

A landscape of five wind turbines in a field at sunset. The sky is filled with dramatic, dark clouds illuminated from below by the setting sun, creating a golden glow. The turbines are silhouetted against the bright sky. The foreground is a lush green field with a dirt path leading towards the turbines.

Generating Opportunity and Prosperity:

The Promise of Rural Education Collaboratives

*“When the winds of change blow, some people
build walls, others build windmills.”*

-Ancient Proverb

Battelle for Kids

RURAL VALUES AND THE WINDS OF CHANGE



Windmills are icons communicating enduring rural values—ingenuity, thriftiness, self-reliance, and resilience. Today, these values are more important than ever. 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.



WHAT IS A COLLABORATIVE?

A collaborative is a group of individuals and organizations working together to increase educational opportunities and raise the quality of education in rural areas through a variety of strategies, such as:

- Sharing resources
- Scaling up and sustaining effective programs and best practices
- Preparing students to be college and career ready
- Communicating with and mobilizing stakeholders
- Advancing economic development

Innovation through collaboration is essential.

Over the last year, Battelle for Kids (BFK) has studied the most promising rural education collaboratives (RECs) across the country, and we made three fundamental, but not surprising discoveries.

- 1 The new realities of the global and American economies are decreasing rural economic opportunity and increasing income inequality.
- 2 The failure to properly invest in and protect vital public goods, such as education, make it difficult for many rural communities to survive, let alone, thrive.
- 3 Collaborative action through bold leadership is a necessity, not a choice.

Windmills have been replaced by wind farms full of turbines with blades up to 116 feet in length, generating more energy at lower cost. Rural schools and communities must navigate a similar transformation—producing greater educational opportunity and economic prosperity in a time of fiscal challenges.



The roots of American prosperity start with our bountiful and expansive land. Natural resources tied to agriculture, energy, transportation, and construction feed, power, mobilize, and build our cities.

Looking forward, rural talent and ingenuity are essential to facing global challenges, such as food and water security, energy independence, climate change, migration, unemployment, poverty, and public health.

We face two essential questions:

- 1 How can America compete globally without unduly increasing rural brain drain, decreasing local economic prosperity, and threatening the ecological vitality of our land?
- 2 How can we strengthen the rural economy through educational innovation, job creation, and wealth generation?

These questions require an honest look at how we invest in rural educational opportunity and economic prosperity. Schools play central social, institutional, and economic roles in rural communities. Smart investments in rural learning systems provide real opportunity for revitalizing rural America.

ESSA provides some real possibilities for helping rural schools and communities. It all starts with a clear understanding and collaborative action around the most essential dynamics shaping rural educational excellence and equity.



**Schools play
central social,
institutional,
and economic
roles in rural
communities.**



RURAL OPPORTUNITY AND PROSPERITY DYNAMICS



For many rural people and places, the future seems daunting—lower educational attainment, higher poverty, diminished civic institutions, greater health challenges, smaller property values, larger local tax burdens, and all the negative social dynamics tied to race, class, and income inequality. The following dynamics must be addressed.

1. OPPORTUNITY GAPS

More than 40 percent of all American schools are in rural areas, and close to one third of all students in the country attend rural schools. One in four of these students lives in poverty, but it is not uncommon for the child poverty rate to exceed 50 percent in rural communities. Eighty-five percent of the 353 persistently poor counties in the U.S. are rural (Cohen, 2014). Twenty-eight percent of rural people without a high school diploma live in poverty as compared to 23 percent nationally (United States Census Bureau, 2007; Brown & Schafft, 2011). The college enrollment rate for rural 18–25 year-olds is 27 percent—lower than the rate for any other locale (Provasnik et al., 2007).

2. DEMOGRAPHIC SHIFTS

Despite overall out-migration of population in rural places, we have seen an increase of four million rural students since 1999 (Strange et al., 2012). Eighty-three percent of rural population growth in the first decade of the 21st century came from racial and ethnic minority populations (Johnson, 2012). Simultaneously, populations in rural America are aging, and there has been a corresponding erosion of support for local schools.



85% of the 353 persistently poor counties in the U.S. are rural.



28% of rural people without a high school diploma live in poverty.



83% of rural population growth came from racial and ethnic minority populations in the first decade of the 21st century.

3. MIXED MINDSETS

Many rural places face a long-term cycle of underinvestment and underdevelopment (Corbett, 2010; Woodrum, 2004). There are significant structural disadvantages, such as limited administrative and operational capacity to meet federal education policy and student achievement goals, that often do not align with rural aspirations and realities. Some of these policies have disembedded rural schools from their communities. Research suggests that strong rural school and community ties can increase housing values, employment rates, and entrepreneurship, and decrease income inequality (Brasington, 2004; Lyson, 2002; Sell & Leistritz, 1997).

More and more policy leaders realize that rural investment policy is not just about agricultural investment policy. We need to move from an agricultural subsidy mindset to an investment strategy focused on growing human capital and access to financial capital. Geographic isolation and diminished infrastructure capacity, such as access to adequate bandwidth, can keep many rural communities from being attractive and accessible places to live, learn, and earn a living.

4. TALENT WARS

The global economy keeps telling young rural talent that real opportunity exists outside of their local community. Yet, according to the Rural High School Aspirations Study, most rural students who leave have a strong attachment to their home communities, and staying or going comes down to their negative perception of local economic opportunity (Schafft, 2014). Preparing everyone for a four-year college is no longer a universal imperative in a time when so many young college graduates are unemployed or underemployed with large amounts of student debt—an average of \$28,400 per student, including those who did not secure a diploma or a credential of labor market value (Bidwell, 2015). Diplomas are being augmented or displaced by more affordable skill-based, credentialed learning tied to clear employment pathways that pay off for the individual learner and the economy.

