



RURAL EDUCATION COLLABORATIVES: A CLOSER LOOK

Vermont Rural Partnership

VERMONT RURAL PARTNERSHIP



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

In 1993, Walter Annenberg announced a national \$500 million “challenge” for public education reform. A \$50 million subset of those funds was awarded to over 700 schools as part of the Annenberg Rural Challenge. One of those awards would enable then-principal Margaret MacLean to found the [Vermont Rural Partnership \(VRP\)](#), a network of 17 rural schools in central and northeast Vermont whose mission is “to promote student voice and engagement through authentic place-based learning¹ that celebrates the unique environment, culture, and heritage of each partner school and its community.”

Three years after the Annenberg Rural Challenge began, a program scout convened a group of Vermont principals (MacLean among them), teachers, and community leaders representing seven schools with innovative practices. Together, the schools identified strengths and opportunities to highlight in a grant proposal. The result of these conversations became the VRP’s four pillars—curriculum of place; student leadership; school and community partnerships; and assessment and documentation—which are integrated throughout the network’s leadership, activities, and school instruction. Truly embedded in its rural school communities, the VRP approach uses the local environment to create opportunities for over 3,000 students in grades Pre-K–12.

Each year, VRP members participate in several activities related to setting Partnership priorities; applying for and peer-reviewing project mini-grant proposals; administrative collaboration and learning; and sharing project achievements and innovations. Principals, teachers, and students commit their time and energy to the Partnership, and receive both tangible (elevated voice, increased capacity, and connections to people and resources) and intangible (courage, inspiration, and new possibilities) benefits as a result.

FOUNDING

While the Annenberg Rural Challenge scout brought them together, the first seven schools of the VRP quickly discovered commonalities. For example, each considered themselves “small rural,” meaning their schools were located in communities with between 300 and 1,000 residents. They received varied and often limited support from supervisory districts. Their staff played many roles in the district. They had strong community ties. Their communities were economically diverse, took responsibility for their schools, and took pride in their individuality. Finally, with their small size, each school operated using local voices and involvement to inform decision making. For perspective, the smallest school in the state has about 19 students. Coupled with the fact that about one third of the 280 school districts in Vermont have fewer than 100 students, it becomes clear that the context of small, rural schools is important.

The seven schools turned their common obstacles into opportunity and discovered a shared set of values. MacLean described the first meeting as each representative sharing his/her school’s strengths and stories about what made the school unique. The key foundational values that were apparent in each school were student

VRP AT A GLANCE

State(s)

Vermont

Year Established

1996

Students Served

3,000

Member Schools

17

Grade Level

Pre-K–12

Focus Area(s)

Place-Based Learning,
Student Leadership

Annual Operating Budget

\$90,000

VRP’S FOUR PILLARS



Curriculum of Place



Student Leadership



School and Community
Partnerships



Assessment and
Documentation

¹According to [vermontruralpartnership.org](#), “‘Curriculum of Place’ refers to an interdisciplinary curriculum woven from the threads of the local cultural and natural heritage ... it is a curriculum that utilizes a community’s resources, rich history, and local uniqueness to teach essential skills and concepts and stimulates discovery of the broader world.”

voice and leadership and community partnerships. Community members were involved at various levels in schools and offered opportunities for innovative student learning.

“The idea of being small and not having a lot of resources, that is, leveraging community resources to meet standards and goals that you want for students (it takes a village kind of thing) ... these schools were really good at that because they had to be. Because they were under-resourced in many ways.”

*—Margaret MacLean, Founding Member,
Vermont Rural Partnership*

Once the group established common ground and purpose, they worked with the Vermont Agency of Education to submit a grant proposal to the Annenberg Foundation. They received a five-year, \$563,000 award. After the first year of programming, the Foundation encouraged the group to obtain nonprofit status and operate as a standalone organization. MacLean partnered with content experts, educators, and administrators to found the [Vermont Rural Education Collaborative](#) (VREC), a network of non-profit initiatives to enhance and support rural education in Vermont. The Vermont Rural Partnership is one such initiative.

FOCUS

Using student empowerment, ownership of learning, and community partnerships as a starting point, the VRP identified four focus areas to address student needs: student leadership and voice; place-based learning; school and community partnerships; and assessment and documentation.

STUDENT LEADERSHIP AND VOICE

The Partnership’s first focus area helps teachers identify ways to organize students so they are more empowered and responsible for their own learning. VRP’s main partner in student voice is [Up for Learning](#), run by a former founding member and school psychologist. The student leadership focus emphasizes authentic, practical ways for students to learn and exercise leadership development skills. As one VRP leadership member summarizes, “It is the difference between having a student council and a council of students.”

