



RURAL EDUCATION COLLABORATIVES: A CLOSER LOOK

The Ohio Appalachian Collaborative

Written and developed in partnership by:

Battelle *for Kids*

 education
northwest

THE OHIO APPALACHIAN COLLABORATIVE



Battelle for Kids (BFK) has thought deeply about, researched, and invested in rural education collaboratives (RECs). In 2015, BFK partnered with Education Northwest (EdNW) to study 17 of the most promising RECs across the country to learn how they are advancing equity, economic growth, and educational change for rural students and communities. Our research and lessons learned are detailed in the paper, *Generating Opportunity and Prosperity: The Promise of Rural Education Collaboratives*.

In addition, we developed in-depth case studies of four of the collaboratives—using in-person and phone interviews, direct observations of collaborative activities, and other research—including:

- [Eastern Shore of Maryland Educational Consortium](#)
- [Northwest Rural Innovation and Student Engagement Network](#)
- [Ohio Appalachian Collaborative](#)
- [Vermont Rural Partnership](#)

Each collaborative offers a unique characteristic that, when taken together, provides real insight into what it takes to advance rural educational opportunity—being well-grounded, well-designed, well-positioned, and well-timed.

There is great promise in rural collaboratives to help elevate the voice of rural districts; uplift and empower isolated educators, administrators, and students; and use limited resources to tackle big issues. Join us as we continue to lead, serve, innovate, and connect collaborative action that advances rural educational opportunity and economic prosperity.

The recent passage of the federal [Every Student Succeeds Act \(ESSA\)](#) signals a new era for innovative forms of state and local relationships in the relentless pursuit of educational excellence and equity. Innovation through collaboration is essential. BFK is committed to working with people and places across the country that want to make ESSA work for rural students, families, and communities. Our research on the value and impact of rural education collaboratives can help this effort.

ABOUT BATTELLE FOR KIDS

Battelle for Kids is a national, not-for-profit organization dedicated to moving education forward for students by supporting the educators who work with them every day. Our mission-driven team of education, communications, technology, and business professionals provides innovative services, solutions, and products that empower teachers, develop leaders, and improve school systems to advance learner-centered education and ensure the growth and success of all. Learn how we move rural education forward at bfk.org/rural.

OVERVIEW

The [Ohio Appalachian Collaborative \(OAC\)](#) was established in 2010 as a partnership between rural Appalachian school districts centered in southeastern Ohio and Battelle for Kids (BFK). These districts came together to address the challenges of educating students in Ohio's rural areas faced with low wealth, high costs for staff recruitment and student transportation, and child poverty rates well above the national average. The fact that these communities have few adults with college degrees also contributes to the stark mismatch between needs and resources.

From the outset, the OAC has focused on increasing aspirations and educational opportunity for rural students, leveling the playing field so that every student is prepared for success in college and careers. Through routine collaboration, OAC districts implement innovations, share and generate resources, influence policy, and promote economic development in their region. With funding from federal, state, and private sources, OAC educators work within and across districts and with higher education partners to implement a range of instructional and networking strategies that are building capacity and linking students to postsecondary and career pathways before they graduate from high school.

OAC AT A GLANCE

State(s)

Ohio

Year Established

2010

Districts

27

Students Served

48,000

Grade Level

6–12

Focus Area(s)

College and Career Readiness

Annual Operating Budget

Approx. \$1 million

FOUNDING

On a spring afternoon in southeastern Ohio, Jim Mahoney, executive director of BFK, loosened his tie as he stood to address a room full of rural school administrators. With one of the nation's worst economic recessions hitting hard and no promise of additional funds, Mahoney knew his message of doing more to increase educational quality and opportunity in the poorest parts of rural Appalachia would be a tough sell.

A major part of BFK's vision was, and remains, to leverage the collective resources of rural school districts to change not only state policy, but also educator practice, through innovation and collaboration. In fall 2008 and spring 2009, BFK held a series of meetings to test the idea of establishing a collaborative organization dedicated to growing education innovation and opportunity in southeastern Ohio. Led by Mahoney, a former county superintendent in the region, and Barb Hansen, a superintendent at the time who served on many different boards and had strong connections in the region, the meetings drew superintendents, principals, curriculum directors, staff from educational service centers, along with representatives from local colleges and universities. "I have no money, all I have is collaboration," Mahoney said to them. It was enough. By fall 2009, 22 local school districts representing 81 schools, 2,270 teachers, and 37,000 students became founding members of the OAC.