From healthcare professionals to staffing teachers in critical areas, such as special education, science, and math, too many rural places face limited access to human capital resources necessary to survive, let alone thrive. Rural schools tend to have a larger share of inexperienced teachers than their urban and suburban counterparts (Fowler, et al., 2013; Gagnon & Mattingly, 2012; Lamkin, 2006; Monk, 2007). The main challenges that new rural teachers voice include the inability to find employment in their hometowns; difficulty in understanding the community in which they work; feelings of social, geographical, and professional isolation; lack of resources; and an increase in work demands (Hardré, 2008).



Nationally, average college debt is \$28,400 per student.



Rural schools tend to have a larger share of inexperienced teachers than their urban and suburban counterparts.



A CALL TO ACTION



Rural Education Collaboratives are helping to...

- ⊕ Reshape the future of learning, livelihood, and well-being
- ⊕ Grow educator talent for local benefit
- ⊕ Make learning more productive

Following are three performance metrics that help clarify and strengthen future investments in rural education. They support an integrated, positive strategy for collaborative action to address rural prosperity challenges, such as opportunity gaps, demographic shifts, mixed mindsets, and talent wars. They also help us focus on implementing ESSA for optimal rural benefit.

1. ECONOMIC SELF-SUFFICIENCY

There are significant economic advantages to attaining degrees—greater lifetime earnings, gross domestic product and tax revenue, lower crime rates, and social service costs. However, degree attainment is not enough. Education for self-sufficiency is becoming essential as more Americans are creating their own jobs as freelancers and entrepreneurs in a more collaborative economy. Innovative rural schools can be a resource to advance employable and entrepreneurial skills that drive local economic productivity.

What is the impact of educational attainment initiatives, such as dual enrollment, digital learning, and more personalized academic/career advising on rural economic self-sufficiency?

2. EDUCATOR EQUITY AND ECONOMIC IMPACT

Economist Eric Hanushek has researched the impact of high-quality teachers on lifetime earnings for students. A teacher just one standard deviation above the average effectiveness can have substantial impact on lifetime earnings. For example, in a class size of 20, a high-quality teacher can generate gains of more than \$400,000 in annual future student earnings. Enhancing and keeping local student and teacher talent are vital for the future of rural communities. Many rural schools face growing teacher and principal shortages and real obstacles to student access to top-notch educators.

What is the impact of attracting, keeping, and leveraging educator talent for rural students, families, and communities?

3. LEARNING PRODUCTIVITY

Recent research on productive rural school districts demonstrates how to increase attainment and manage costs. We live in a time where technology enables any learner anywhere to have access to high-quality educational resources. Strategies, such as personalized learning, shared services, and flexible use of time, talent, and resources can increase opportunity, attainment, and local economic impact. Learning productivity shifts the focus from inputs to outcomes highlighting how to better use time, talent, and resources for individual learner growth.

How will personalized learner-centered education, including the use of blended and competency-based learning, increase opportunities and effectiveness in rural schools?

RURAL EDUCATION COLLABORATIVES: OPPORTUNITIES ABOUND



Let's look at some rural education collaboratives (RECs) that are taking on some of these challenges. Numerous RECs are working hard to advance equity, economic growth, and educational change. Battelle for Kids, in partnership with [Education Northwest](#), studied RECs in five ways:

- 1 A literature review of academic studies of networks
- 2 A comprehensive web search and document review to identify and collect basic descriptive data on RECs across the county
- 3 Conversations with leaders of RECs
- 4 Case studies of four different RECs from various regions of the country
- 5 A review of federally-funded RECs through the Investing in Innovation (i3) Fund and the Race to the Top-District programs

This is not a comprehensive documentation of what exists. It is merely a first step. Collaboratives are organic creatures—taking many forms with various challenges and life cycles.

Regardless of place and purpose, the RECs we studied share one common cause—the relentless pursuit of greater rural educational opportunity. There is no doubt that collaboration is a vital and pervasive part of rural education. The Appendix includes a high-level overview of the collaboratives Battelle for Kids identified through our national scan.



Collaboration
is a vital and
pervasive part of
rural education.



WHAT CONSTITUTES A RURAL EDUCATION COLLABORATIVE (REC)?

This is a tricky question. Due to factors such as geographic isolation, limited resources, and the need to implement federal and state policies that often tax local capacities, collaboration is an everyday necessity. In fact, various institutional frameworks support rural collaboration, such as regional service agencies and shared services consortia. These forms of collaboration were not included in this study, though we recognize they play vital roles. We are interested in informal and organic collaborative structures that are more peer-to-peer and network based. Drawing upon theoretical frameworks and research on how organizations can effectively work together to achieve collective impact, our criteria for selection identified collaboratives that are:

- ✓ Visible (easily located through internet searches) and currently active
- ✓ Committed to a common purpose that creates value for rural students and reaches beyond the missions and needs of individual members
- ✓ Well-organized and orchestrated through a member-led governance structure
- ✓ Focused on improving practice by establishing real solutions to defined rural educational opportunity problems at significant scale
- ✓ Established with viable sustainability indicators (e.g., stable leadership, strong and consistent member engagement, funding, and partners)
- ✓ Clear about intended outcomes and metrics of success

