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Rural Teachers Forging New Bonds—and New Solutions

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To counteract professional isolation, rural educators are forming cross-country networks of "job-alike" peers.

What does it mean for teachers to lead their own learning in rural schools? On the one hand, rural teachers form *organic* communities because they are absolutely dependent upon each other to play different roles. Rural teachers need each other to serve as custodians, bus drivers, and social workers for their students. In rural settings, everyone is a generalist. Many rural schools don't have a science or math department, but rather a single teacher who teaches both subjects. Some rural teachers work with students not for one or two years, but for all 12 years they are in school. Rural schools are ideal for teachers whose top priority is getting to know their students, who love wide-open spaces, and who prefer a different rhythm of life than what is found in cities or suburbs.

But there also are real drawbacks to being a rural teacher. If you've been to an education conference virtually anywhere in the United States, you've heard about how wonderful it is to collaborate with colleagues to develop lesson plans, visit each other's classrooms, and exchange feedback. But in small rural schools, despite the nourishing sense of community, there is the constant danger of professional isolation. You have plenty of *community* but not enough structured *professional learning*. Given the small number of colleagues, it might seem that there is no way out of what is an inherently limited situation, right?

Wrong! For the past six years the Northwest Rural Innovation and Student Engagement (NW RISE) network has been bringing educators together from Alaska, Idaho, Montana, Oregon, and Washington. NW RISE enables participants to build bottom-up "job-alike" groups so they can plan lessons across schools; develop shared curricula; and place students in direct contact with one another as writers, readers, and mathematicians. With assistance from experts at Boston College (who initiated and help facilitate the network in partnership with the Northwest Comprehensive Center), true *rural* professional learning communities have been formed.

Finding Common Ground

How does the NW RISE network function and how does it enhance learning? First, participating educators come together in-person twice a year. During these three-day meetings, they engage in community-building activities, share real-world problems of teaching and learning, and brainstorm innovative strategies. This work is done within PLCs or "job-alike" groups, which align educators in similar roles (such as 3rd–5th grade teachers, secondary science teachers, counselors, and administrators). Many of these rural educators are unused to collaborating professionally and come from locations that are thousands of miles apart. But once they start discussing their teaching experiences in their small communities, they find that cherished common ground they are searching for.

Second, for rural educators, the standard structure of in-school professional learning communities is useless. There just aren't enough colleagues! But a network like NW RISE helps to fill the gap. In addition to in-person convenings, these educators communicate across schools via email, Skype, and Schoology (an online learning management system) to facilitate collaborative projects throughout the school year. The "job-alike" groups are indispensable: Participants think of ways to enhance student engagement and plan curriculum activities. They connect their students directly to one another online and have them read each other's writing and offer constructive criticism. They plan their learning sequences following the Common Core State Standards so they have a shared point of departure.

Purpose in Partnerships

What does this professional collaboration look like in practice? One participant (Karen) teaches in a town of about 1,000 people in a remote part of Alaska. She lives a two hours' drive from the nearest hospital and airport. With only one road running through her community, there are more wild animals (including grizzly bears!) in her neighborhood than human beings.

Karen, who is in the upper elementary "job-alike" group, likes to give her students a say in the direction of their learning. After a recent class discussion about the Women's Suffrage Movement, one of her students, John, said, "*Students* should be allowed to protest. We should protest if we think school doesn't have a purpose."

The next day she asked John to tell her a little more about his thinking. He asked, "Shouldn't we understand the purpose of how we spend our time at school? Why can't we choose the classes or activities that we think are worth doing?" Karen told her students that they should constantly question the purpose of attending school and that responses such as "to go to college" or "to get a job" are limited in perspective. To address John's questions, she planned new activities, like having students watch,

discuss, and write about the documentary *Most Likely to Succeed*, which calls for an overhaul of the American education system.

How does this relate to the NW RISE network? Karen shared this story with her NW RISE colleagues and explained how John's questions helped her to better understand both the limitations and power of formal schooling for rural students. The group then discussed how students like to work with one another and how a sense of community can create meaning and purpose for them. So they decided to ask their students to collaboratively solve complex math problems and then go onto Schoology to illustrate and explain their reasoning to virtual peers in other NW RISE schools.

Karen and her NW RISE colleagues found that the simple reorganization of a class activity can go a long way. It gave the students a sense of purpose because they were developing their thinking skills together and wrestling to articulate their arguments in a shared language. At the same time, they were reaching out to others and forming online friendships that helped them to think deeply about what they were learning and why.

No longer were students just completing a task because their teacher designed a lesson plan. Instead, students developed their mathematical reasoning with excitement both within and beyond their classroom walls.

Hunting for Empowerment

As the only special educator in her school in Cusick, Washington, another rural teacher (Cynthia) advocated for one of her students with support from her NW RISE colleagues. Cynthia met Randy when he was in kindergarten and worked closely with him throughout the years due to his behavioral and academic struggles and family issues. There were moments when she felt helpless, like when she learned that Randy had to pick up his father from a bar late at night after he had been drinking heavily and that he had witnessed his father pointing a gun at his brother.

Before joining NW RISE, Cynthia focused on how to get struggling students through the education system to a diploma, but hadn't necessarily considered addressing their self-advocating skills. But spirited conversations with her NW RISE colleagues led her to realize that she could do much more for her students. In one discussion, a teacher in the special education "job-alike" group shared that she played a bingo game and led creative scavenger hunts to help students fully understand their Individual Education Plans.

