

Building Capacity and Expertise in Rural Areas

Insights From the Field

RACHEL JONES, MARY ANN WOLF, THERESA GIBSON, NANCY MANGUM, PATRICIA HILLIARD

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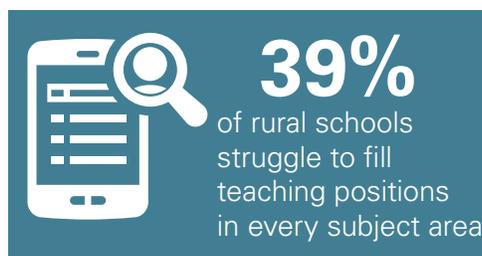


The Friday Institute for Educational Innovation (FI) is providing professional learning opportunities for district leaders, principals and teachers in rural districts, recognizing that rural educators need professional learning opportunities that may differ from their suburban and urban counterparts. The FI's work in Wyoming and Tennessee highlights how the creation of a professional learning cohort, professional learning networks (PLNs) and coaching can help rural schools and districts support principals and teachers to positively impact teaching and learning.

Why Do We Need to Think about Rural Differently?

As the nation strives towards educational equity, there is even more pressure to improve student academic success, reduce dropout rates and increase college-readiness. According to the [National Center for Education Statistics \(NCES\)](#), the majority of all school districts (53%) are in rural areas, serving over 9 million students. Over 80% of those rural students qualify for free-reduced lunch compared to 67% of their suburban counterparts ([NCES](#)). In addition to high poverty rates, rural areas have historically had a lower share of adults with college degrees, including postgraduate and professional degrees, compared to urban areas ([US AG report](#)). Further, the Economic Research Service (ERS) classifies 467 counties as “low education” counties—those where 20 percent or more of adults ages 25 to 64 do not have a high school diploma or equivalent. Recent data shows that 79 percent of these counties are rural. The [Rural Education at a Glance, 2017 Edition](#) publication states that educational attainment is highly correlated with measures of regional economic prosperity. Rural counties with the lowest levels of educational attainment face higher poverty, including child poverty, unemployment, and population loss than other rural counties. In addition to higher poverty rates, rural counties with low levels of educational attainment tend to have high unemployment rates.

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 that school districts have historically struggled to serve effectively. Rural school districts also find it difficult to recruit and retain qualified teachers. According to the article, [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% of remote schools struggle to fill teaching positions in every subject area.



Rural Educators Face Limited Access to Professional Learning

Rural educators often lack access to both formal and informal professional learning opportunities, especially face-to-face. Many teachers in rural areas don't have the opportunity to interact with their subject matter peers on a daily basis, as they are often the only person in the school building who teaches a particular subject area. Although coaching and mentoring is a proven professional learning strategy, rural school districts who are already dealing with staffing shortages, often don't have the human capacity to provide a coach in every school building. Another effective professional development strategy is the creation of Professional Learning Communities (PLCs) and Professional Learning Networks (PLNs). Research reported by the [Teacher Collaboration in Instructional Teams and Student Achievement](#) study states that teachers who collaborate in PLCs to continuously improve their practice and their students' learning experiences have a measurable positive impact in schools. However, educators in rural areas struggle to join PLCs due to geographic isolation and fewer colleagues in their specialty area.

Professional Development Solutions for Rural Areas

Through our work in Wyoming and Tennessee, the FI is helping rural school leaders build professional learning capacity. The FI knows that educators want to do the best for their students, and that they need professional learning opportunities to learn 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 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.



“ I’m a high school principal in a rural school district and I want to implement personalized learning for my students. My high school is the only one in the district and my nearest colleague is 50 miles away. I have researched different approaches for how to start the process, but I would really like to talk to other principals to learn about potential pitfalls and to glean best practices. Due to your geographical isolation, it is difficult for me to access relevant examples of personalized learning. What can I do? ”

–High School Principal

The FI understands that there is not a “canned” solution for all rural districts and schools and our 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. The FI’s trained facilitators work with superintendents, principals, teachers and coaches to engage in face-to-face and online learning opportunities. The FI’s work in Wyoming and Tennessee highlights how the creation of a professional learning cohort, PLNs and coaching can help rural schools and districts make a positive impact on teaching and learning.

Building Professional Learning Capacity in Wyoming

The Friday Institute designed the Wyoming Innovative Leaders, a state-wide professional learning program, that offered principals, superintendents, and district leaders an opportunity for job-embedded professional learning experiences that prepared educators to lead a transition to personalized learning. Participants in the program had both face-to-face and virtual opportunities to work with trained facilitators and other leaders in a cohort of Wyoming Innovative Leaders. The FI program was deeper than traditional professional learning because it:

1. Was job embedded: activities and plans are immediately applicable to your school
2. Provided time to make a plan
3. Accessed to data collection tools to drive decision making
4. Connected participants to a diverse group of districts and principals
5. Was based on a proven national professional learning program for leaders

During these face-to-face and virtual 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

“ I have become re-energized by participating in the program and have been able to voice and reiterate our goals for a Personalized Digital Teaching and Learning environment to my staff and to our local Board of Education. I have become even more knowledgeable of how to successfully implement change and have been able to better communicate the steps necessary to accomplish this change....