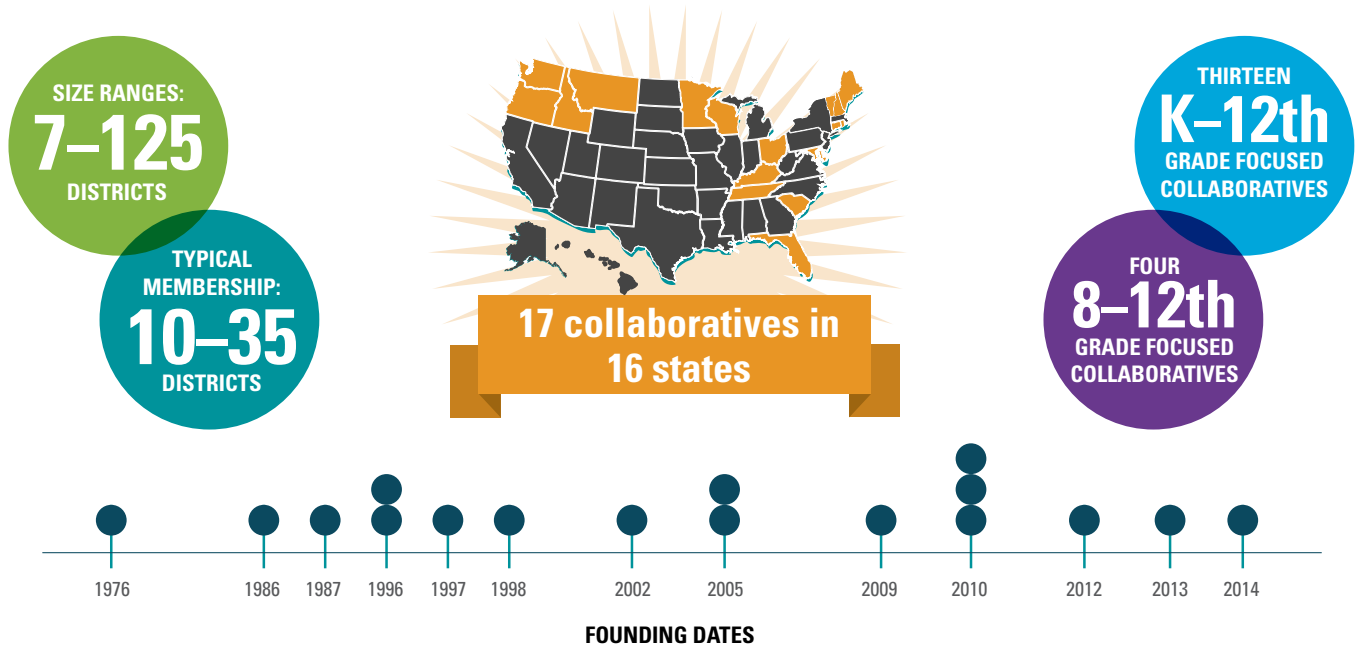
Our inquiry centered on the following questions:

- ⊕ What is the focus of these collaboratives?
- ⊕ What outcomes do they report?
- ⊕ What lessons can be learned?



**We identified
17 rural
collaboratives
in 16 different
states.**

THESE RECs ARE SERVING 400,000+ STUDENTS ACROSS 600 DISTRICTS.



See the Appendix for more information about these 17 RECs.

COLLABORATIVE FOCUS

Overall, identified collaboratives strive to increase educational opportunity and raise the quality of education in rural areas by using one or more of the following strategies:

- ⊕ Resource sharing
- ⊕ Advocacy
- ⊕ Curriculum design/scaling up programs and best practices
- ⊕ Preparing students to be college and career ready
- ⊕ Holistic/comprehensive approach to incorporating all four strategies

Resource sharing

Several collaboratives initially formed with the goal of strengthening operations by sharing costs, resources, and expertise. The goal of resource sharing is to improve student performance through effective and efficient use of human, fiscal, and technological resources. Sharing resources helps member districts to meet their educational goals and objectives by providing programs and services that individual districts would not be able to provide as effectively or as economically on their own. A few collaboratives have partnered with state universities to provide career development opportunities for teachers. The [Western Maine Education Collaborative](#), for example, offers graduate-level courses in partnership with the University of Maine-Farmington. These courses are made available to member districts in areas, such as literacy, differentiated instruction, and effective use of technology. This partnership takes advantage of a shared course agreement between the two organizations and allows for sharing of tuition expenses at the rate of 60/40 percent.

Advocacy

Advocacy efforts provide a common voice for districts across local and state regions by documenting and sharing stories and influencing policies in the state legislature related to rural issues. For example, several collaboratives issue press releases and/or policy briefs on rural education issues. The [Wisconsin Rural Schools Alliance](#) publishes its advocacy agenda on its website and provides testimonies to the Wisconsin State Legislature in response to proposed legislation and possible impacts on rural school districts.

Curriculum design/scaling up programs and best practices

Many collaboratives are formed to develop common processes involving curriculum, assessment, and staff development. Some have worked to create coherence across curriculum, instruction, and assessments to meet state standards. Others have researched, identified, and implemented best practices in the area of proficiency-based learning. Montana's [Golden Triangle Curriculum Cooperative](#), for example, has created curricula and assessment tools for members to meet district, state, and national standards. The [Northwest Rural Innovation and Student Engagement \(NW RISE\) Network](#) uses cross-district, job-alike groups to develop educators' capacity to disseminate best practices and resources related to implementing new standards.



The goal of resource sharing is to improve student performance through effective and efficient use of human, fiscal, and technological resources.

