RURAL EDUCATION COLLABORATIVES: A CLOSER LOOK

The Northwest Rural Innovation and Student Engagement Network

Written and developed in partnership by:

Battelle for Kids   **education northwest**

THE NORTHWEST RURAL INNOVATION AND STUDENT ENGAGEMENT NETWORK

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 [Northwest Rural Innovation and Student Engagement (NW RISE) Network](#) was founded in 2013 to support improvements in teaching and learning in rural schools in the Pacific Northwest. The Network was formed in response to requests by state education agencies (SEAs) for assistance in supporting the rollout of new state standards and other needs in rural districts where geography, small size, and limited resources present significant barriers to implementation. NW RISE is a partnership among SEAs in Alaska, Idaho, Oregon, and Washington; 18 rural school districts; and the Northwest Comprehensive Center (NWCC) based at Education Northwest. Education network experts at the Boston College Lynch School of Education also serve as consulting partners.

NW RISE brings together teachers and leaders from rural communities across the four states to share resources, exchange best practices, and collaborate to increase student engagement and achievement. Members participate in regular virtual and in-person convenings, job-alike groups, and joint projects facilitated through an online professional learning community.

Just beginning its third year, NW RISE is already making a difference. Network members—including school, district, state, and other education agency staff—report high levels of satisfaction with Network activities and transformative effects on engagement and instructional practice. For many members, NW RISE has offered their first opportunity to work regularly with educators who teach the same grade or subject:

> *"I'm the only teacher who teaches my subject in my school. It is so helpful to be able to bounce off ideas about lessons with these more experienced teachers."*

NW RISE NETWORK AT A GLANCE

State(s)
Alaska, Idaho, Oregon, Washington

Year Established
2013

Students Served
3,900

Districts
18

Grade Level
K–12

Focus Area(s)
Student Engagement

Annual Operating Budget
$450,000

FOUNDING

In spring 2013, SEA leaders in Idaho, Oregon, and Washington asked the NWCC for assistance in supporting their many rural districts. Across the three states, approximately 70 percent of the districts are rural and 40 percent are remote.[1] Their primary concerns were improving student engagement and achievement; attracting and retaining qualified teachers to remote areas; and supporting rural educators in implementing new state standards and assessments.

The SEAs knew from experience that geography, small size, and limited resources were major barriers to delivering professional development to teachers and school leaders in rural districts. SEAs themselves had neither the funds nor staff capacity to provide sustained, on-site support for standards implementation and continuous improvement efforts in every rural district. Even a professional learning community (PLC) approach designed to engage teachers with their peers in school-based collaborative improvement proved difficult to implement in small rural districts where educators were known to make rueful jokes about being a "PLC of one."

As one of 15 federally funded regional comprehensive centers, NWCC's purpose is to enhance SEA's capacity to assist school districts and schools through training and technical assistance. NWCC is based at Education Northwest (EdNW), a non-profit applied research and development organization based in Portland, Oregon. In response to the SEA's request, EdNW's Chief Program Officer, Danette Parsley, and NWCC Director, Mike Siebersma, proposed the creation of a professional development network that would link rural educators in a learning community within and across states. The idea was well-received, and NWCC formed a design team to develop what would become the Northwest Rural Innovation and Student Engagement (NW RISE) Network.

[1] U.S. Department of Education, 2011. Remote districts are defined as more than 25 miles from an urbanized area and more than 10 miles from an urban cluster.

The team spent a full year designing NW RISE with SEA staff. The design team soon expanded to include representatives from each state who formed NW RISE's initial steering committee. NWCC leaders also reached out to Andy Hargreaves and Dennis Shirley, education network experts in the Boston College Lynch School of Education, who provided both theoretical framing and practical network advice informed by research and field experience. Design team members examined a number of successful education networks (Hargreaves, et al., 2015) and identified elements that would serve as the "architecture" of the NW RISE Network, and an associated set of decisions related to member participation, focus, and leadership and governance (see below).

