ruraled/>.

A smaller percentage of rural students attended high-poverty schools than students in other locale types. During the 2010–11 school year, 48 percent of public elementary and secondary students nationwide were eligible for free or reduced-price lunch under the National School Lunch Program (see NCES Rural Education in America website, table B.1.e.-1). Using the percentage of students eligible for free or reduced-price lunch as a proxy for the poverty level within a school, high-poverty

schools are defined, for the purposes of this analysis, as schools in which more than 75 percent of the students are eligible. The percentage of students in rural areas attending high-poverty schools (10 percent) was lower than the national percentage (20 percent). The percentage of students attending these schools in rural areas was also lower than the percentage in cities (38 percent), suburbs (14 percent), and towns (15 percent).

Figure 4. Percentage distribution of public elementary and secondary students, by locale and percentage of students in school eligible for free or reduced-price lunch (FRPL): Fall 2010



NOTE: The National School Lunch Program is a federally assisted meal program. To be eligible, a student must be from a household with an income at or below 130 percent of the poverty threshold for free lunch or between 130 percent and 185 percent of the poverty threshold for reduced-price lunch. In total, 666 public schools with student enrollment did not report information on the number of students eligible for free or reduced-price lunch. Detail may not sum to totals because of rounding and missing data.

SOURCE: U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, Common Core of Data (CCD), "Public Elementary/Secondary School Universe Survey," 2010-11 (version 1a). See table B.1.e.-1 at <http://nces.ed.gov/surveys/ruraled/>.

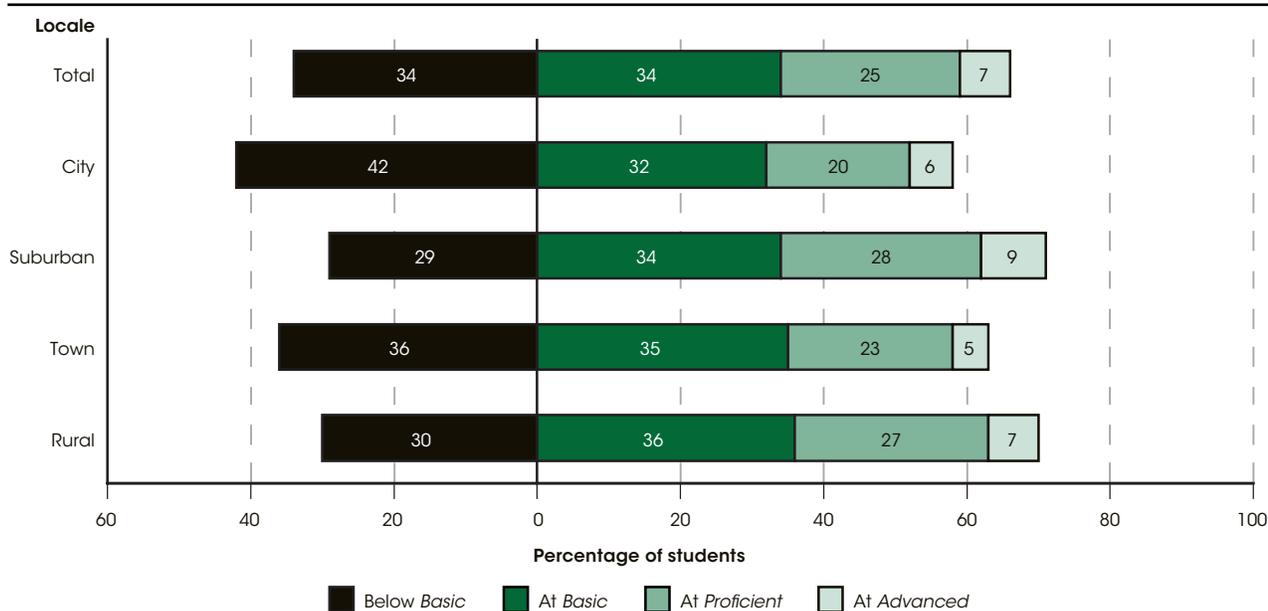
Within the detailed rural locales, 19 percent of rural students in remote areas attended high-poverty schools in 2010-11, as did 11 percent in distant rural areas and 8 percent in fringe rural areas. Further, more than half of American Indian/Alaska Native and Black students (57 and 59 percent, respectively) in remote rural areas attended high-poverty schools, compared with 10 percent of White students, 29 percent of Hispanic students, 19 percent of Asian/Pacific Islander students, and 21 percent of students of two or more races.²

On average, public school students in rural areas perform better on the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) than their peers in cities and towns

² Asian students and Pacific Islander students are shown separately in the reference table, but were combined into a single category for the purpose of this Spotlight. Students who identified as both Asian and Pacific Islander would be part of the "two or more races" group.