Preparing students to be college and career ready

Many collaboratives were formed to increase cooperation and coordination among school districts, other governmental units, and postsecondary institutions, with the goal of increasing college and career readiness. The focus is typically to create and identify flexible pathways to postsecondary institutions and careers. For example, through an Investing in Innovation (i3) grant, the [Niswonger College and Career Ready Consortium](#) has helped schools expand Advance Placement course offerings, assisted in paying non-covered dual enrollment fees, and provided college and career counseling to students.

Holistic/comprehensive approach to incorporating all four strategies

A few collaboratives intentionally incorporated all four of the strategies described in this paper as a basis for organizing. For example, through its comprehensive Rural Education Transformation Approach, the [Ohio Appalachian Collaborative \(OAC\)](#) focuses on implementing educational innovations that prepare all students for college and career success; sharing and generating resources; influencing local, regional and federal education and economic policies; and building a community that encourages rural prosperity in Appalachian Ohio.

The most commonly reported outcome across the collaboratives is an increase in graduation rates. Other measures of success include: increases in college enrollment rates, ACT scores and in elementary math achievement, and a decrease in dropout rates. Collaboratives also reported increasing school-community partnerships, changing instructional practices, increasing teacher collaboration, and influencing state rural education policies.



Measures of success: increase in college enrollment rates, ACT scores and in elementary math achievement, and a decrease in dropout rates.



LESSONS LEARNED

Some lessons learned from our inquiry align with other research on networked improvement communities (*Bryk et al. 2010*) and networks in general (*Hadfield & Chapman, 2009*).

<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	Bring the right districts together around a clear purpose and a common mindset to advance access and opportunity. Use collaboration as a means, not an end.
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	Remember that trust, personal relationships, and strong communication are important to make the collaborative work, especially in the early years. Share goals and encourage collective responsibility among members to achieve those goals.
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	Assign a person or organization to coordinate the collaborative to keep it focused and moving forward.
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	Use technology among many means of communication. Leveraging technology reduces the sense of isolation among collaborative members and offers meeting alternatives that help keep travel and face-to-face meetings to a minimum.
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	Have a clear strategic design and work plan and be nimble enough to exercise a just-in-time response to unexpected issues or opportunities.
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	Evaluate what is and isn't working.
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	Have a representative group of network members lead activities and make decisions to create high levels of ownership and ensure the network is relevant and useful to all participants.
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	Secure champions at the local, regional, state, and national levels.
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	Evolve the network to be able to address new issues and deal with potential threats.
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	Clarify continuously the value proposition for every collaborative participant—they get more than they give.

There are a few areas where many collaboratives face real challenges to securing public and private grants through rigorous and highly competitive selection processes. The primary reason for this difference, we surmise, is the lack of organizational and personnel capacity in small rural districts. For RECs to grow in influence and impact, we need to find ways to make them a more attractive investment opportunity.



Focus more on feasibility and less on fidelity. While a REC organized around evidence-based practices is ideal, it is often not feasible due to the costs, and the capacity and time dimensions associated with implementing these practices with fidelity. Collaboratives help implement evidence-based strategies in practical and locally beneficial ways.



Amplify and accelerate local innovation. We must work with policy and philanthropic partners to offer systems of support to help collaboratives strengthen district implementation capabilities. Dedicated time from participating staff, centralized project management and facilitation support, and effective communications are essential. Some collaboratives are too risk-averse to take on innovations that are not fully funded. Many, if not most, rural districts innovate out of necessity. We must figure out ways to foster the spread and sustainability of local innovations that are making a difference.

RURAL EDUCATION COLLABORATIVES: A CLOSER LOOK



Our four case studies range from a nearly 30-year-old collaborative on the Eastern Shore of Maryland to a Northwest Washington collaborative launched in 2014. The key takeaway is that these four collaboratives clearly fit their circumstances. 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, designed, positioned, and timed.

BEING WELL GROUNDED

In 1993, Walter Annenberg announced a national \$500 million “challenge” for public education reform. A \$50 million subset of those funds was awarded to more than 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 learning that celebrates the unique environment, culture, and heritage of each partner school and its community.



Building deeper understanding across students, teachers, principals, schools, and communities is essential.



Today, the Partnership 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 opposed to report cards. Member schools have shared project tools, such as storytelling processes, place-based learning assessment rubrics, and conference presentation artifacts.

Rural voice is strengthened through empathy, and the Partnership strives to create ways to build deeper understanding across students, teachers, principals, schools, and communities. Member of the VRP leadership team, Margaret MacLean observes:

“Know the schools well. Get to know the teachers. Listen well and ask good questions. Know the needs; have a vision of the possibilities and bring that vision and excitement to the 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.”

Due to financial considerations and a more than 20-year recognition that intimate connections are key to their success, VRP leaders have decided not to grow at this time. As one collaborative member states:

“We hope to strengthen the relationships between our current schools as one way to strengthen the partnership.”

BEING WELL DESIGNED

[The Northwest Rural Innovation and Student Engagement \(NW RISE\) Network](#)

was founded in 2014 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 meeting other needs in rural districts where geography, small size, and limited resources present significant barriers to implementation. NW RISE comprises 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.

Utilizing an inquiry and improvement cycle approach, job-alike groups design a collaborative project focused on a common problem of practice.



**NW RISE members
collaborate through an
online
professional
learning
community.**

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 convening time to review progress and revise their projects.

One principal notes:

“They’re [job-like 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 toward changing what’s happening in the classrooms.”