FOCUS

"Our goal is not just to get a student to graduate. It's really to set that student up for life. To make sure that student has the same opportunities that students in the large suburban districts have."

—Monte Bainter, Superintendent, Maysville Local School District

THEORY OF ACTION

With input from a cross-sector group of stakeholders, early discussions among OAC members generated an initial framework for the collaborative called the *Rural Education Transformation Approach*, unveiled in the OAC's first public report in 2011.¹ The framework places college and career readiness at the center of the OAC's

¹ Cross-sector stakeholders included representatives from BFK, the Coalition of Rural and Appalachian Schools, the Ohio Department of Education, higher education, business, and philanthropic organizations.

action agenda, driven by members' desire to raise expectations and expand opportunities for youth and communities in southeast Ohio. The approach is designed to marshal the power of collaboration, training, technology, and communications to activate improvement in six areas—teacher quality; leadership quality; community engagement; redesigned learning opportunities; data use to inform practice; and recognizing and rewarding excellence. The framework expresses the OAC's underlying theory of action: *If schools and systems are strengthened in these areas, students across Appalachian Ohio will graduate from high school with higher aspirations and be prepared for success in college, career, and life.*

EVOLUTION AND MILESTONES

OPERATIONS AND GOVERNANCE

In the OAC's first months, member superintendents signed a memorandum of understanding codifying their commitment to the collaborative. They also secured support from their local teachers' union, which was a membership requirement. As a group, members met several times in sessions facilitated by BFK to discuss how they would organize and ways in which the collaborative could benefit their districts. Initial conversations focused on "pooled purchasing"—going in together on orders for goods and services to qualify for discounts from large companies—and on using the power of the network to increase professional learning opportunities for staff and expand course offerings for students.

FUNDING

Though the OAC began with no outside funding, the collaborative quickly attracted public and private investments. In its first year, the OAC was awarded federal Race to the Top (RttT) and Teacher Incentive Fund (TIF) grants, making up two-thirds of the collaborative's operating funds that year. The remaining third came from grants awarded by philanthropic organizations, including the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation and the AT&T Foundation, as well as in-kind contributions from BFK.

BFK became the fiscal agent for the RttT grant and was responsible for overall project management. In this role, BFK worked with the OAC's districts each year of the grant to develop district-specific scopes of work and budgets to guide their activities. In the first year, the collaborative focused on formative instructional practices. Intensive training to build educators' ability to use value-added measures to inform teaching and learning was introduced in Year 2, and college- and career-readiness pathways and measures in Year 3. Change leadership was the focus in Year 4, though leadership development for superintendents and principals through regular network meetings was supported from the beginning of the collaborative.

In 2013, the OAC applied for a grant through Ohio's new Straight A Fund, a \$250 million state-funded investment in education innovation and improvement. The fund is designed to support ideas from local schools and districts to advance student learning and to achieve operational efficiencies. The OAC's collaborative structure and track record of managing multi-million dollar grants and large-scale implementation put the collaborative in a strong position to win an award.

MILESTONES

2009

- 22 rural districts become founding members of the Ohio Appalachian Collaborative

2010–2012

- The OAC receives federal Race to the Top and Teacher Incentive Fund grants
- The OAC Steering Committee forms as a representative group of districts
- The OAC holds its first face-to-face convening
- The Connectors Network begins
- The OAC strives to improve college and career attainment with dual enrollment programs (e.g., ROCHS, Ready-Set-College!)

2013–2015

- The OAC receives a \$15 million Straight A Fund grant
- Membership increases to 27 rural school districts
- Districts realize over \$260,000 in technology equipment savings through pooled purchasing
- Dual enrollment efforts see gains: student participation increases from 1,308 to 2,417 students; available dual enrollment courses increase from 41 to 236 courses; and the number of dual enrollment credentialed teachers increases from 82 to 156
- The Career Pathways System is developed
- The online dual enrollment course catalog goes live
- The online professional learning community begins

With RttT funding ending in 2014, and TIF in 2016, the Straight A grant was well timed. In early 2014, the OAC received the largest Straight A grant awarded in the first round—\$14.9 million over five years. Because the grant had to be awarded to a local school or district, BFK could no longer serve as the fiscal agent as it had for RttT and TIF. One of the original OAC member districts, Northern Local, stepped forward to administer the grant, a decision that was vetted by the other districts collaborating on the project.