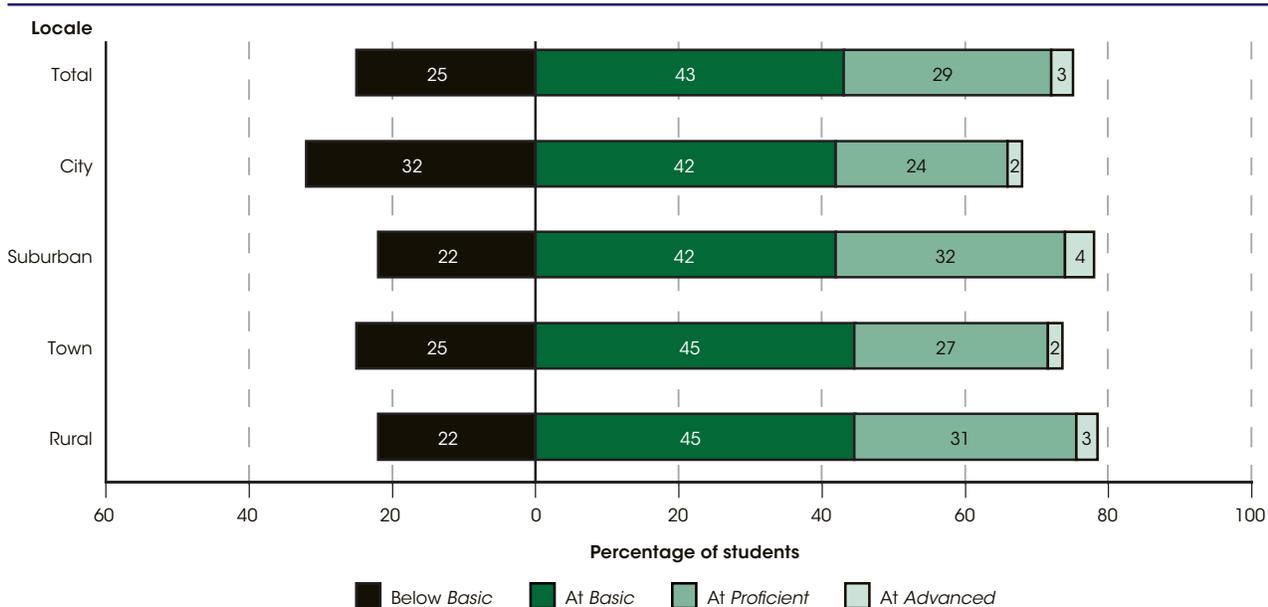
but generally not as well as their peers in suburban areas. Nationwide, 32 percent of 4th-grade public school students scored at or above the *Proficient* level on the 2011 NAEP reading assessment (see NCES Rural Education in America website, table B.2.a.-1). The percentage of 4th-graders in rural areas scoring at this achievement level (35 percent) was larger than in cities (26 percent) and towns (29 percent), but smaller than in suburban areas (37 percent). The pattern for 8th-grade public school students who scored at or above *Proficient* in reading was similar to that for 4th-graders, with 32 percent of 8th-graders in the United States scoring at this level overall. The percentage of 8th-graders in rural areas scoring at or above *Proficient* (33 percent) was larger than in cities (26 percent) and towns (30 percent) but smaller than in suburban areas (36 percent).

Figure 5a. Percentage distribution of 4th-grade public school students across National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) reading achievement levels, by locale: 2011



NOTE: Detail may not sum to totals because of rounding.
SOURCE: U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), 2011 Reading Assessment. See table B.2.a.-1 at <http://nces.ed.gov/surveys/ruraled/>.

Figure 5b. Percentage distribution of 8th-grade public school students across National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) reading achievement levels, by locale: 2011