NW RISE NETWORK ARCHITECTURE: DESIGN ELEMENT DECISIONS	
SITE SELECTION AND PARTICIPATION	• Sites have a common structure (i.e., K–12 schools, single-campus LEAs). • SEAs invite LEAs (up to four per state in Year 1) to participate based on indicators of readiness (e.g., buy-in, willingness, minimum technological capacity, general capacity).
NETWORKING ACTIVITIES	• Combine in-person meetings (twice per year) with a robust infrastructure for distance networking, facilitated by technology. • Provide opportunities for virtual collaboration (e.g., monthly webinars, asynchronous discussions, role-alike projects). • Assign community manager to facilitate virtual collaboration. • Steering committee oversees continuous improvement of activities and makes adjustments as needed.
FOCUS	• Implementation of the teaching, learning, and assessment of college- and career-ready standards. • Role-alike groups prioritize, define, and organize around problems of practice (e.g., math, English Language Arts, technology use in the classroom, formative assessment).
LEADERSHIP AND NETWORK STEERING	• Steering committee establishes Network vision, gathers feedback from members, and provides guidance for design modifications. • EdNW provides network infrastructure support. • External partners share ideas and examples from other models.
RESOURCES	• Steering committee identifies opportunities to sustain the Network. • SEAs find existing resources and create incentives to participate in the Network (e.g., recognition and support; college credit, CEUs, PDUs; coaching; stipends).
NETWORK CITIZENSHIP	• Network leaders provide multiple forms of support as members engage and build capacity within their network. • Participants have a responsibility to engage in Network activities. • Established norms of Network citizenship, and share exemplars; community manager reinforces expectations, norms of online interactions. • Network participants take ownership of platform and initiate their own interactions and webinar presentations.
KNOWLEDGE CIRCULATION	• Steering committee creates and monitors documentation and communicates successes and lessons learned from Network activities. • Intentionally connect via existing state and regional programs and networks.

FOCUS

The NW RISE Network's overarching goal is to increase student engagement and achievement by creating supportive conditions for rural teachers and administrators to improve their practice. NW RISE is a "networked improvement community" that connects SEAs, districts, schools, researchers, and technical assistance providers in routine resource sharing, exchange of best practices, and collaboration to improve teaching and learning (Coburn, et al., 2013). It builds upon a substantial and growing body of international research indicating that educational change networks, when properly developed and led, build capacity to improve student achievement.[2]

For district- and school-based members, NW RISE focuses on developing and circulating "professional capital," defined by Hargreaves and Fullan (2013) as educators' capacity to:

1 access expertise and support (social capital)

2 know what and how to teach (human capital)

3 use judgement to apply knowledge and input effectively in practice (decisional capital)

For SEA members, NW RISE increases their capacity to directly support and sustain school improvement, and to disseminate best practices and tools more broadly to schools across their states. For students, NW RISE focuses on academic and civic engagement. The design team identified three outcomes of high-quality student engagement especially important for students in rural communities: academic achievement, community attachment, and empowerment.

EVOLUTION AND MILESTONES

OPERATIONS AND GOVERNANCE

Since its inception, NW RISE has been governed by an 18-member steering committee comprised of four members from each participating state (one SEA staff member, one district staff member, one school staff member, and one "other" member), three NWCC staff, and two partners from the Boston College Lynch School of Education. NW RISE uses the Network's "architecture" as an anchor for the steering committee's work and to track decisions and adjustments over time. NWCC serves as the coordinating organization for the Network, with responsibilities that include, but are not limited to, facilitation, logistics, identifying potential speakers, supporting schools in conducting monthly webinars, tracking participation, and hosting the online collaboration platform, Schoology. Partners at Boston College assist in major decision making and provide technical assistance and support. They also play significant roles at the semi-annual, in-person convenings, co-facilitating, and presenting on student engagement and professional capital.

The steering committee began as an advisory group for NWCC staff, but is gradually assuming greater responsibility as NW RISE's primary decision-making body. According to Matt Eide, NWCC's project leader for NW RISE, "the steering committee plays a very real role in setting the big picture vision for the Network" and is increasingly involved in determining the direction, priorities, and specific activities of the Network. Eide plans and facilitates all NW RISE steering committee meetings. Since the Network was formally launched in winter 2014, the steering committee has met monthly, though it now meets virtually every three months. Twice each year, the steering committee has met in-person for a full day following the semi-annual convenings of the whole network. During these in-person meetings, committee members engage in deeper reflection on successes and challenges to date, and big picture issues like Network strategies, growth, and funding.

MEMBERSHIP

SEAs take responsibility for recruitment, often in collaboration with member districts. SEA members on the original design team recruited the initial pilot cohort of nine districts. NW RISE has since doubled in size to 18 districts. All districts have either a single K–12 school, or at most two schools (one elementary and one secondary) located on the same campus.

[2] See Hargreaves & Shirley, 2009; 2012; Hadfield & Chapman, 2009; Hadfield & Jopling, 2006; Hargreaves & Shirley, 2009; 2012; Muijs, Ainscow, Chapman, & West, 2011.