In just a few years, the OAC developed governance and collaboration structures and increased capacity in districts to advance instructional innovation and college- and career-readiness goals (see Goals and Performance Metrics). High schools in four districts established a [Rural Ohio College High School](#) program, increasing opportunities for students to earn college credit in high school. Fifteen other districts started similar dual enrollment programs called “Ready-Set-College!” with funding from the AT&T Foundation. A few districts even achieved a 100 percent high school graduation rate (Battelle for Kids, 2011; 2014).

The OAC has grown to 27 rural districts—serving more than 48,000 students—including 17 of its original member districts and 10 new districts, several of which are located outside the southeast Ohio region.

STEERING COMMITTEE

To continue the OAC as a “member-led” collaborative under the RttT grant, BFK organized a stewardship group and a steering committee to advise BFK engagement leads throughout the collaborative. In the stewardship group, every district was represented by its superintendent; a smaller subset of superintendents served on the steering committee, which met quarterly and played a more active role.

Under the Straight A grant, the steering committee became a decision-making body. The committee now has a formal charter that sets forth its roles and responsibilities, organizational structure, procedural rules, and membership. Six superintendents serve on the steering committee with five representing regional networks of OAC districts called “Pods” (see below). As the Straight A fiscal agent, Northern Local School District’s superintendent also serves on the steering committee in addition to its Pod representative. The stewardship group, made up of superintendents from all 27 districts, continues to serve as an advisory group for the collaborative.

Three BFK representatives also serve on the OAC’s steering committee. The charter clarifies BFK’s role as a collaborating organization and the project and performance manager for “affiliated grants” (i.e., grants shared across the collaborative). BFK can make recommendations to the steering committee, but the committee members deliberate and make all decisions. BFK schedules and facilitates committee meetings, which occur monthly, either face-to-face or virtually via WebEx.

For Mark Glasbrenner, a senior director at BFK charged with leading the organization’s work with the OAC, shifting the steering committee into a decision-making role was a major step toward securing the collaborative’s long-term sustainability. “We had to do that to evolve the OAC,” he says. He also noted that decision making has not been easy for the group, especially at first. Glasbrenner expects the process will become easier with more practice, and believes the benefits far outweigh the costs. “It’s very time consuming ... but we’re working through it, and it’s the right way to do it [because] it creates ownership,” he remarked.

COLLABORATION STRUCTURES AND SUPPORTS

Under RttT, the OAC developed support systems within each member district and across the collaborative, utilizing the existing structure of District Implementation Teams (DIT) responsible for the district’s RttT scope of work, and coordinated the planning and implementation of specific grant activities. DITs were comprised of the superintendent, union president, principals, and selected teachers (e.g., Technology Coordinators and subject-area leads). Each district also identified a Collaborative Learning Practitioner (CLP)—a teacher, curriculum director, or principal with strong instructional background—tapped to serve as a local transformation coach. CLPs were themselves networked across districts. Together, they received training and ongoing support from BFK-based Collaborative Learning Leads (CLLs). They also collaborated directly with CLPs from other OAC

districts face-to-face and virtually, even visiting each other's districts to learn from their peers and assist in professional development.

PODS: REGIONAL NETWORKS OF SUPPORT

The Straight A grant prompted significant developments in how the OAC's work is organized and supported to increase capacity among member districts for sustained implementation and collaboration. DITs remain the core actors in planning and implementing improvements. To promote local collaboration across districts, the OAC's 27 districts are now grouped into five Pods or regional networks made up of four to seven districts that, for the most part, are geographically contiguous. The Pod structure is designed to encourage and directly facilitate the exchange of ideas, support, and resources across neighboring school systems (see Alea's Story).

Formative findings from an external evaluation by Ohio University researchers of the first year of the OAC's Straight A project revealed that, while the Pods experienced some communication challenges early in the process, "grouping districts into Pods by region is showing signs of a successful model for closer inter-district collaboration" (Hutzel, et al. 2015). For one district team member struggling with turnover and few resources, his Pod is an important source of support. He explains, "My counselor just retired, my principal is at another meeting, there aren't that many of us." However, pointing to others at the table, he adds, "We function pretty well as a Pod—we share courses across districts, we're doing some cool stuff."