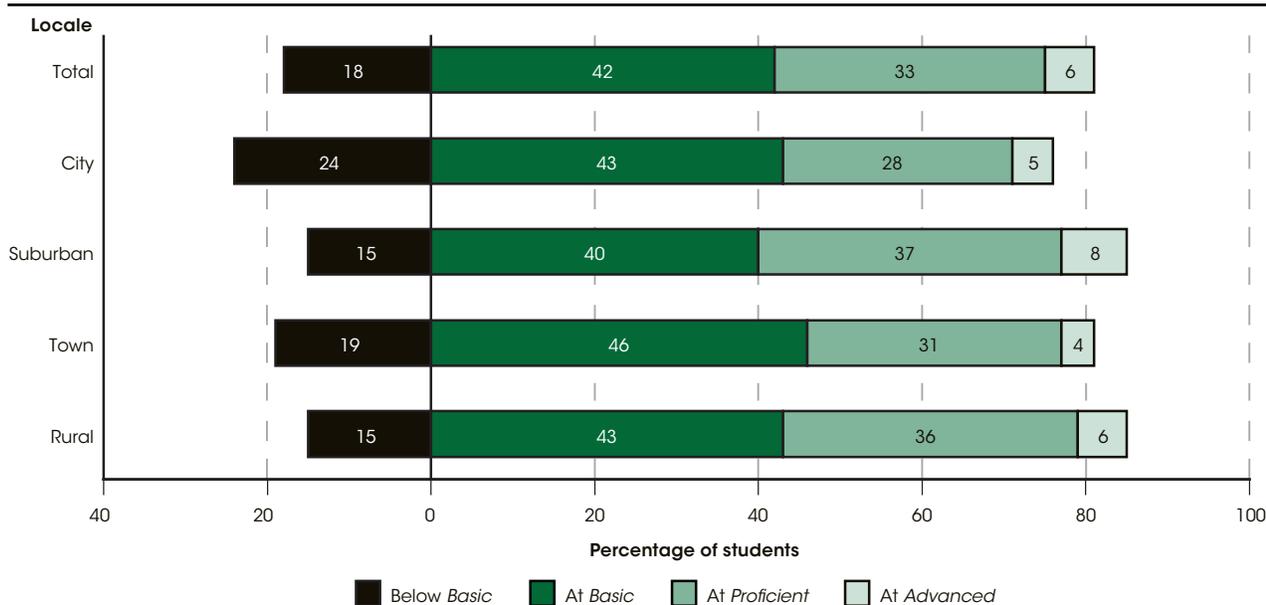
NOTE: Detail may not sum to totals because of rounding.
SOURCE: U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), 2011 Reading Assessment. See table B.2.a.-1 at <http://nces.ed.gov/surveys/ruraled/>.

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Nationwide, 40 percent of 4th-grade public school students scored at or above the *Proficient* level on the 2011 NAEP mathematics assessment. The percentage of 4th-graders in rural areas scoring at this achievement level (42 percent) was larger than in cities (33 percent) and towns (35 percent) but smaller than in suburban areas (45 percent) (see NCES Rural Education in America website, table B.2.a.-2). The pattern for 8th-grade public school

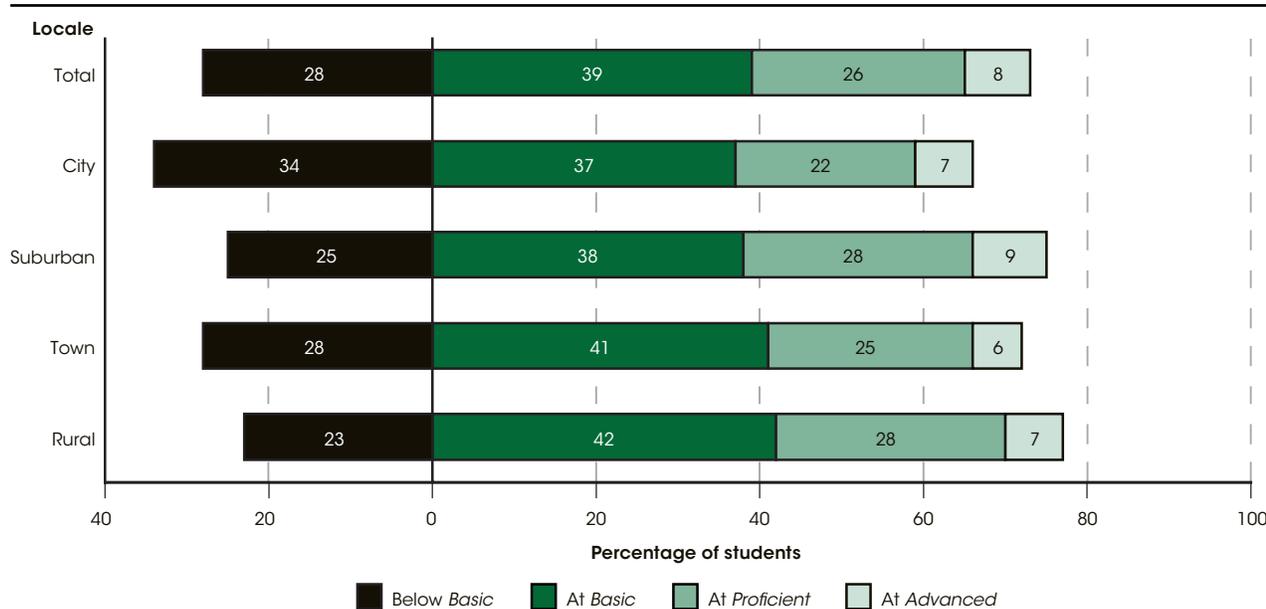
students who scored at or above *Proficient* in mathematics was similar to that for 4th-graders, with 34 percent of 8th-graders in the United States scoring at this level overall. The percentage of 8th-graders in rural areas scoring at or above *Proficient* (35 percent) was larger than in cities (29 percent) and towns (31 percent) but smaller than in suburban areas (37 percent).