SEAs used various criteria to recruit the founding districts—including cultural, linguistic, and racial diversity in student populations—aimed at reflecting the richness of heritage in the Northwest region. The SEAs also assessed schools' capacity and willingness to share their challenges and experiences with other schools and share student-level demographic and outcome data with Network leaders.

Until recently, the steering committee has been cautious about recruiting new districts, expressing concerns that getting too big too fast could erode the trust developing among members and affect emerging collaborative activities. NW RISE now feels stable enough that committee members feel intentional growth is both necessary and desirable to help diversify the Network and ensure that all participants have job-alike colleagues to work with.

Currently, there are no bylaws, membership terms, or other formal agreements to join and participate in NW RISE, though one SEA requires that its district members sign a memorandum of understanding (MOU). As the Network matures and transitions from its startup phase to a sustaining organization, NWCC staff expect that formal bylaws and other agreements will emerge.

MILESTONES

2013
- NW RISE founded
- Collaborative design period

2014
- NW RISE launched
- First steering committee meeting
- Job-alike groups started
- First face-to-face meetings
- Online community launched
- Collaborative projects started

2015
- Activities ongoing
- NW RISE expands to include Alaska districts

FUNDING

NW RISE is supported through a combination of federal, state, and local funds. The NWCC is currently the primary source of support, with funds going to Network operations and support staff. SEAs have supplied districts with small amounts to cover travel to in-person events. NW RISE districts contribute time "in-kind" for teachers and administrators to participate either virtually or in-person in meetings, job-alike groups, webinars, and other professional development activities.

NW RISE leaders recognize that members have few, if any, extra resources. Indeed, limited access to resources was a primary reason for forming the Network in the first place. They are optimistic, however, that the Network will become self-sustaining. Members are highly engaged and experiencing benefits, and more districts are expressing interest in joining. The steering committee has begun discussing funding models that will rely less on NWCC and more on a mix of grants and local and state contributions. "We want everyone to have skin in the game, [and we're] moving in that direction," reported one NW RISE leader.

ACTIVITIES AND IMPACT

NW RISE has pursued activities designed to build trust and respect among members, provide opportunities to share resources and collective expertise, inspire collective responsibility for student learning, and generate frequent and meaningful inquiry and networking opportunities among teachers and schools. Through face-to-face and virtual meetings, job-alike groups, and collaborative projects, NW RISE members explore and implement innovative, research-based, and promising practices to improve teaching and learning.

CONVENINGS

NW RISE convenes the Network twice a year for two-day, face-to-face networking meetings. The Network's kick-off convening was held in Seattle, Washington in February 2014. It brought together 45 participants, including rural school educators, district leaders, SEA leaders, representatives of state and federal programs, and Network staff. Participants learned about the purpose, goals, and structure of NW RISE, and heard from members of a long-standing rural network in Canada. Participants also met in job-alike groups for the first time, and received instruction on how to plan cycles of inquiry and improvement, and how to use the Schoology platform to facilitate virtual collaboration.

A common focus across all meetings has been to develop a deeper and shared understanding of student engagement, including theory, strategies, and practices. Members also are routinely asked to reflect on Network activities and provide feedback to NW RISE leadership. By June 2015, the number of convening participants had increased by two-thirds to 70 members.

JOB-ALIKE GROUPS

Job-alike groups are a priority strategy and a central organizing activity for NW RISE. Teacher members organize into groups where they have natural affinity, typically around a subject area or grade level. There are also job-alike groups for SEA members and a separate group for principals and superintendents. Members are encouraged to self-select into the group that makes the most sense for them, or even form a subgroup. Currently NW RISE supports 10 job-alike groups:

- Kindergarten–Grade 2
- Grades 3–5
- English Language Arts
- Math (High School)
- Math (Middle Grades)

- Social Studies
- Science
- Special Education
- Administration
- SEA

Network leaders have received positive feedback from participants and steering committee members about the job-alike group strategy. In particular, some members have found the time set aside for job-alike groups to be the most valuable aspect of the in-person meetings. One member explained:

> "I got a chance to work with a great partner. I now have plans to do something new in my classroom. I have every expectation that students will be engaged and will enjoy our plan."

NW RISE leaders are enthusiastic about how job-alike groups are beginning to work more effectively, increasing their potential to change classroom practice and outcomes for students.

> "They're [job-alike group members] still figuring out how to work together and in ways that address the project, but now they're starting to tighten it and move more directly and intentionally … Now they're starting to move towards changing what's happening in the classrooms."