NW RISE was intentionally designed around research on the essential elements for successful networking, including:

- ⊕ Shared goals
- ⊕ Careful participant selection
- ⊕ Specified community managers to facilitate virtual collaboration
- ⊕ Focus on implementation of work that matters
- ⊕ Identifying resources to create incentives to participate (e.g., continuing education units, stipends, and peer coaching)
- ⊕ Establishing norms of good network citizenship
- ⊕ Connecting with existing communication networks and state and regional programs, processes, and assets

Original external network orchestrators thought they could recede by this point, but as they look to the future, they realize that collaboratives go through life cycles and there is still a need for external support. One orchestrator notes:

“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.”

BEING WELL POSITIONED

In the mid-1980s, with limited external resources and unpredictable year-to-year state support, the nine rural superintendents along Maryland’s Eastern Shore began looking for ways to do more with less. They recognized an increasing need to come together. Led by one of their own, the nine superintendents served as their own advocates to lobby state officials and agencies to address rural needs. As a result, the state legislature passed a bill to enable collective purchasing and other cost-savings methods among county boards of education. Thus, under the Annotated Code of Maryland, the [Eastern Shore of Maryland Educational Consortium](#) was founded in 1986 as an administrative entity to facilitate cooperative and joint programs among the nine county school boards.



**Job-like
groups create
collaborative
projects focused
on common problems
of practice.**

Initially, the focus of the Eastern Shore of Maryland Educational Consortium (ESMEC) was around advising member school systems about projects, programs, or services that would enable all Eastern Shore students to develop socially, culturally, economically, and most importantly, educationally. The nine school districts select projects yearly based on the needs of their staff and students; ranging from advocacy through educating decision-makers and administrative professional development, to leveraging vendor group rates for amplified cost savings. Dr. Jon Andes, ESMEC's executive director, sums up the flexible approach and why it has worked for more than 25 years:

“ESMEC is homegrown and authentic to what schools need.”

The Consortium provides a trusting, reliable network of support for its members. In a region where school administrators and teachers wear many different hats, ESMEC creates a safe environment to discuss common challenges and find solutions. Face-to-face meetings also play a significant role in trust and relationship building. One superintendent reflects:

“ESMEC gives me a place to talk to someone who understands.”

Early on, the Eastern Shore leadership team identified obvious strengths. Because each county's size and funding varied, ESMEC made relationship development a priority. Leadership leveraged its relationships, or created new ones with local agencies, community foundations, and Eastern Shore businesses to support the work of the Consortium. The community of support has been one of ESMEC's most valuable assets.

“We have a great relationship with the county commissioner,” notes a superintendent. Everyone is so giving, and that's the beauty of being on the Shore.”



**ESMEC creates
a safe place to
share common
challenges and
find solutions.**



The Consortium positions itself to be influential around policy and/or operational issues that are relevant to all members. For example, the Eastern Shore Energy Trust, established in 2001, was designed to save public funds through cooperative energy procurement. In that same year, ESMEC commissioned an economic impact study of public K–12 school systems to demonstrate the return on investment to Eastern Shore elected officials, business leaders, and parents.

Similar to the Vermont Rural Partnership, the ESMEC is not interested in growing. In fact, its annual operating budget is just around \$124,000, and the group feels that is about the right size to generate a big return on investment. As Jon Andes, ESMEC executive director wryly states:

“Most folks come for therapy, answers or both.”

This kind of common sense approach leads to longevity and lasting value.

BEING WELL TIMED

[The Ohio Appalachian Collaborative \(OAC\)](#) was established in 2010 as a partnership between rural Appalachian districts centered in southeastern Ohio and Battelle for Kids (BFK). The OAC formed in response to the challenges of educating students in Ohio’s rural areas where low wealth and child poverty rates well above the national average, and few adults with college degrees create a stark mismatch between needs and resources.

In fall 2008 and spring 2009, we hosted a series of meetings across Appalachian Ohio led by BFK Executive Director, Jim Mahoney, who was a former superintendent in the area. The aim of the meetings was to test the idea of establishing a collaborative organization dedicated to growing education innovation and opportunity in southeastern Ohio. The meetings drew superintendents, principals, curriculum directors, education service center staff, and representatives from local colleges and universities.

By 2009, 22 school districts representing 81 schools, 2,270 teachers, and 37,000 students became founding members of the OAC. 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. The remaining third came from grants from philanthropic organizations, including the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation and the AT&T Foundation, and in-kind contributions from BFK.

Today, the OAC has grown to 27 districts serving more than 44,000 students. Member superintendent Monte Bainter from Maysville, Ohio reflects that over the years, the focus has remained the same:

“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.”



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While the desired outcome has remained the same, strategies and tactics have varied to stay with, and often ahead of, the times. For example, while dual enrollment was not part of the original Race to the Top-funded work, the OAC is creating a shared dual enrollment system organized around personalized learning pathways that are greatly expanding access to educational opportunity unimagined just a few years before. Across the collaborative from 2012 to 2015:

- ⊕ The number of dual enrollment courses offered in OAC districts increased nearly six-fold, from 41 to 254.
- ⊕ The number of dual enrollment credentialed teachers nearly doubled, increasing from 82 to 156.
- ⊕ Student participation in dual enrollment courses grew by 85 percent, increasing from 1,300 to nearly 2,400 students.

The OAC is a thriving rural education collaborative. Members are excited about the measurable progress they have made in just a few years, and are proud to be part of a network that is raising aspirations and getting better results. Elements of the OAC's success include: remaining relevant, securing timely funding, maintaining an educational opportunity focus, promoting member-leadership, and partnering with BFK as the "backbone" organization to keep the collaborative operating, communicating, and moving forward. The returns for students, educators, and rural communities are already evident and offer compelling rationale for continued financial and human capital investment in the OAC and similar rural education collaboratives nationwide.



