



Collaborative Curriculum Planning Networks – US Pacific Northwest (NW RISE)

“We all live in the sticks.” These are the words of Martha, a high school English Language Arts (ELA) teacher in a rural school in Washington State, USA, about the network of rural school educators to which she belongs. Schools like Martha’s find it hard to get access to what can come so easily to teachers in towns and cities: other colleagues who teach your own grade level, share the same curriculum, or who can just come down the corridor to give some ideas, advice, or moral support if you’re having a rough day. But “in the sticks,” teachers often find they have to do pretty much everything themselves.

Twice a year, Martha and her colleagues drive over mountain passes and across state lines to get to places like Spokane, Washington, where she and teachers and administrators from other rural schools and communities convene for two days as members of the Northwest Rural Innovation and Student Engagement (NW RISE) Network. During their two-and-a-bit days in this small city, teachers from rural and remote schools in Alaska, Idaho, Oregon, and Washington listen to presentations and share ideas about their students’ learning. Most of all, and most of the time, though, educators will get together in what their own survey responses have indicated are their most valuable groups. These are job-alike groups of colleagues working with similar subjects or groups of students across their schools such as math teachers, kindergarten teachers, teachers of special needs, and school administrators. Opportunities to meet with like-colleagues are rare, which is why job-alike time in the network is so highly valued.

Student engagement, especially in rural schools, is the focus of the network. In the US, over 40% of K-12 schools are located in rural communities. 85% of the persistently poor counties in the US (ones where 20% of the population has lived below the poverty line for the last 30 years or more) are classified as rural counties. Other challenges of rural American communities include weak economic development, chronic absenteeism, low educational aspirations, poor achievement, and low high school and college completion rates.

In the US and elsewhere, student achievement is closely connected to student engagement. For teachers in the NW RISE Network, this means learning to work with and plan around what students and their rural communities have, as well as what they lack. And it means working with other rural teachers (and their students) to create the inspiration, ideas, curriculum, and assessments that can bring their students’ learning alive.

Chris Spriggs described how she, Martha, and another founding member of the ELA job-alike group got started. “We had decided that we really, truly wanted to focus on student engagement, but that we wanted to focus on authentic learning,” she told us. For their first project together, Chris and the other group members chose to teach their 9th to 11th grade students how to write and defend an argument. These arguments focused on local topics, such as 1:1 technology adoption in their own schools or drone policies in their home communities, and involved writing to an authentic community-based audience, like their school technology community or the state representative in their town.

Through activities like these, students learned about different genres and structures of writing, and about how to consider different writing purposes and audiences, especially in their rural communities. But most importantly, these writing projects connected the students across the schools, as well, so they could collaborate on their writing. Chris explained: the teachers “put the kids together, and then they [we]re given a common peer editing rubric that they use to give feedback and post onto *Schoology* [a digital platform] for their peers to read.” Connecting students with students and having them write to an authentic audience ended up being transformative. As one student said, “I took the project a lot more seriously. I thought I could be heard.”

The design of the NW RISE Network grew out of collaboration between State Education Agency (SEA) members and Education Northwest, with technical and strategic support from Boston College. Learning from global expertise and research on effective networks, the NW RISE Network was created to find better ways to serve remote, rural schools in their states. Danette Parsley, Chief Program Officer at Education Northwest says this work is grounded in a central belief:

We believe that teachers working with teachers is the most effective way that you can improve schools and we believe that teachers are professionals who have way more to offer to each other than perhaps they're ever given the opportunity to ever elevate and express, especially in small, rural schools.

Chris Spriggs agrees:

It's completely changed my thinking. I've been so isolated as a teacher. I just have gotten used to being my own boss and doing what I want and making my decisions. And then I have to come here and hear ideas that don't necessarily go with mine and learn to be flexible and see others' perspectives. It's also been nice just to work with other people who have the same frustrations. They don't get paid very much, but they do 20 jobs and work late nights and they

*coach and they advise. That's really changed my life to come here
and work and be around everyone.*

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