Also under Straight A, a team of two professional development coordinators (PDCs) has replaced the CLP. Each coordinator is responsible for a project strategy (e.g., dual enrollment, blended and project-based learning, and pathway course development). PDCs are trained in Ohio's Learning Standards, formative instructional practices and assessments, blended learning, project-based learning, and student motivation. In addition, PDCs learn how to use the online professional learning platform powered by Schoology, the dual enrollment course catalog, Redbooth (a project management tool), and the OAC website.

Like the CLPs, PDC team members receive training from BFK's practice experts in face-to-face meetings and online. They then "turn around" what they have learned to train and coach teachers in their district. Unlike the CLPs, however, the PDC team also is responsible for ensuring the DIT meets at least four times per year; recruiting participants in and outside the school system to support

ALEA'S STORY: CREATING OPPORTUNITY THROUGH PERSONAL AND DIGITAL CONNECTION

Alea Barker was eager to talk about her work with the OAC. She has served as curriculum director for the Crooksville Exempted Village Schools for nearly 16 years, during which the district joined the OAC. In 2011, she became a Collaborative Learning Practitioner (CLP) to facilitate implementation of the RttT grant activities in Crooksville. Alea's experience and strong communications skills led the OAC to expand her role. She now serves on special assignment one day per week as a lead consultant and trainer for multiple OAC districts.

One of Alea's favorite activities is supporting a cross-district network of teachers called the "Connectors." The group first focused on personalized learning, exploring, and sharing ways to think outside the box and use projects and technology to expand learning opportunities for students. "It's a very grass roots coalition," she says. "We started by doing a weekly e-mail and then it just took off. People were asking, 'Can I be part of the group?'"

The Connectors eventually shifted their focus to the Common Core State Standards and adopted social media as their favored way to communicate. Alea launched "OAC tweet chats," which the growing group uses to share curricular and instructional resources. Alea is grateful that she now has the help of members of the OAC's Professional Development Council to lead the tweet chat, which recently exceeded 800 followers.

Alea describes tangible benefits of the OAC's effort to increase accelerated learning opportunities for rural students. She helped to establish a Rural Ohio College High School (ROCHS) program in Crooksville that enabled students to earn college credit while in high school. She recalled how students complained about how hard it was—"We were pushing our kids in our little, 1,100-student, K-12 rural school district more than ever before." With emotion, Alea then read a post that one of her students, now a freshman in college, had recently shared on Facebook:

"As much as I thought I hated the ROCHS Program in high school, I'm feeling very relieved today after meeting with my academic advisor. After this semester is over in a few weeks, I will be a junior in college! I'm so excited that I was able to get a whole year of college out of the way during high school."

As for Alea, the benefits for educators of cross-district collaboration through the OAC have been "unbelievable." She reflects, "For me, professionally—I say this to people all the time—this has been the best professional learning experience of my career."

improvement efforts; and collaborating with other PDCs in their region to coordinate professional learning.

ACTIVITIES AND IMPACT

The Straight A grant enabled the OAC to enhance and expand the collaborative's action agenda with a focus on college and career readiness. The collaborative has established common goals and performance metrics that include specific targets for increasing high school graduation and postsecondary enrollment rates (see Goals and Performance Metrics). To achieve its goals, OAC districts are pursuing activities in three main areas, with BFK's help.

DUAL ENROLLMENT

To increase access to dual enrollment opportunities, districts are using Straight A funds to purchase technology, increase the number of teachers credentialed to teach dual enrollment courses, create and/or expand partnerships with local colleges and universities, and develop an online course catalog so that students across OAC districts can take any dual-credit class offered by any OAC high school.

Straight A funds also allowed teachers interested in teaching dual-credit courses to take coursework needed for the credential, or to pursue the masters-level credits needed in their content area to become eligible.

In Northern Local School District, Sheridan High School installed Polycom, a video conference system. The new system enables students at Sheridan to take dual-enrollment classes in the River View Local School District 60 miles away. Other technology upgrades allow students in Sheridan's computer class to learn how to create an app for mobile devices. With their new tablets, students can check their work right away, accelerating their progress and increasing their engagement in the project.

Overall, the OAC realized more than \$260,000 in technology equipment savings through pooled purchasing. According to BFK reports, nearly two-thirds of the OAC districts (17 of 27) have significantly improved their technology infrastructure, increasing their capacity for classroom and online learning. Most OAC districts also opted to purchase laptops, iPads, Chromebooks, and interactive whiteboards, impacting nearly 320 classrooms and 13,000 students across the collaborative.

