

APRIL 2026

Deep Roots, Strong Futures: Advancing Rural Youth Economic Mobility

A Sunnylands Convening

Presented by rootEd Alliance and Heartland Forward



Executive Summary

Rural youth¹ represent nearly one in five American students², making up a significant portion of our country's future workforce. Yet rural economic mobility is still treated as a local or regional issue, rather than a national workforce imperative.

New investment in a range of industries is reshaping rural labor markets and creating high quality jobs within reach of rural communities. Recent McKinsey analysis finds that 63 percent of \$1 trillion in announced advanced manufacturing projects will be located within commuting distance of rural areas, with the potential to generate approximately \$34 billion in additional wages each year for rural workers, or about 10 percent of rural America's manufacturing GDP.³

While rural regions are positioned to benefit from these new and expanding industries, their youth face unique obstacles to attaining the skills and credentials needed to be competitive in the evolving job market. Consequently, career success and upward mobility are increasingly elusive to rural students.

In rural America:

- Post-secondary attainment trails urban markets.⁴
- Employers report greater difficulty hiring skilled workers.⁵
- Only 3 percent of philanthropic funding flows to rural organizations.⁶
- More than 400 federal programs touch rural development, yet few communities have the administrative bandwidth to navigate them effectively.⁷

While some existing programs have demonstrated that rural economic mobility can be achieved in pockets of rural America, a lack of sustained funding support and enabling, rural-centric policy stymies real scale. Partly to blame is the absence of a collective, national vision of prosperity for all rural regions. The result is fragmentation at the very moment the country needs cohesion.

At Sunnylands, rootEd Alliance and Heartland Forward partnered to convene a group of cross-sector leaders to highlight promising approaches, identify the key structural barriers that persist, and lay the groundwork for a shared agenda to expand economic mobility for rural youth.⁸

Ingredients for Success

Our sessions highlighted impactful initiatives that demonstrate how policymakers, philanthropists, industry, and higher education can come together to prepare students for in-demand, high-growth career pathways creating strong public-private partnerships with clear action and funding. (See the Appendix for more information on the models discussed).

Attendees shared that the success of these initiatives hinges on a few enabling factors:

1. Strong Local Anchor Partner

A trusted regional entity serves as a community anchor, convening and aligning multiple stakeholders across industry, K–12 systems, post-secondary institutions, and public agencies. Without that coordinating function identifying and working towards a shared vision of upward mobility for rural youth and strategic workforce development, even well-funded programs risk failure.

2. Direct Alignment with Employer Demand

Education and training pathways are tied to real jobs in advanced manufacturing, energy, health care, and technology. These pathways should be frequently reviewed to ensure we are training students for the ever-evolving jobs of the future, rather than yesterday's jobs. Employers work with schools and provide job shadowing opportunities to communicate the dynamic career paths available to students within their companies, in addition to helping design curricula and committing to local hiring.

3. Outcome-Driven Policy and Program Design

Public and private funders, employers, and policymakers, are aligned on what success looks like and what specific outcomes programs are designed to achieve. These desired outcomes are informed by the realities of the current and future economy. More specifically, programs and policy should not focus exclusively on traditional four-year college enrollment, but rather measure wage progression, job placement, and long-term mobility.

While many of these best practices are working in select regions, they are not yet embedded in federal and state policy or adopted as standard practice nationwide.

Structural Gaps We Must Address

Several structural gaps continue to limit progress:

1. Lack of National Infrastructure

There is no national entity singularly focused on advancing rural youth economic mobility through research, evaluation, and policy. Efforts remain fragmented across agencies and funders, and best practices are not shared from community to community.

2. Collaboration and Coordination Challenges

While public, private, and philanthropic stakeholders each have a role to play in crafting and driving forward common economic mobility and workforce development goals, cross-sector collaboration at the local, regional, and federal levels has not materialized to the extent needed.

3. Lack of Strategic, Long-term Funding

Rural communities are starved of philanthropic funding, leaving them without a potential source of long-term, risk-tolerant capital that can catalyze additional public and private investment. Where funding does exist, it is often allocated without meaningful engagement of local residents, institutions, and leaders, reinforcing mistrust and misalignment with on-the-ground priorities.