**The OAC is
a thriving
rural education
collaborative.**



WHAT'S NEXT FOR RURAL EDUCATION COLLABORATIVES?

First, RECs offer a viable way to overcome a deficit mindset policymakers and rural educators themselves often hold. On the one hand, it is difficult to be cutting edge and creative when you face daunting financial and operational challenges as poverty grows and the community declines. On the other hand, recent research shows that in most states, the most productive school districts or so-called super-high ROI districts (i.e., high achievement, low-per-pupil cost) tend to be remote rural districts (*Roza, 2015*). When looking closer at these districts, they are able to leverage their rural context to their advantage. They seem to tap local ingenuity in unique ways. Only six percent of published research in K–12 school settings specifically address rural issues in a rural context (*Hardré, 2008*), therefore much more attention is needed on what works in rural education.

Second, many collaboratives are on the cutting edge of the learning revolution. They are flipping the script on how learning can be more personalized and have a higher pay-off for individuals and communities. Specifically, many of them see that changing demand, cost, and technological trends are creating a learning revolution in five fundamental ways:

- 1 Unbundling and rebundling educational services and opportunities through new learning platforms that go across systems (e.g., dual enrollment, shared learning management systems, and skill-based credentialing systems)
- 2 Eliminating obstacles to professional isolation of rural teachers and principals through virtual practice networks and social media
- 3 Using personalized career pathways to reconnect rural schools to their local communities and regional economic development priorities
- 4 Blending place-based learning with new forms of competency-based assessment of cognitive and non-cognitive skills
- 5 Promoting active, participatory, and cooperative learning around real-world problems



Many of the nation's most highly productive districts are in remote rural areas.



Third, collaboratives can help make rural schools and communities more attractive markets for public and private investment. They can help mobilize action centered on seeing rural support not as a subsidy, but as an investment. The presence of big philanthropic investment in rural America is receding. A few years ago, one top foundation executive was widely reported to have said that the best strategy to help rural people who are struggling is to give them bus tickets to cities (Cohen, 2014). While we have various definitions of what exactly is rural, it is fairly clear that rural should never mean a place that is not yet urban. Rural life has been and always will be a strength of this country. The challenge is how to amplify and accelerate rural reinvestment. There are some promising signs.

Part of the Workforce Investment Opportunity Act is designed to help build rural human capital. The rural wealth creation work funded by the Ford Foundation is helping to change the optics on seeing rural places from an investment and not a deficit perspective. Some RECs essentially are creating “micro markets” in which participating districts can strike better deals with higher education partners, economic development partners, and educational vendors.

Fourth, collaboratives can help overcome the “square peg syndrome.” Few doubt that most of the educational and economic policy in America at the federal and state levels is overly urban-centric and does not always fit rural realities and aspirations. Often, rural schools will receive governmental funds to enact compliance, rather than respond to local need and/or opportunity.

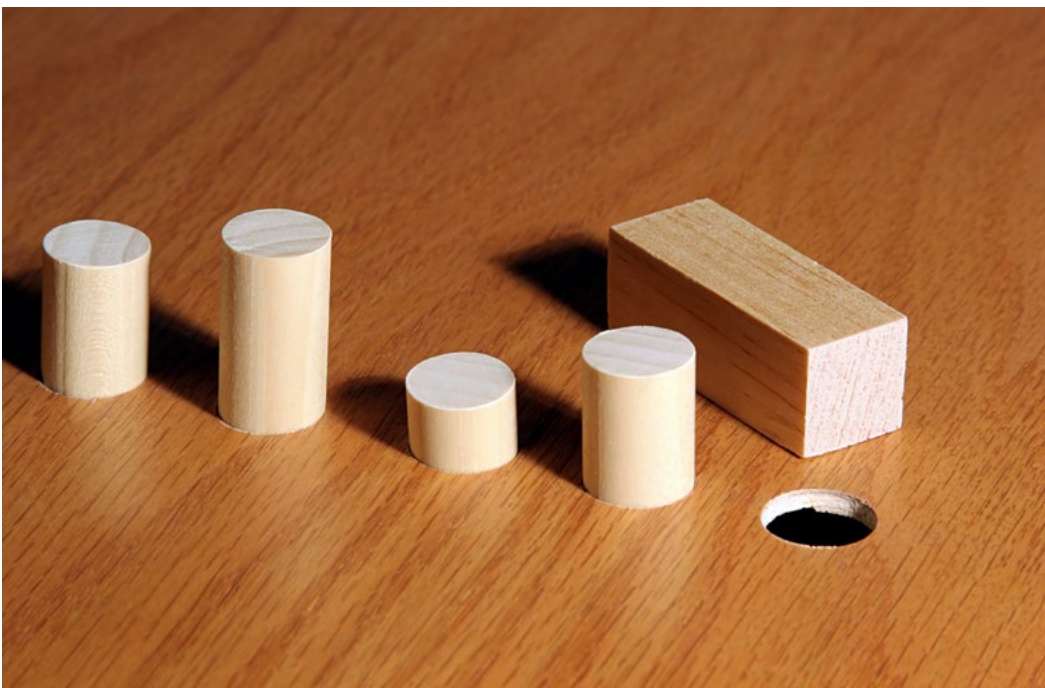
Too often, policymakers hear rural voices about resistance instead of voices for innovation. What many collaboratives realize is that instead of adopting a square peg resistance-based mentality, they are pursuing a more positive stance. Essentially, this means promoting a flexible policy framework that can adapt to specific rural strengths and needs, as well as promote economic self-sufficiency, educator equity, and learning productivity. ESSA ushers in an era that offers new opportunities and resources for rural schools to pursue solutions that work for them.