When Cynthia tried these activities with her students, it empowered them to navigate the special education system and the trajectory of their own learning. For the first time, Randy began to understand

his disability and the full range of support that was available to him. Cynthia's heart rejoiced when Randy, who had always just complied with the dictates of adults, began standing up for himself and dreaming about what he wanted to accomplish in life.

What is Randy doing now? He graduated from high school two years ago. During this time, he was diagnosed with rheumatoid arthritis. But he now has the confidence to ask his doctors questions to ensure he understands the status of his health and prognosis. He has a job that pays a living wage with benefits and also coaches a boys wrestling team.

Every time Randy visits Cynthia now, she is thankful for her NW RISE colleagues. Working with NW RISE partners taught her that all educators, including rural ones, can benefit when given the chance to share common challenges.

An Interstate Writer's Workshop

A third example comes from Chris, an English teacher from Glens Ferry, Idaho. Chris explains that "When you live in Glens Ferry, you either own a farm, work on one, or work at the school." Chris is the only junior and senior English teacher in her district, the only teacher on campus offering dual-credit courses, and an occasional history teacher when needed. Given this workload, it's no surprise that Chris often has struggled with engaging all of her students.

So, with her NW RISE English Language Arts "job-alike" group, she started a project that connected students from Idaho, Oregon, Washington, and Alaska in an online classroom to write argumentative essays. Students edited one another's papers and provided their cross-state peers with constructive feedback on the various stages of their writing. Over the course of this three-year project, her students have written about and shared their thinking on the efficacy of one-to-one devices in the classroom, the morality of using drones in warfare, and the value of a college education.

How has this project with her NW RISE colleagues impacted Chris's students? First, it helped them find common ground with others. Although the students involved had never met offline, they quickly realized that their peers in other remote locations struggle with some of the same rural community issues, including poverty, drug abuse, and a lack of opportunities.

Second, the students learned to take their writing seriously. Their years of working within the same small school with classmates who are like siblings to them led them to become complacent about their written work. However, the addition of the other NW RISE students took them out of their comfort zones. Exchanging feedback on their writing with cross-state peers made students more accountable for their

learning. It allowed them access to a diverse range of feedback and knowledge. What's more, they got a confidence boost when their own feedback helped others improve.

Science teacher Mark Martin and his colleagues examine an abandoned wolf den during an inquiry-based staff training. Photo by Kaymbra Mortensen

Growing Engagement

Another curriculum innovation happened in Mark's classroom in Healy, Alaska. As the only middle school science teacher in his building, he was searching for new ways to engage students. When Mark brought this up with his NW RISE secondary science colleagues, they recommended sparking curiosity with inquiry-based problem solving. One of Mark's colleagues had engaged his students by making an aquaponics system (cultivating plants in water with life sources, such as fish, to provide nutrients). After much discussion, each teacher in Mark's "job-alike" group decided to build an aquaponics system for their classrooms.

Although most of these educators had never completed a project like this, as a group, they took a risk and found ways to support each other. They met virtually to modify their designs and set-up and committed to share similar plant species so growth rates could be more comparable. They also designed a new curriculum and learning experiences and agreed on the data students would collect and how students would share their work.

The buy-in from Mark's students was immediate. They were excited to engage in a project with so many layers and asked questions with genuine curiosity. Students explored topics about the requirements plants need to live, the interaction of biological systems, and the delicacy that diverse ecosystems demand in order to sustain life.

One of the key success factors in this NW RISE project was its multiple entry points for students. They engaged in inquiry, designing and engineering, and building the aquaponics system. Three previously disengaged students in Mark's class now took a sudden interest in science for the first time. They gave up their lunch periods and came in after school to work on the project. As they built the system, they persevered through challenges and owned their mistakes. This newfound enthusiasm spilled over to the rest of the project as they tried to get their plants to grow successfully. When it came time to share their progress with other schools, the class was excited, and these three students were at the front of the pack. NW RISE has given Mark a science department for the first time in his career. At every turn, he is supported and inspired by colleagues who are facing the same challenges, struggles, and realities.

Learning Together

While these stories show the benefits of rural educator networks, it's important to acknowledge that many challenges remain. When educators gather at NW RISE convenings, they realize how little experience they have standing up before colleagues and talking about their work. They can really sparkle in the classroom with students they've known for years, but when the moment finally comes to learn from and share with other adults, they find themselves in unfamiliar territory. Fortunately, these teachers also understand that everyone else is in the same situation, so they're patient and support each other. Another challenge for network participants is keeping themselves accountable to learn from each other and improve their instructional practices. They understand that as important as *community* is in a professional learning community, the *professional learning* component is the core of teacher-led learning. So, each "job-alike" group presents on its progress on individual projects at every biannual convening and receives feedback. In addition, NW RISE invites outside speakers to share new ideas and strategies. Processes like critical friends protocols are used to discuss problems and come up with practical solutions. Because participants believe in the initiative, they constantly strive to improve this unique rural network.

Despite some of the drawbacks, there are *many* benefits of teaching in rural schools. Rural environments often have stunning natural beauty. Educators become part of close-knit communities and rely on each other in good times and bad. They get to know their students well over many years, and their students' children become their students, in turn. But rural teachers need networks to help them not just look within, but also beyond their communities. Consider contacting NW RISE to learn more about how to build networks that will support *all* of our students.

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