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Rural School Collaboratives: Key to Success?

One-third of all public schools in the U.S. are located in rural areas – more than in cities or towns.



Rural schools struggle to overcome obstacles like lack of Internet access and low teacher retention rates.

By [Lauren Camera](#)

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Rural schools face unique challenges that other schools don't, and for that reason many struggle with graduating students who are well-prepared to succeed beyond high school and help ignite the often already struggling economies in their rural communities.

But when it comes to policy recommendations and state and federal programs, rural schools are often overlooked despite the fact that 29 percent of all public schools in the U.S. are located in rural areas – more than in cities or towns, according to the [National Center for Education Statistics](#).

However, the idea of rural collaboratives – groups of rural school districts or groups of states with large numbers of rural schools that pool resources and research – could help schools tackle many of their challenges.

Last Year, Battelle for Kids, an education consulting group, partnered with Education Northwest, an education research organization, to identify and study 17 of those rural school collaboratives, which serve more than 400,000 students across 600 districts.



"For most rural school districts, collaboration is not a choice, it is a necessity," said Brad Mitchell, managing director of innovation at Battelle and the lead author of a [white paper](#) published this week that details their findings.

That necessity is borne in part because many rural schools face a long-term cycle of underinvestment and underdevelopment.

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Nearly half of students enrolled in rural schools live in moderate to extreme poverty. And geographic isolation and lack of state and

federal funds often hamper rural schools' ability to access things like Internet, which in turn keep many rural communities from being attractive and accessible places to live and earn a living.

One of the most challenging issues facing rural schools includes recruiting and retaining teachers. Long commutes and lack of public transportation often dissuade teachers willing to teach in a rural school, and geographic isolation of many rural schools means limited housing options and few job opportunities for teachers' spouses.

But Mitchell and his research team uncovered some major benefits of the collaborative strategy that have resulted in marked improvements for rural schools.

Among other findings, the paper shows that sharing resources helps rural schools meet education goals and objectives by providing access to programs and services that individual districts would not be able to afford and offer on their own.

For example, the Western Maine Education Collaborative offers graduate-level courses in partnership with the University of Maine-Farmington, which participating rural districts can tap for professional development in literacy or to learn how to use technology more effectively in classroom instruction. Under the partnership agreement, the collaborative covers 60 percent of the tuition costs while the university covers 40 percent.

The white paper also underscores the value of collaboratives that publicize their unique circumstances, especially to politicians and policymakers. The Wisconsin Rural Schools Alliance, for example, publishes an annual advocacy agenda and provides testimony to the Wisconsin Legislature in response to proposed legislation and its possible impacts on rural school districts.

In addition, the analysis highlighted the importance of tapping federal and state education grants that allow rural schools to cover the cost of programs they might not otherwise be able to offer. For example, through a federal Investing in Innovation grant, the Niswonger College and Career Ready Consortium helped schools expand Advanced Placement course offerings, assisted in paying non-covered dual enrollment fees, and provided college and career counseling to students.

Notably, however, [some recent studies](#) show federal programs, especially the School Improvement Grant designed to turn around low-performing schools, have had mixed results in rural settings.

The most commonly reported outcome across the collaboratives, the report found, is an increase in graduation rates. But other measures of success include increased college enrollment rates, increased ACT scores and elementary math achievement, and decreased dropout rates. And schools that participated in the collaboratives also reported greater success in school-community partnerships, in teacher collaboration and in influencing state rural education policies.

The report comes ahead of the implementation of the recently passed federal education law, the Every Student Succeeds Act, which includes new provisions aimed at giving rural school districts more flexibility in how they use funding and offers new opportunities to collaborate across district, and even state, lines.

"The 17 rural collaboratives we studied are examples of the power of collaboration to help rural districts overcome challenges of poverty, isolation and a lack of resources to move education forward for their students, educators and communities," said Jim Mahoney, executive director of Battelle.

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