**Collaboratives
can help
make rural schools
and communities more
attractive markets
for public and private
investment.**



**The Every Student
Succeeds Act (ESSA)
offers new
opportunities
and resources
for rural
schools.**



HOW BATTELLE FOR KIDS IS MOVING RURAL EDUCATION FORWARD



LEAD

Change the rural mindset from a deficit to an investment perspective



SERVE

Secure resources to connect and develop rural education collaboratives and networks



INNOVATE

Solve critical rural challenges related to:

- Educator shortages
- Dual enrollment
- Personalized learning
- Learning productivity
- ESSA implementation



CONNECT

Grow the annual [Rural Education National Forum](#) as a 24/7 platform to connect rural collaboratives, leaders, and initiatives



Battelle for Kids has thought deeply about, researched, and invested in rural education collaboratives that are building windmills instead of walls. We honor enduring rural values, such as ingenuity, thriftiness, self-reliance, and resilience. We recognize rural innovation is historically underfunded and often lacks the capacity to scale. As shown in the four case studies from Maryland, Ohio, Vermont, and Washington previewed in this paper, collaboratives can be continuously creative, impactful, sustainable, and deserving of greater investment. RECs can generate great power when they bring collective force to innovations focused on opportunity gaps, economic self-sufficiency, educator talent development, and learning productivity.

As BFK continues to learn from and advance the cause and capability of RECs, we hold to three fundamental lessons:

- 1. Lasting change comes from within.*
- 2. Members of a collaborative get more than they give.*
- 3. Trust is the currency that matters most.*

There are many aspects of the new ESSA that are aligned with these three lessons—returning authority to state and local actors, incentivizing innovation through collaboration, and building evidence-based learning systems that fit unique circumstances in rural schools.

Battelle for Kids has hosted the Rural Education National Forum over the last several years to bring education leaders from across the country together



RURAL EDUCATION

*National Forum and 108th NREA
Convention and Research Symposium*

to discuss the ideas and challenges raised in this paper to move rural education forward. We're pleased to announce that this year, we're partnering with the National Rural Education Association (NREA) to host the [2016 Rural Education National Forum and 108th NREA Convention and Research Symposium](#), October 13–15, in Columbus, Ohio. Please join our efforts to lead, serve, innovate and connect collaborative action that advances rural educational opportunity and economic prosperity.

To learn more visit BFK.org/rural or contact us at info@BattelleforKids.org.



**Lasting change
comes from
within.**



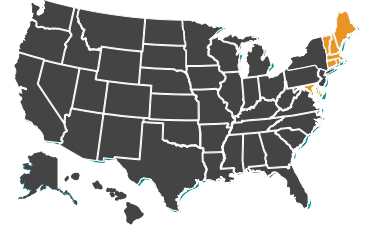
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APPENDIX: RURAL EDUCATION COLLABORATIVES AT A GLANCE

Following is a high-level overview of the collaboratives referenced in this paper along with their current focus.



EAST

EASTERN SHORE OF MARYLAND EDUCATIONAL CONSORTIUM *(est. 1986)*

A partnership comprised of the boards of education from all nine Eastern Shore of Maryland counties, promoting management efficiency and effectiveness.

Strategies/Activities

Administrator summer education conference; Aspiring Principals Institute; Energy Trust; and public education economic impact study.

esmec.org

NEW ENGLAND SECONDARY SCHOOL CONSORTIUM *(est. 2009)*

A regional partnership across Connecticut, Maine, New Hampshire, Rhode Island, and Vermont that promotes proven, forward-thinking design and delivery of secondary education to close persistent achievement gaps and promote greater educational equity and opportunity for all students.

Strategies/Activities

High school redesign; advocacy; common data project; proficiency-based learning; leadership briefings; and League of Innovative Schools (founded 2011).

newenglandssc.org

VERMONT RURAL PARTNERSHIP *(est. 1996)*

Seventeen schools in central and northeast Vermont that promote student voice and engagement for 3,000 K–12, primarily economically-disadvantaged students and celebrate the unique environment, culture, and heritage of each school and its community.

Strategies/Activities

Annual Learning in Place conference; mini-grants to schools; place-based curriculum; youth leadership development; and small rural school advocacy.

vermontruralpartnership.org

WESTERN MAINE EDUCATION COLLABORATIVE *(est. 2005)*

Twelve Maine school systems committed to collaborating with business and community partners who improve student performance through sustainable, effective, and efficient use of human, fiscal, and technological resources.

Strategies/Activities

Bulk purchases and facilitating logistics of professional development and platforms for standards-based customized learning (since 2012).

sites.google.com/a/mtbluersd.org/wmec/home

MIDWEST

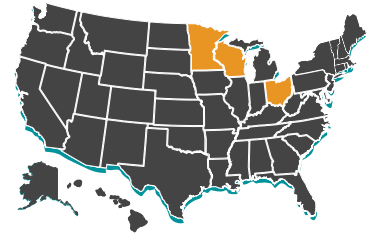
ITASCA AREA SCHOOLS COLLABORATIVE *(est. 2005)*

A Minnesota-based collaborative that intends to achieve education transformation and improve sustainable education outcomes through strengthened partnerships and cooperation, state-of-the-art architecture, integration of functions, and enhanced stakeholder understanding.

Strategies/Activities

Common assessments; principal evaluation system; Cognos-based data system; student success pathways; membership evaluation rubric; increased Telepresence use; shared services; and internal and external communications.

iasc.k12.mn.us



OHIO APPALACHIAN COLLABORATIVE *(est. 2010)*

An initiative of 27 rural Ohio school districts—serving more than 44,000 students—and Battelle for Kids, that have joined forces to develop and implement a comprehensive approach for transformational change in rural education.