PLACE-BASED LEARNING

VRP leadership define place-based learning as a student-centered, sensory-based concept that focuses on the immediate environment and place (town, town history, rivers, mountains, etc.). VRP’s place-based content expert develops ways to sequence “place” and helps teachers integrate it into unifying themes. For example, different grade levels focus on lessons centered on the local habitat. This is the “doing part in schools” because it quite literally connects teachers, students, and curriculum to the immediate environment.

FROM STUDENT OWNERSHIP TO STUDENT ADVOCATE: CARA COOKSON’S STORY

Cara Cookson, one of 20 class of 2000 graduates of The Cabot School in Cabot, Vermont, attributes her success at Mount Holyoke College to her quality high school education. “Every child at Cabot is special ... Cabot is part of my heritage, my family tradition,” says Cookson. “The school is the center of the village of Cabot, physically and metaphorically.” Cookson was an active student in several VRP initiatives. “That was a big deal in my social development,” says Cookson. “I was so blown away by the concept of rural being something worth investing in. As a young person, you get a lot of pop culture messages that living in a rural place is less than living in the city, that rural is a place to leave. So even though I had always been proud of my place and my family, it was important to me to have the idea cemented that rural is important—that there’s this greater cultural value to it, value that is shared.”

Cookson has been an ongoing advocate for rural communities and student voice at the national and state level. She was invited to help form a student leadership group and establish a national infrastructure around rural education issues. She stayed active with that work and the VRP throughout high school. “Having all those experiences helped me develop poise and confidence. It was a wonderful platform for me personally, for finding my voice as a leader,” she says.

Her passion for the community brought her back to Vermont after several years as a U.S. Senate staffer in Washington, D.C. Cookson is currently a staff attorney with the Federal Judiciary in Vermont, a former member of the State of Vermont Human Services Board, and VRP advocate.

Story originally published in the Vermont Rural Partnership newsletter.

SCHOOL AND COMMUNITY PARTNERSHIPS

VRP promotes connections between young people and adults through its school and community partnerships. Because schools in Vermont are the “hub” of the community, but 70 percent of voters do not have a child in school, VRP schools find creative ways to continuously engage the community and communicate the value and benefit of rural education—for example, using nature trails, town meetings, and highlighting environmental issues.

ASSESSMENT AND DOCUMENTATION

The VRP emphasizes “being able to tell your story well” and members publish documentation online that includes member-created curriculum, reflections, and youth/community interactions as a way to continuously inspire the network. For example, some schools have used innovative approaches to progress reporting, using narratives to describe student growth and development as compared to report cards. Member schools have also shared project tools such as storytelling processes and place-based learning assessment rubrics.

THE VALUE OF THE VRP

The value of VRP membership is multi-dimensional. Schools are able to access resources as a collaborative that they could not reach individually. The VRP provides additional capacity for fund seeking, shared professional development, and targeted projects based on student needs. As a result of VRP-funded projects, some school teachers have received national attention that led to international opportunities. For example, a few teachers participated in the [Global Teacher Fellowship](#), sponsored by the Rural School and Community Trust, which allows rural instructors to travel, study abroad, and bring experiences back to their students.

The mini grant peer-review process is an excellent opportunity for sharing and professional development with “people who understand,” which rural educators may not typically experience. One principal describes the difference reviewing with his peers makes:

“There’s great value because it’s not just a couple of people sitting in a room saying yay or nay, and then writing that narrative feedback. It’s a real discussion and a kind of excitement to say, ‘Wow, I never thought about doing that ...’ And reading [the proposals], and discussing them, and hearing about them really is a value-added of the work as well.”

While it is typical for educators to write grants for their own schools, there are opportunities to collaborate on projects with other VRP schools. For example, two nearby schools co-wrote a grant proposal and incorporated similar programs in their buildings. Students simultaneously developed, conducted, and analyzed a climate study of their schools. Throughout the process, the projects “exchanged” groups so that students could compare experiences. “We decided to nurture student voice that way,” one of the principals stated. “There’s some energy and excitement behind collaborating that way—there’s pressure for both schools.” When asked what value collaboration and mutually reinforcing activities held for his school, the principal remarked, “The more that we can collaborate, the more learning and free exchange of ideas and projects ... things that are sometimes not measurable.”

A PLACE-BASED CELEBRATION: FAYSTON SCHOOL 50TH ANNIVERSARY

Fayston School principal, Mr. Berthume, shared how VRP support helped his school design, implement, and record a celebration of the school with the entire community.

“Our first year in VRP, we held a celebration of the 50th anniversary of our school. We did a variety of activities that culminated in a huge community celebration around the evolution of our school. Students told stories and made videos of what schooling was like before Fayston. Third and fourth graders did a StoryCorps piece like National Public Radio. We worked with the Folk Life Center and trained students to interview people with experiences in Fayston from its beginning to current day.