Figure 6a. Percentage distribution of 4th-grade public school students across National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) mathematics achievement levels, by locale: 2011



NOTE: Detail may not sum to totals because of rounding.
SOURCE: U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), 2011 Mathematics Assessment. See table B.2.a.-2 at <http://nces.ed.gov/surveys/ruraled/>.

Figure 6b. Percentage distribution of 8th-grade public school students across National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) mathematics achievement levels, by locale: 2011



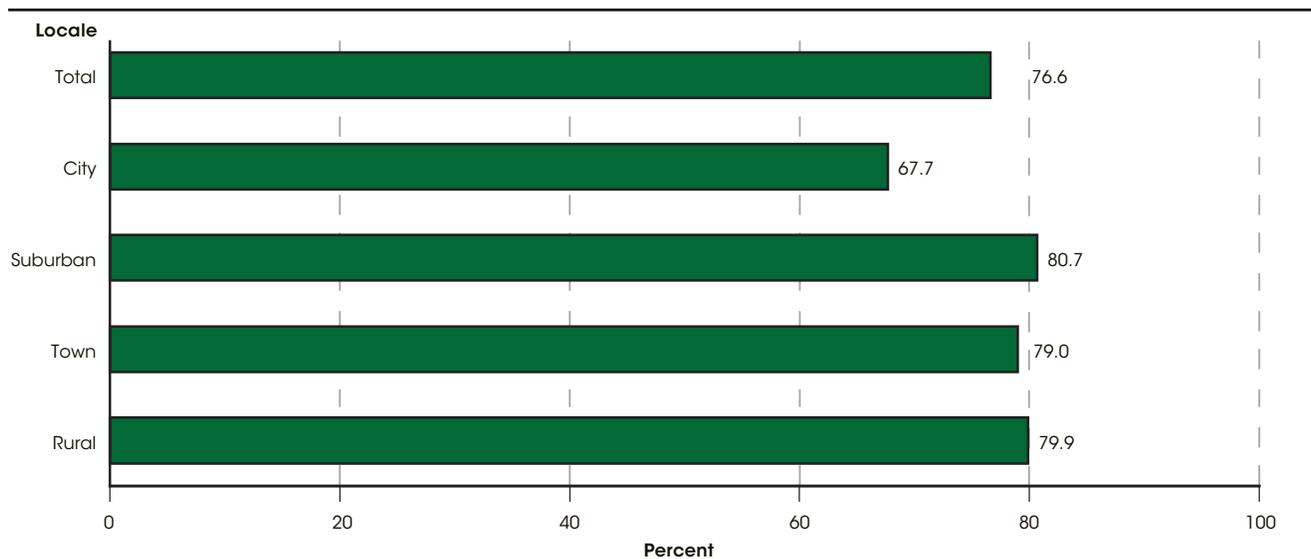
NOTE: Detail may not sum to totals because of rounding.
SOURCE: U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), 2011 Mathematics Assessment. See table B.2.a.-2 at <http://nces.ed.gov/surveys/ruraled/>.

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Students in rural districts experienced higher graduation rates than their peers in districts in cities and towns. Nationally, during the 2008–09 school year (the latest year for which these data are available), the averaged freshman graduation rate (AFGR) for the 47 states that reported data (California, Nevada, and Vermont did not) and the District of Columbia was 77 percent (see NCES

Rural Education in America website, table B.3.a.-1). The rate was higher in rural areas (80 percent) than across the 47 reporting states and the District of Columbia. The rate was also higher in rural areas than in cities (68 percent) and towns (79 percent) but was lower than the rate in suburban areas (81 percent).

Figure 7. Averaged freshman graduation rate (AFGR) for public high school students, by locale: School year 2008–09



NOTE: The analysis is limited to 47 states and the District of Columbia. California, Nevada, and Vermont are not included because completion data are not available. School districts with missing data on the number of diplomas or total enrollment base or locale code are excluded. Geographic districts in New York City are combined as one school district. High school students are students attending a school offering the final years of high school work necessary for graduation.

SOURCE: U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, Common Core of Data, Local Education Agency Universe Survey Dropout and Completion Restricted-Use Data File, School Year 2008–09 (version 1a) (NCES 2011-314). See table B.3.a.-1 at <http://nces.ed.gov/surveys/ruraled/>.

Reference tables: [NCES Rural Education in America website](#), tables A.1.a.-1, A.1.a.-2, A.1.a.-3, A.1.a.-6, B.1.b.-1, B.1.e.-1, B.2.a.-1, B.2.a.-2, B.3.a.-1

Glossary: Achievement levels, Averaged Freshman Graduation Rate (AFGR), Elementary school, Free or reduced-price lunch, National School Lunch Program, Poverty, Public school, Secondary school