COLLABORATIVE PLANNING AND THE ROLE OF SCHOOLOGY

Job-alike groups develop a collaborative project and implementation protocol using an inquiry and improvement cycle approach called SPUR™, which guides groups through four stages: 1) set the focus, 2) plan for change, 3) undertake change, and 4) recharge and sustain. Group members document their goals, strategies, and activities as well as lessons learned and ways to address them. Groups implement their plans and use online and face-to-face meeting time to review progress and revise their projects.

The SPUR process provides a helpful, concrete structure by which to guide job-alike activities. Michael O'Connor, an English Language Arts facilitator from Boston College, asserts that the guiding nature of the protocol has provided the job-alike members with "a roadmap, a structured guide that isn't used to impose or enforce, but rather guide our planning, implementation, and review of each job-alike project."

NW RISE uses Schoology, an online networking and collaboration platform, to support job-alike group activities and collaboration. While some groups limit their collaboration to sharing resources on Schoology, others develop joint projects to implement in the classroom followed by sharing successes and challenges with the rest of the group. Group facilitators assigned by NWCC are encouraged to prompt participation on Schoology and drive the momentum of group interactions through posting, sharing resources, and offering assistance in response to posted questions and challenges.

MEASURING SUCCESS

NW RISE leaders gather data on the impact of the Network through feedback forms, member surveys, observations, and anecdotal accounts. These data indicate high levels of overall satisfaction with Network activities and transformative effects on members. In 2015, Network members also piloted two survey instruments aligned to core network goals (student engagement and professional capital) with the goal of assessing progress over time.

PARTICIPATION AND FEEDBACK

To date, over 200 NW RISE members participated in the four in-person, Network-wide convenings in 2014 and 2015. Well over half provided feedback on the convenings they attended via exit surveys. Across all events and the three evaluation categories—objectives, quality/relevance/usefulness, design and delivery—participants gave the meetings very high ratings, ranging between 96 and 100 percent. Nearly all respondents reported that the event content increased their professional capital and their understanding of how to improve student engagement.[3]

In addition to surveying participants, the group also conducted interviews. In the words of two members interviewed for this case study:

> *"It's been a rejuvenating experience! Every conference, meeting people, people just like you. You can vent but then also talk about how we can help each other."*

> *"It's incredibly valuable! There is no other professional development that is situated to schools our size. I'm going on my sixth year of teaching, and this is by far the best conference I've done that helps me become a better teacher in this situation."*

Janet Bubl, a steering committee member representing the Oregon Department of Education, recalled an informational meeting to recruit a district for NW RISE. A district staff member was openly resistant to joining NW RISE. He did not believe the Network could help him and disliked that participation required heavy use of virtual communication. After his first in-person meeting, however, his attitude completely changed. "He's totally engaged [now] and really excited about getting ideas from other areas and other people like him," reports Bubl.

CHANGING MINDSETS THROUGH COLLABORATION

Rob Coulson is the social studies teacher at Powers High School in Powers, Oregon. He's also a social studies job-alike group member and a steering committee member of NW RISE. Rob also teaches 8th grade English, has six preps, serves as the district technical coordinator, and the list goes on. "You talk to anybody in a small school—there's nobody in a small school that does just one thing," he says.

Small rural school teachers do not always have opportunities to collaborate. Rob stresses that NW RISE *"…is the only chance to improve myself. It's very important to me because it's my only exposure to other people who teach what I teach and do what I do."*

Rob has found the in-person convenings to be particularly beneficial.

"I would say that every time I go, I come back with things that make my classroom better… On top of that, I get a chance to talk to people who do other things, and I bring back to my school things that other teachers can use and should know about."

Perhaps the biggest success of all is not a measurable outcome but rather the mental and emotional effect of participating in NW RISE. Rob considers this his biggest success, explaining, *"I think the big thing is getting a sense of what my place is in all this. I'm not just a cog. [I have realized] I am actually very important to this whole thing and what I do actually does matter. [Also that] within our schools, we have what we need to solve most of these problems, and that's not something I would have thought prior to all this. That change in mindset is a huge success."*

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[3] Following each NW RISE face-to-face convening, an external evaluator analyzes both quantitative and qualitative data from the feedback forms and provides a summary report to Network staff. Network staff, partners at Boston College, and steering committee members review the report and discuss what was well-received, what was not, and what, if anything, was missing from the event that can be added to the next virtual or face-to-face convening agenda.