A survey that Ohio University researchers conducted reveals that OAC Straight A grant coordinators perceive dual enrollment emphasis as one of the biggest benefits of the grant. Two-thirds of teacher respondents (411 of 611) report that they have incorporated new technology, such as Chromebooks and iPads, into their courses and rank new technology resources as the biggest change so far in their districts (Hutzel, et al., 2015).

PROFESSIONAL LEARNING

The OAC has advanced instructional innovation and improvement in districts and schools through professional development initially focused on formative instructional practices and, more recently, blended learning

GOALS AND PERFORMANCE METRICS

The OAC's current overarching goals are to:

- Overcome the rural opportunity gap by increasing student postsecondary aspiration and preparedness and decreasing postsecondary costs through college credentials earned in high school
- Amplify the local talent pipeline to help fuel the resurgence of the local economy
- Establish a sustainable collaborative that can steadily grow to include other rural districts in the advance of Straight A aims—increased student achievement, reduced costs, and more resources focused on personalized learning

The OAC has also established clear performance metrics and targets for the five-year grant period, including:

- Raise the OAC average four-year high school graduation rate by one percent per year, from 92.2 percent for the class of 2013 to 96.2 percent for the class of 2017
- Increase the number and percentage of students participating in dual enrollment courses
- Increase the number and percentage of students achieving ACT college-ready scores
- Increase the number of students who earn an industry credential upon graduation
- Raise the percentage of students enrolling in postsecondary education by one percent per year
- Reduce the annual per-student college-cost burden through avoided tuition

(combining technology and teacher-based instruction) and project-based learning. A team of BFK-based content specialists for the OAC provide frequent on-site planning and implementation support to OAC districts. They work directly with the DITs to map out college and career readiness plans, and with PDCs to train and encourage collaboration among teachers to improve instruction.

“I’ve enjoyed watching some of the teachers try project-based activities, small group instruction, new technology—teachers trying new things and they’re really excited ... It’s exciting to see people become more motivated.”

—Jennifer Bohach, PDC for Switzerland of Ohio

To strengthen and extend capacity to support classroom teachers, the OAC is cultivating a supported online professional learning community (PLC) that connects and serves all 3,200 teachers across the collaborative. A team at BFK identified and installed a common platform (Schoology), began developing a series of online courses for teachers, and collaborated with a university to certify the courses for graduate credit. Using a train-the-trainer model, BFK also brought in PDC teams and Technology Coordinators from each district to receive training in the system prior to launch so they could provide on-site support in their schools.

According to Dr. Maria Boyarko, who leads the BFK team’s efforts to develop the online PLC, in addition to courses, the system also allows teachers to participate in discussion forums, and to share and access lesson plans, materials, and other instructional resources. For now, the goal is simply getting teachers logged into the system, but Boyarko envisions a vibrant and effective PLC will soon be underway. “The hope is they will collaborate, feel more supported, and have tons of resources at their fingertips that will make a difference for the kids they teach,” she says.

PERSONALIZED LEARNING PATHWAYS FOR GRADES 6–12

A priority activity for OAC districts under the Straight A grant is to develop Personalized Learning Pathways, also known as Career Pathways, for students that integrate rigorous academic instruction with curriculum and real-life work experience. In 2014, the OAC formed a “Think Tank” of individuals representing the region’s businesses, school districts, and higher education institutions to develop model pathways in four areas: Arts and Communications, Business and Entrepreneurship, Health and Human Services, and STEM (science, technology, engineering, and mathematics). Over the course of three meetings, the group drew from research-based models to develop a common pathway framework and template for districts to create their own pathways. Each pathway includes four components: course offerings; instructional strategies that support personalized learning; work-based learning, such as job shadowing, internships, virtual apprenticeships, and school-based enterprises; and career advising and counseling. By the OAC’s June 2015 convening, the Think Tank had produced [four model pathways](#), and 26 OAC districts had submitted 42 pathways they plan to implement in the coming year.

MEETINGS AND TOOLS

In addition to the steering committee and stewardship group meetings described earlier, the OAC convenes implementation teams from all member districts for a daylong meeting twice each year. With input from the steering committee, BFK staff develops the agenda, facilitates plenary sessions, and manages logistics. The 2015 convening focused on OAC goals and accomplishments under the Straight A grant. Participants learned from evaluation findings and were introduced to new communications tools they can use to build awareness about the OAC in their districts and communities. DITs were provided structured time for self-assessment and planning. Afternoon breakout sessions, co-facilitated by OAC district leads and BFK staff, allowed high school principals and counselors to discuss pathway development, while district PDC teams and curriculum directors met around professional learning goals.