4. Policy Challenges

Federal and state policymakers are not always aligned to rural-specific challenges, and therefore struggle to create comprehensive, rural-centric policy. Policymakers have the opportunity to better utilize public funding for scaling high-impact models.

5. Incentive Misalignment

High schools and postsecondary institutions are primarily evaluated on degree attainment, not employment outcomes. That distorts student guidance and resource allocation.

6. Lack of Shared National Narrative

Rural communities are diffused and often geographically isolated, and the challenges they face are shaped by local economies, demographics, and institutions. This has made it difficult to articulate a cohesive national narrative about rural youth economic mobility. In the absence of a shared narrative, the issues fade to the background of national policy discussions, resulting in further disenfranchisement for rural communities. Changing this dynamic will require deliberate investment in creating a clear narrative around the urgent needs and proven solutions that can work for rural communities.

Action Priorities

Addressing rural workforce mobility requires focus and commitment. Three priorities warrant immediate attention.

1. Establish a Rural Youth Economic Mobility Coalition

The study and advancement of rural youth economic mobility requires a national home. A national Rural Youth Economic Mobility Coalition could serve as a central platform for rural leaders across sectors and potential partners to convene over time. With a destination to host ongoing strategic conversations, rural leaders can then collaboratively lead new research efforts, share best practices, and disseminate federal and state policy recommendations and other practical guidance. The Coalition could also facilitate more place-based experimentation, testing out, as an example, whether employer-led local models can be replicated across markets.

2. Scale Working Solutions

Durable progress depends on coordination, consistent funding, and a focused strategy. Significantly more capital – both public and private – must flow to rural communities to sustain and scale high-impact programs with a track record of success. Rather than piloting new efforts in isolation, funders and policymakers should prioritize bringing proven models to additional regions and supporting local adaptation over time. This includes helping rural partners access local, state, and federal dollars, and engaging employers as co investors so programs remain aligned with real labor market demand. These efforts could be identified and accelerated by the Rural Youth Economic Mobility Coalition.

3. Identify and Scale Best-in-Class Policy

Local, state, and federal policy frameworks should prioritize measurable employment and earnings results, rather than traditional college enrollments. Post-secondary institutions, philanthropy, and employers can work together to advocate for and shape these priorities within their communities. State leaders can then identify and elevate best-in-class policies to embed these outcomes in accountability systems, data reporting, and funding formulas.

Looking Ahead

Rural communities can position themselves to benefit from the tailwinds of reshoring jobs, the energy transition, infrastructure investments, and other macro trends. These capital flows can create opportunity, but only if local residents are prepared to participate. Rural leaders must work together to ensure the long-term competitiveness of their communities and prepare their youth for today's job market.



Appendix – Sunnylands Attendees (1/2)

PARTICIPANTS

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Appendix – Sunnylands Attendees (2/2)

SPECIAL GUESTS

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References and Notes

1. “Rural” refers to communities outside major metropolitan areas; “Youth”: Refers primarily to rural K–12 students and recent high school graduates who are navigating the transition into postsecondary education, training, and early career employment
2. [National Center for Education Statistics, Enrollment and School Choice in Rural Areas](#)
3. [McKinsey, Manufacturing in rural America: A plan for K–12–industry partnerships](#)
4. [USDA, Educational attainment in rural America rises, but urban areas widen the degree gap](#)
5. [Federal Reserve Bank of Richmond, Are Labor Shortages in Small Cities and Rural Areas Worse Than Urban Ones?](#)
6. [USDA, Rural America’s Philanthropic Sector](#)
7. [Pipa, Anthony F. and Elise Pietro, Brookings Institute, What's in it for rural? Analyzing opportunities for rural America in IIJA, CHIPS, and IRA](#)
8. The Sunnylands retreat, “Deep Roots, Strong Futures: Advancing Rural Youth Economic Mobility,” was hosted at the Sunnylands estate in Rancho Mirage, California, from February 4–6, 2026.