OUTCOMES FOR TEACHERS AND STUDENTS

Access to new ideas and resources is a common theme when teacher members talk about their experiences with NW RISE. Teachers gain from the routine exchange with their peers in other districts, and from the opportunities to interact with experts from NWCC and Boston College. These experiences not only open doors to support and expertise, some members report a strengthened sense of purpose and increased confidence resulting from their participation in the Network (see Changing Mindsets Through Collaboration).

Another common theme is the energizing effect of Network activities on teachers as they collaborate and integrate ideas into their classroom practice. In one job-alike group, for example, members implemented a cross-state writing project that involved students from three rural schools in online peer editing. A teacher interviewed for this case study reported benefits for teachers and for students (see Cross-state Collaborative Projects).

NW RISE leaders also observed that participation in the Network provides leadership opportunities for rural teachers, including leading job-alike groups, serving on the steering committee, and facilitating and presenting in virtual and face-to-face meetings.

> *"Chris [Spriggs] is a good example of what we're talking about. Someone with a ton of energy, a ton of excitement … This is an opportunity for her to exercise some of those leadership muscles, without having to leave the classroom and become an administrator."*
>
> —*Mike Siebersma, NWCC Director*

OUTCOMES FOR NW RISE LEADERS

For Janet Bubl, Oregon's SEA representative for NW RISE, the Network is addressing states' needs to extend training and development opportunities:

> *"[NW RISE] has allowed us, as an organization, to better support the small rural districts. To put it simply, it gives everyone involved the chance to connect and exchange ideas and receive support."*

NWCC Director Mike Siebersma describes how SEA members have begun to see just how "far reaching" the effects of membership in NW RISE can be. More specifically, he describes how the Network can help address the challenge of attracting and retaining teachers in rural districts:

> *"At least from the part of our SEA colleagues, they're starting to see the Network as a powerful retention strategy for teachers in these isolated small districts. I don't know if that's how we originally envisioned this thing but I think that is a powerful outcome for this Network."*

CROSS-STATE COLLABORATIVE PROJECTS

Chris Spriggs is the only English teacher at Glenns Ferry High School, a 140-student high school in Glenns Ferry, Idaho. Chris' district joined NW RISE during its first year, and not long after she was asked to join the steering committee.

When asked what she felt has been the most energizing NW RISE project or activity, Chris shared her job-alike group's collaborative project. The goal was to create a cross-state writing project in which students from three rural schools met online to peer edit and work cooperatively as part of their English class curriculum.

> *"Glenns Ferry brought [the idea of the cross-state assignment] back to the district and all teachers feel that pride. We have teachers that have been on staff 30+ years and we're just now writing on discussion boards together. This helped create a lot of camaraderie in our school. I think it has made a tremendous impact."*

Due to the success of the cross-school collaboration in their English classes, Chris and participating teachers plan to incorporate a similar student-to-student collaboration in history, science, and math classes. Teachers are getting on board because they see the positive effects on student engagement.

> *"Having our students work that way together was a huge eye opener. The students tried harder."*

LESSONS LEARNED

BEING WELL-DESIGNED

When asked what advice they would like to give others about creating a rural education collaborative like NW RISE, Network leaders stressed the importance of intentional design. Danette Parsley attributes NW RISE's rapid evolution and success to the work of the original design team:

> "We learned from existing networks … about the best of them … and then created a network from the ground up to function and work that way. It's been a huge win."

For Matt Eide, early planning has facilitated the day-to-day work of NW RISE because it offered a clear operating framework:

> "We attend to the architecture of the [collaborative], that intentional design, and use that as a framework to get going and make adjustments along the way."

As part of the framework, leaders stress the importance of the steering committee with representatives in each group, citing it as "essential."

DEDICATED NETWORK COORDINATION

The role of NWCC as a coordinating organization is also key. NW RISE leaders have adopted the concept of a sustaining "backbone" organization from the collective impact literature (Kania & Kramer, 2011). Mike Siebersma explains:

> "Originally, we wanted to provide that scaffolding and then withdraw, but we're learning that without that backbone [organization], there isn't a network. The backbone is able to keep the passion and the mission, allowing the participants to use that to move forward while the backbone can also do the ongoing technical work."

CONCLUSION

While this Network is young, it is full of ambition and passion. Early successes have included a focus on intentional network design, bringing a diverse group of stakeholders together for Network governance, and providing multiple options for network engagement. Members have enjoyed the benefits of face-to-face meetings but also the options to connect virtually to colleagues in different states through online platforms. This kind of flexibility is a critical part of Network success, and bodes well for the future of NW RISE as it continues to plan for the sustainability of this growing and valuable network.

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