Strategies/Activities

Rural Education Transformation Approach; career pathways, shared dual enrollment and professional learning systems; and an online professional learning community.

bfk.org/oac

WISCONSIN RURAL SCHOOLS ALLIANCE *(est. 2010)*

A combination of educators, school board members, rural community members, business leaders, and other concerned advocates who are working together to address the unique issues that rural Wisconsin schools face.

Strategies/Activities

Annual conference; public forums; research and best practices; advocacy (testimony to legislative committees); and scholarship program for graduating seniors.

wirsa.org

SOUTH

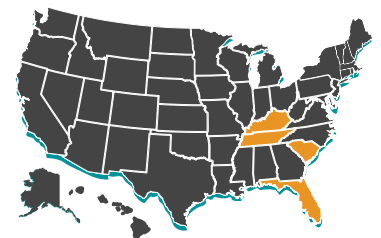
KENTUCKY VALLEY EDUCATIONAL COOPERATIVE AND THE GREEN RIVER REGIONAL EDUCATIONAL COOPERATIVE COLLEGE AND CAREER READINESS INITIATIVE (CR3) *(est. 2012)*

A five-year college and career readiness Investing in Innovation (i3) grant initiative in Kentucky that provides students with enhanced STEM-integrated curriculum education using WIN Learning Courseware.

Strategies/Activities

Career exploration and individual pathways; career and college readiness; soft skills training; and an annual Career Awareness Week.

college-career.org



NISWONGER COLLEGE AND CAREER READY CONSORTIUM *(est. 2010)*

An Investing in Innovation (i3) partnership among 30 Tennessee high schools, five colleges and universities, and the Niswonger Foundation to ensure all students at member high schools graduate ready for college or careers.

Strategies/Activities

Infrastructure to support technology-enabled classrooms; online course offerings; distance-learning; Advance Placement (AP) expansion; offsetting dual enrollment fees; STEM, career technical education, and professional development; and college and career counseling.

niswongerfoundation.org/partnerships

NORTH EAST FLORIDA EDUCATIONAL CONSORTIUM *(est. 1976)*

A group of districts that cooperatively meet educational goals and objectives by providing programs and services that individual districts in Florida would not be able to provide as effectively or as economically when acting alone.

Strategies/Activities

More than 30 general technical assistance, instructional, and technology programs and services.

nefec.org

WESTERN PIEDMONT EDUCATION CONSORTIUM *(est. 1997)*

An effort initiated by ten superintendents to make their South Carolina districts more efficient and effective.

Strategies/Activities

Sharing costs, resources, and expertise.

sc-wpec.org

WEST

EASTERN PROMISE COLLABORATIVE *(est. 2013)*

A collaborative aiming to increase the number of eastern Oregon high school students who are college ready by creating additional opportunities for students to participate in college-level courses and earn college credits and/or certificates while still in high school.

Strategies/Activities

Early college and dual-credit enrollment.

eastern-promise.org

GOLDEN TRIANGLE COOPERATIVE *(est. 1998)*

A collaborative focused on integrating a comprehensive process involving curriculum, assessment, and staff development to provide high-quality programs in Montana.

Strategies/Activities

Professional development opportunities; curriculum development; and assessments.

gtccmt.org

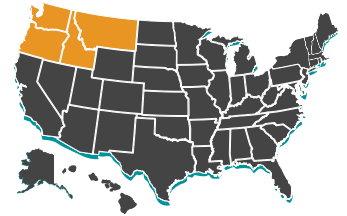
MONTANA SMALL SCHOOL ALLIANCE *(est. 1996)*

An alliance focused on providing professional development, research, resources, and technical assistance to help Montana's small schools meet state and federal mandates.

Strategies/Activities

Research; Montana Small Schools Professional Development and Curriculum Consortium; MSSA Standards Program; MSSA-MAP Testing Program; and affordable health insurance.

www.mt-ssa.org



NORTHWEST RURAL INNOVATION AND STUDENT ENGAGEMENT NETWORK *(est. 2014)*

A network that brings together educators from the Northwest's most isolated and remote communities to learn from each other, share collective expertise to meet unique challenges, and spread the best practices of rural schools in Oregon, Idaho, and Washington.

Strategies/Activities

Cross-school job-alike groups; semi-annual conference; consulting network; and collaborative instructional activities.

nwcc.educationnorthwest.org

RURAL ALLIANCE FOR COLLEGE SUCCESS *(est. 2002)*

A P-16 collaboration of Washington rural districts, higher education, and the college readiness community striving to achieve postsecondary program completion and career readiness for every student.

Strategies/Activities

College readiness, access, and program completion; sharing and replicating best practices; sustainable projects to address gaps in services and academics; data driven decision-making; advocacy; and implementing replicable and scalable model for rural school improvement.

ruralalliancewashington.org

RURAL EDUCATION CENTER *(est. 1987)*

A statewide cooperative of small and rural Washington districts, several educational service districts, and other key educational organizations committed to achieving the highest-quality of learning on behalf of children in public schools.

Strategies/Activities

Small and rural school advocacy at the legislative policy level; continuous improvement; resource sharing between member schools; and leadership network.

education.wsu.edu/ruraleducation/

BattelleforKids.org

We're passionate about collaborating with educators and sharing lessons learned to move education forward. Visit our Learning Hub to find blogs, publications, success stories, videos, and other free resources to support your work.