BFK has also developed a range of tools to support district team planning, implementation, and assessment, including:

- Common district protocols for credentialing teachers for dual enrollment instruction
- Dual enrollment partner report card that districts can use to rate and guide current partnerships with postsecondary institutions
- Common survey to assess students' experiences of their dual enrollment courses
- Templates for districts to organize pathway courses by grade and subject
- Professional learning needs assessment and planning tool
- PDC team tracking tool
- [Dual enrollment online course catalog](#)

MEASURING SUCCESS

At the OAC's June 2015 Straight A meeting, Mark Glasbrenner reported measurable gains on the OAC's key performance metrics. Across the collaborative, from fall 2012 to spring 2015, the OAC saw:

- Student participation in dual enrollment courses had grown by 85 percent, increasing from 1,300 students to more than 2,400 students.
- The number of dual enrollment courses in OAC districts increased nearly six-fold, from 41 to 236.
- The number of dual enrollment credentialed teachers nearly doubled, increasing from 82 to 156.

For Glasbrenner and others interviewed for this report, one of the OAC's greatest achievements to date is the 12,699 hours of college credit that high school students have earned through the expansion of dual enrollment. "That's nearly \$2.5 million dollars in avoided tuition costs for our students and their families," noted Glasbrenner. "Kids are going to go to college who never even thought about it before ... They already have one to two years of college work that's been approved, [and] that's huge for us."

By making college a viable option for low-income students, OAC districts are "leveling the playing field" for rural students and their families. Chuck Rinkes, principal of River View High School, credits dual enrollment courses and new equipment with almost doubling the percentage of graduating seniors going on to a two- or four-year school, from 37 percent to 62 percent, in the last five years (*Hayhurst, 2014*).

Northern Local School District was selected as a case study site for a state-sponsored independent evaluation of the Straight A initiative. The first year report describes positive effects of dual enrollment on student learning. "Dual enrollment has raised expectations and rigor in all classes," according to the report. It also discussed how enhanced technology has increased learning opportunities: "...even snow days are less of a disruption since teachers can post assignments and students can continue to work online." One of the most striking findings in the report is a dramatic increase in family engagement. The report says, "One high school has seen College Night attendance grow from three families six to eight years ago to over 300 families this year, with most still focused on first-generation college students, because both parents and children are now seeing real potential for a college education."²

TRANSFORMATIONAL EXPERIENCES

For OAC leaders and educators, membership in the collaborative has opened doors to professional opportunities, resulting in higher expectations, increased confidence, and energized practice. For teachers, dual enrollment increases student engagement and motivation and earning dual enrollment teaching credentials deepens content knowledge and improves practice, as evidenced by the following quotes (*Hutzel, et al., 2015*):

² Ohio Department of Education. (2015). Ohio Appalachian Collaborative: FY14 Case Study Site Visits Year One—Straight A Fund. C H Smith & Associates, LLC. Evaluation report.

- “Students are more engaged, and it gets them familiar with technology which is crucial in the workforce today.”
- “It boosts their self-esteem and confidence. It gets them motivated for learning and college.”
- “There should be no dispute that an advanced understanding of the content makes a difference in the quality of a teacher. I am grateful for the rigorous program I am currently completing.”
- “Because I know my content better, I understand how to teach it better.”

For leaders, the OAC raises expectations, creates a proactive community, increases confidence, and amplifies the voice of rural educators, as indicated in feedback from participants:

- “It’s raised the expectations for teachers, principals, and students. After six years, we look at one another and say ... I want my district to have that piece.”
- “It’s forced us into ... a proactive perspective rather than reactive. We can either invest in our future or have someone making our future for us.”
- “We’ve been required to self-inventory our technology and become advocates for ourselves in dual enrollment as a result of the OAC. We’ve also had to think about our PD in the long term.”
- “I’ve been in one district my entire career. I wouldn’t know anything about any of these other districts without the OAC. I know I can call someone. The relationship piece is huge.”
- “We didn’t have a voice really. Our 2,300 students are not a population, 24,000 are. It’s given us a voice and opportunity.”
- “We’re on the front end/cutting edge of things. If we didn’t have [the OAC] we wouldn’t have the same opportunities because we are so small.”
- “It has definitely created a sense of hope in the community, as well as the schools.”