–Wyoming Principal

Initial Goals and Outcomes

During the initial face-to-face session, the Wyoming Innovative Leaders cohort established the following goals:

- Reconnect with Wyoming Innovative Leaders to share implementation status and strategies and garner feedback
- Explore topics generated by the network in order to deepen understanding
- Continue to reflect on our own leadership in order to plan for scaling our personal impact
- Understand polarities and how this research-based concept can be used to explore tensions in your school/district.



Steve Loyd talks about rethinking professional learning to leverage the expertise of the teachers in his district and to bring in the expertise of neighboring districts. <https://youtu.be/pWqSPImGC4M>

Creating Teacher Expertise through Coaching in Rural Tennessee

The [Rural Education at a Glance, 2017 Edition](#) publication reports that educational attainment levels are lowest in the rural South and higher poverty in the South is both a cause and consequence of lower educational attainment. This is evidenced in Tennessee where Rural schools face many

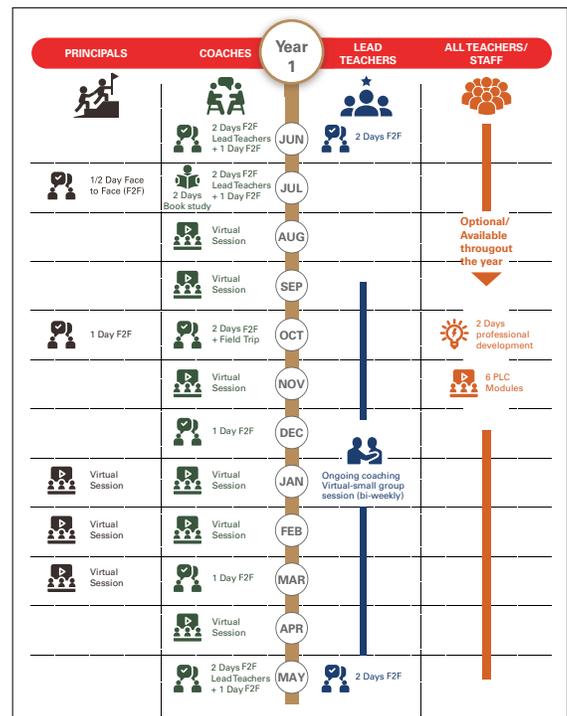
challenges that affect student achievement and success, including geographic isolation and difficulty recruiting and retaining educators (Tennessee SCORE, 2011). The Niswonger Foundation (NF) aims to address some of these challenges by making a positive and sustainable difference in education in Northeast Tennessee with the implementation of the Rural Literacy Initiative Focused on Effectiveness (Rural LIFE) grant program that focuses on improving middle grades literacy through personalized learning and effective literacy practices. The Rural LIFE program serves 18 school districts, 73 schools and approximately 19,700 students, 61% of those students considered high-need based upon their poverty level and 85% of schools are Title I school-wide. During the first year of implementation, the Rural LIFE program focused on establishing partnerships, onboarding staff, training coaches and lead teachers from 36 area schools, and creating school literacy plans. Each school completes a [Literacy Action Profile](#) plan by identifying priorities and aligning those priorities with four principles of personalized learning: personal learning pathways; learner profiles, competency based progression; and flexible learning environments. Priority areas include: strengthening literacy development across the content areas; literacy interventions for struggling readers and writers; school policies, structures, and culture for supporting literacy; building leadership capacity; and supporting teachers to improve instruction. With the guidance of their literacy coaches, schools began implementing their literacy plans last year. In the upcoming year, the program will onboard the remaining 31 schools and continue supporting the efforts of the original schools.

“Our goal was to create a culture of literacy where students see themselves as readers and writers and are excited to read and share with other students. Schools used different strategies, including expanding libraries in the classroom, creating after school or lunch book clubs to develop this culture of literacy.”

–Nancy Mangum, Friday Institute for Educational Innovation

As part of this project, the Friday Institute provided teachers with professional learning opportunities for lead teachers and academic coaches to improve teacher effectiveness and student achievement for students in grades 6-8. The FI also established a regional shared services support network to leverage economies of scale to support schools and districts. Educators received a variety of professional learning supports during the program. Principals and district leaders receive some face to face networking time; coaches receive quarterly face-to-face professional development, monthly virtual coaching, and just in time one-to-one coaching as needed.

Lead teachers receive face-to-face professional learning four times a year and focused coaching weekly. A big piece of the lead teacher professional learning is also that creation of a professional learning network. We recognize how important it is for rural teachers to be able to come together and to not only learn from the Friday Institute, but also from each other. Sharing best practices and challenges helps everyone figure out strategies to overcome those roadblocks.



Year One Timeline for the Friday Institute's work in Wyoming and Tennessee. Includes professional development activities for principals, coaches, leader teachers and all teachers/staff.

“As we are bringing these schools together, one of the most beautiful things in my mind is that we’re creating a network. Many coaches and teachers have talked about how powerful it has been for them to have a network of people that they can bounce ideas off of or plan with.

–Brooke Dinnon, East Ridge”

Considerations for the Future

Through the FI’s work with and across rural communities to address the unique professional learning needs of rural schools and districts, several critical themes evolved:

Build the capacity



of rural school leaders and teachers with the implementation of effective coaching models.

Expand the expertise



of your teachers to create lead teachers who can share best practices and challenges with other teachers.

Create regional professional learning networks



to leverage economies of scale in rural areas where geography impacts face-to-face professional learning opportunities.

Develop policies and provide funding



to support professionally learning activities specifically targeted for rural educators.