“We threw a really nice community celebration, where we shared the student learning with the broader community and called it a red carpet event. The staff and students really contributed their views on how they could get involved in the celebration. It was about being able to learn and it blended celebration and learning. I’m always looking for opportunities for kids to have a chance to exhibit learnings with an audience greater than their teachers or peers.”

EVOLUTION AND MILESTONES

OPERATIONS AND GOVERNANCE

In the early days of design a horizontal leadership team organically emerged to guide implementation. The VRP leadership team is comprised of Executive Director Margaret MacLean, Place-based Learning Specialist Joseph Kiefer, Communications Specialist Eilleen Riley, and Shawn Gonyaw, a principal representative. The main responsibilities of the leadership team involve grant writing, coordination, administration, and communications. In addition to these technical roles, a content expert (place-based learning, student voice, food and nutrition, etc.) and rotating member school principal have historically served on the leadership team. Members meet monthly to design programming throughout the year.

Since its inception, the VRP has been deliberate about sustainability, so it purposefully stays small. Membership fluctuates slightly from year to year, but hovers around 15–18 rural schools. Recruitment is largely by word of mouth. On several occasions, a VRP member has moved to a new school, and the new building became involved. The lean infrastructure allows the Partnership to be more flexible and operate as a grassroots network. Initially, volunteers did much of the work, but contributors are now compensated on an ad hoc basis.

One major function of the leadership team is offering mini-grants to its member schools. MacLean scans grant opportunities on behalf of the Partnership, in which case the VREC acts as the fiscal agent, and distributes the funding to VRP schools. Some grants can be applied to the Partnership as a whole, while smaller grant opportunities may be more appropriate for individual schools to pursue.

ACTIVITIES AND IMPACT

The VRP leadership team holds four meetings for members each year to share information, plan, and collaborate around specific initiatives, including: 1) mini-grant announcement, 2) fall principal’s retreat, where school leaders gather to plan the year, 3) mini-grant proposal peer review, and 4) spring conference. The spring conference is a particularly exciting event because Partnership schools share updates on their mini-grant projects and students, parents, and community members are involved. The spring conference coordinator described the energizing atmosphere generated by the event each year:

“We had almost 200 in attendance at the 2015 spring conference, with students playing key roles as hosts, emcees, and workshop leaders. This is a day when all our schools gather with adult and student teams to showcase the work they have been doing during the school year. We have music, great food, outdoor workshops, and opportunities for students to share their expertise. It is a wonderful day, and we all leave feeling really inspired!”

Projects range from school gardens, to outdoor classrooms, to community or school histories. In general, a single school undertakes the projects over the course of the grant, but a few schools are creating innovative collaboration by working together. In addition to sharing projects, some educators within the VRP act as pioneers, exploring new ideas. “Those teachers who are the exemplars create prototypes and help others to see what’s

MILESTONES

1996–1997

- Seven schools form the Vermont Rural Partnership.
- Annenberg Foundation awards five-year, \$563,000 grant.

1998–1999

- Eleven new schools join the Partnership.
- A.D. Henderson Foundation awards \$500,000 grant to VRP.
- Student group organizes and hosts first regional event to showcase student voice and leadership.

2001

- First annual Learning in Place Conference “Sustaining Rural Culture through Place-Based Learning.”

2002

- Student-led event combines with Learning in Place Conference for second annual Learning in Place Conference “Voices of Hope: Youth in Partnership.”

2003–2007

- Three additional schools join the VRP.

2007–2013

- Documentation and communication support staff join the VRP.
- Up for Learning nonprofit established as outgrowth of student voice initiatives.
- Three teachers receive Global Teacher Fellowships.

possible,” a VRP partner shared. “With support of the VRP, they were able to carve out those prototypes.” Cabot and Fayston Schools are both examples of building innovation and creating value-added for other VRP members.

With so many diverse activities occurring in schools and across the Partnership, the leadership team measures success in several ways:

- Perceived benefit of VRP involvement among participating schools
- Alignment between the VRP, schools, and mini-grant project mission and goals
- Member awareness and level of participation in VRP activities (e.g., schools, principals, teachers, students, parents, etc.)

Margaret MacLean, the VRP executive director, also offers her own words of wisdom about reaching and recognizing success:

“Know the schools well. Get to know the teachers. Listen well and ask good questions. Know their needs. Have a vision of the possibilities and bring that vision and excitement to places. You have to be sensitive to how much you can expect; you can’t overextend teachers. Sometimes people disappoint us, other times people go over and beyond.”

LESSONS LEARNED

The VRP started as an organic, grassroots initiative to advance rural education by elevating the voices that are sometimes lost along the way. Rural Vermont school communities, especially students, have turned their immediate environment into opportunity using place-based learning. The long history of this collaborative lends itself to several lessons learned.