GREATEST ACHIEVEMENTS

In a focus group of six OAC superintendents, the participants shared what they considered the OAC’s greatest achievements to date, including:

- Opportunities for underserved children
- Increased college access and aspiration
- Collaboration
- Ideas and resources
- Higher expectations
- Leadership opportunities for teachers in the field

LESSONS LEARNED

LOCAL LEADERSHIP

When asked what advice they would give others about starting a rural education collaborative, Jim Mahoney and Barb Hansen agree—local leadership matters. Mahoney and Hansen’s early arguments for creating a collaborative resonated with superintendents in southeast Ohio because each had deep roots in the region and first-hand experience with the challenges of operating rural schools. “It has to be a native bell cow, or cows,” said Mahoney. “It just doesn’t work from the outside.” Hansen emphasizes the importance of understanding not only the challenges of rural education, but also the strengths that rural communities bring. The mindset of “helping each other out,” common in rural areas, is a natural foundation for establishing a collaborative, but leaders must be attuned to it.

SUSTAINABILITY

The OAC also had to address sustainability and BFK’s role in the collaborative. At the outset, the OAC was meant to be self-governing. In its early years, however, the RttT grant put BFK in the driver’s seat with member districts guiding the collaborative’s development only in an advisory capacity. This model raised the question of how the OAC would be sustained organizationally and financially once the federal funding ended. BFK could not sustain the collaborative on its own; OAC member districts would need to have “more skin in the game.”

Ohio's Straight A grant offered funding and flexibility, enabling the OAC to make important adjustments to its governance, fiscal, and collaborative structures to strengthen its capacity for impact and long-term sustainability. In a focus group interview for this case study at the 2015 convening, OAC steering committee members were asked whether the OAC is a "member-led organization." The consensus response was that it has transitioned to being much more member-led in the last year, because of Straight A.

BACKBONE ORGANIZATION

In the same interview, steering committee members also expressed a continued need for BFK's facilitation and coordination. Though no longer the fiscal agent for OAC's core grant, BFK continues to serve as the OAC's "backbone organization" which, according to Kania and Kramer (2011), is a key component of initiatives that succeed in having a collective impact on complex social issues. Brad Mitchell, a managing director at BFK who led the OAC in its early years, views the collaborative's development as a shift toward a "collective impact" approach. "We didn't call it that at the time," said Mitchell, "but all the elements were there." (See Collective Impact Approach).

CONCLUSION

By all accounts, the OAC is a thriving rural education collaborative. Members are excited about the measurable progress they have made in just a few years, and they are proud to be part of a collective that is raising aspirations and putting many more students on a college-going path. Leaders view the regional network structure, as well as the development of pathways and the online professional learning community, as major advances that will help close opportunity gaps for economically disadvantaged students and ensure that innovation and continuous learning occur in every district.

Elements of the OAC's success include funding, focus, member leadership, and maintaining BFK as the backbone organization that keeps the collaborative operating, communicating, and on course. The returns for students, educators, and rural communities are already evident and offer a compelling rationale for continued financial and human investment in the OAC and similar collaboratives nationwide.

COLLECTIVE IMPACT APPROACH

The collaborative work of the OAC is supported by research from Kania and Kramer (2011) and Hanleybrown, Kania, and Kramer (2012). This research outlines five conditions for collective success, which are demonstrated in the OAC:

- 1. Common Agenda:** Collaboratives must have a common agenda to remain focused and productive. In the OAC, this is embodied by the OAC Rural Education Transformation Approach.
- 2. Shared Measurement Systems:** The common agenda should be measured in common systems. The OAC's performance goals are focused on college- and career-readiness metrics, highly effective teacher metrics, and metrics around increasing student growth and student achievement.
- 3. Mutually Reinforcing Activities:** Maintaining a calendar of events and expected meeting times are activities that drive ongoing collaboration. The OAC has developed a system of support that regularly brings together teachers, principals, superintendents, and district leaders to work toward shared goals.
- 4. Continuous Communication:** Collaboratives must have a seamless method of communication and operation. In the OAC, this is driven by the system of support and the teams within districts that are charged with guiding and leading change.
- 5. Backbone Support Organization:** It is helpful for collaboratives to have third-party support to help guide the organization, making day-to-day decisions, guiding meetings, and gathering stakeholders around the cause. In the OAC, this third party is BFK.

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