



## Friday Institute Education Brief

### Improving Professional Learning Opportunities in Rural Schools

Due to [high rates of poverty, low levels of educational attainment and unemployment](#), many rural school districts face significantly different challenges in educating students than their suburban and urban counterparts. Rural school districts often serve a large number of minority, English language learners and high poverty students—students whom school districts have historically struggled to serve effectively. Rural school districts also find it difficult to recruit and retain qualified teachers. According to [“Tackling Teacher and Principal Shortages in Rural Areas”](#), the problem is exacerbated in remote areas, areas that are 25 miles from an urban center, where 39 percent of remote schools struggle to fill positions in every subject area. Rural educators lack access to both formal and informal professional learning opportunities, especially face-to-face.

#### Professional Development Solutions for Rural Areas

The Friday Institute for Educational Innovation’s Professional Learning and Leading Collaborative (PLLC) is working to address the specific challenges facing rural districts and schools by helping rural school leaders build professional learning capacity. The PLLC knows that educators want to do the best for their students and that they need professional learning opportunities to learn new techniques and new strategies. Traditionally, K-12 professional development consists of a few days per year when educators are released from their teaching or administrative responsibilities to attend “sit and listen” workshops. While these sessions may increase awareness of new or emerging expectations, they rarely lead to changes in educational practices or improvements in student achievement. However, with high-quality professional learning, administrators, teachers and coaches can achieve their goals, whether a school is transitioning to a personalized digital learning environment, implementing project-based learning or improving student literacy.

There is not a “canned” solution for all rural districts and schools. The PLLC’s approach is built around the [Leadership in Personalized and Digital Learning \(LPDL\)](#) model, which offers a job-embedded professional learning experience for district and school leaders to lead a transition to personalized learning. Trained facilitators work with superintendents, principals, teachers and coaches to engage in face-to-face and online learning opportunities. High-quality professional learning empowers educators to innovate.

## Statewide High-Quality Professional Learning Cohorts in Wyoming

The PLLC's work in Wyoming highlights how the creation of a professional learning cohort, PLNs and coaching can help rural schools and districts support administrators and teachers to positively impact teaching and learning. The team designed the Wyoming Innovative Leaders, a statewide professional learning program that offers principals, superintendents and district leaders an opportunity for job-embedded professional learning experiences. Participants in the program had both face-to-face and virtual opportunities to work with trained facilitators and other leaders in a cohort of other Wyoming Innovative Leaders.

During these sessions, principals were guided through a planning process to produce a road map for transforming their school. Program components included:

- Developing a shared vision for personalized and digital learning
- Leading an effective personalized and digital learning transformation
- Building a strong teaching workforce
- Fostering a school culture that supports personalized and digital learning

## Practical Suggestions

As the PLLC has worked with and across rural communities to address the needs of schools and districts, several critical aspects of the work have evolved. From this work, here are four practical suggestions for improving professional learning opportunities at your school:

1. Consider developing regional professional learning networks to leverage economies of scale in rural areas where geography impacts face-to-face professional learning opportunities.
2. Build capacity of rural school leaders and teachers with the implementation of effective coaching models.
3. Develop school leaders and leverage the expertise of your teachers to create lead teachers who can share best practices and challenges with other teachers.
4. Develop policies and provide funding to support professional learning activities.

## About the Professional Learning and Leading Collaborative

The Professional Learning and Leading Collaborative (PLLC) engages educators and education stakeholders across the PreK-16 education system to develop, share and research innovative models and approaches that support the whole student. The team builds capacity, grows leadership, facilitates strategic planning and research, and coaches educators to implement personalized and digital teaching and learning to meet the needs of all students.