BE WELL-GROUNDED

Collaboratives must build strong relationships within and outside their member organizations. Leadership teams should listen carefully to constituents and provide quality ways for them to connect both in-person and remotely (blog, listserv, newsletter, social media, etc.). The VRP communications lead suggests, “Make sure you meet together and have fun at least twice a year. Get outside and really enjoy the rural places where your students live. Celebrate the unique heritage and culture of your place.”

DISTANCE MAKES A DIFFERENCE

Rural schools often deal with isolation. In a rural collaborative, this can pose many challenges. In the VRP, schools tend to work separately, and then come together and share experiences. Some schools are as far as 60 miles apart. However, a few neighboring schools have started building “true collaboration,” writing grants together and implementing complementary projects. Over time, VRP leadership has noticed that neighboring schools in the Partnership stay longer and participate more successfully. As a result, they are identifying “buddy schools” for some of the more remote members to keep schools involved.

WHAT ENERGIZES ME? CABOT SCHOOL CREATIVE PLAY TIME

When asked what energizes her most about participating in the Vermont Rural Partnership, Ms. Talamini of Cabot Elementary School shared the story behind a new student-designed playground.

“I get excited about the connection with other rural teachers. It’s hard to be in these places sometimes due to isolation. I teach Pre-K part-time and literacy intervention for the entire school. [As a team] we’ve been redesigning and finding creative opportunities for kids during play time. We also had a team of kids working on writing the VRP mini-grant in the fall.

“First, we met with primary students and middle school students and asked them to design the program. Then, we had our 3D planning design phase, where we asked students to look around their natural environment and try to build creations using natural materials. Next, teachers showed students pictures from Pinterest of natural play spaces, and students narrowed it down and had a vote of which they wanted to have.

“What’s powerful is seeing our students come together. Some of them don’t leave our town. So going to other schools to host and get to know one another is so exciting for students. It really opened up the heart of teaching—being part of the Partnership—because it gave us added support and connections and the desire to think outside of the box.”

KNOW YOUR LOCAL CHAMPIONS

Over the course of its many years, one VRP constant has been strong, consistent school leaders. Much of the work is influenced by the culture of schools, and the leader is pivotal in how the work is translated into the classroom. MacLean agrees that leaders play an important role:

“Connect people and resources. Get people’s excitement and energy up around trying new things. We keep the flame around child-centered work and tell educators they can do this! They don’t just have to go by the textbook. You can use what you have outside in your community. It’s about empowerment.”

THINK BIG, START SMALL

The VRP’s place-based content expert suggests thinking big and starting small: “You want to be successful and make things that are doable.” During its first few years, the VRP leadership quickly realized that many of the small schools had no capacity on their own to generate extra resources. As a Partnership, however, the rural schools found that it was very attractive to funders to support small, high-needs projects. Instead of applying for a grant to fund a single school at a time, the leadership team realized it could manage and oversee a \$50,000 grant, turn it into 18 different projects, and amplify its impact. As a result, the VRP built strong relationships with family foundations, which have been continuous network supporters. Collaboratives should consider the immediate concerns or issues that schools face and how they can address them in a learning context. VRP leaders also suggest thinking about how students can be engaged in problem solving and learning that benefits them, their schools, and communities.

STUDENTS EMPOWERED BY VOICE

The youth leadership work grew and developed into something greater than expected. Early on, students conducted an assets survey, analyzed the data, and shared the results in a community forum. There was a large amount of promotion of student voice at the elementary level. In addition, older students had the opportunity to participate in the grant review process. The Youth and Adults Transforming Schools Together Summer Institute that started in the VRP laid the foundation for high school transformation work, which would later branch off as Up for Learning. Finally, during the annual Learning in Place/Student Extravaganza Conference, students led workshops and told their own stories of the work. The VRP’s place-based content expert reflected on his experience with empowered students:

“Our first great achievement is elevating the voice of students. When I go to the conference, I observe all the workshops and see students given a chance to own their learning. It is unbelievable. I’m in ecstasy every year at our conference, because it really is students leading the day. And our feedback from teachers, from students, is always that we want to do more of this.”

CONCLUSION

The members and leaders of the VRP have maintained a sustainable design and structure, maximizing their return on investment. It is clear that the formula works for their schools, as more schools within the Partnership have shown interest in collaborating intentionally across buildings. With the education policy environment leaning away from test-centric instruction and placing more emphasis on social-emotional skill development, demand for VRP’s student voice practices may increase. These could be positive challenges for the four-member leadership team, but they must decide if meeting those demands is worth overwhelming current resource capacity.

VRP members shared several thoughts about the road ahead, suggesting that strengthening relationships between schools, incorporating network tools like social media, connecting with funders, and continuing to have quality face-to-face collaboration time with members are all strategies that will ensure future success. The VRP reinforces the collaborative nature of the schools in rural northeast Vermont, and the overall benefit of having the right voices tell the right stories.