

# How Leveraging Community Can Make a Difference for Rural Districts

Schools are often at the heart of rural communities. It's not uncommon for parents and students to run into their teachers at the grocery store, or diner, and school events may form the social center of community activities. Because the school district is often one of the largest employers in rural communities, a high percentage of residents may be directly involved in school operations. These close ties create opportunities for districts to partner with businesses and community organizations to enhance learning experiences for their students.

## STRATEGIES FOR RURAL DISTRICTS TO LEVERAGE THEIR LOCAL COMMUNITY

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### COMMUNITY GOALS

*Foster long term community relationships by involving non-students in school activities.*

### SPECIFIC STRATEGIES

Host open houses for the community to showcase how students are leveraging technology to enhance their learning

Host community events such as musicals, art exhibits, adult education classes or bingo nights

*Increase student learning opportunities by partnering with community organizations and businesses*

Invite local businesses to “adopt a class” to share their industry specific expertise, mentor students, and provide internships

Partner with local libraries, museums or other cultural institutions to support community-based programs and events

*Expand Home Internet Access for Students*

Work with local businesses to create “Homework Hotspots” that offer students free Wi-Fi and a safe place to do homework

Partner with local libraries to make Wi-Fi hotspots available for check out to students.

Work with the city, town, or county government to expand Internet access by sharing the costs of building Internet infrastructure to and within the community.

## REAL LIFE STORIES

The best ideas often come from looking at real life examples. Here are stories from the Sitka School District in Alaska; the Nixa School District in Missouri; and the Mohawk Trail Regional School District in Massachusetts.

### **How Sitka School District (Alaska) Partners with Local Organizations to Promote Culturally Responsive Education**

The Sitka School District (SSD) in Sitka, AK serves approximately 1,250 students. The town of Sitka is an artistic community, with an award-winning fine arts camp and summer music festivals featuring world-class musicians. Sitka's population is comprised of nearly one-third Alaskan Natives and there is strong support in Sitka for Native language revitalization.

SSD's digital transformation journey began in 2009 when the Sitka High School student council approached the school board asking them to invest in technology to better prepare students for the future. The School Board responded positively, establishing technology-related learning goals and significantly increasing the technology budget. Supported by improved IT infrastructure and professional development, teachers began to use technology in more meaningful ways. During this transition SSD also sought to weave the arts, local culture, and technology into the core curriculum, partnering with the Alaska Arts Education Consortium (AAEC) to help teachers integrate arts and culture into their lessons. For example, students learned how math skills might factor into the weaving of an Alaskan Native robe or wall hanging. Initially, district initiatives were siloed and launched on an ad hoc basis, but the district sought to take a more systemic approach.

During the 2013-2014 school year, the district received a multi-year New Visions grant from the Alaska State Council on the Arts designed to support transformation in arts education in a school district. This launched the Arts, Culture & Technology Initiative (ACT) which created new standards for arts, culture, and technology learning. The ACT standards provide context to content standards and are designed to develop student competence around the arts, culture and technology. The ACT initiative, combined with a district-wide emphasis on Social-Emotional Learning, was very successful. Recognizing their overlapping goals, the ACT Advocacy Council merged with the Culturally Responsive Social Emotional Learning leadership team during the 2016-17 school year.

In the summer of 2017, SSD hosted an AAEC Basic Arts Institute to support teachers in examining culturally responsive instruction through the arts and innovative technology. The district has partnered with a number of organizations to weave community resources into SSD education offerings, including the Sitka Fine Arts Camp, the Sitka Conservation Society, the Sitka National Historic Park, the Sitka Science Center, and the local Tlinget Tribe. These programs are credited with helping to close the achievement gap and making the schools more welcoming for all students.

## How School/Community Engagement Benefits All: Nixa Public Schools (Missouri):

With 6,200 students, Nixa Public Schools (NPS) is relatively large for a rural district. Despite their relative proximity to an urban setting (Springfield, MO), they still have a rural feel and are much smaller than most urban districts. The district is a member of the Nixa Chamber of Commerce and enjoys a supportive community base.

Before launching a 1:1 laptop program in 2016, NPS technology leaders spent two years doing research and visiting other 1:1 districts to identify lessons learned. Teachers were involved in the process from the very beginning and worked closely with the IT department to ensure that the technologies chosen would support instructional goals. The district then held public forums outlining how the technology investment would align with district learning goals. Thanks to the district's extensive outreach efforts, the bond funding passed by 72 percent.

District leaders are deeply involved in the community; each administrator is a member of at least two civic organizations and the district supports over 30 community partnerships. The district offers monthly outreach events on social issues, such as data privacy, cybersecurity and other topics.

Nixa belongs to a consortium of more than 20 school districts called the Greater Ozarks CAPS program (GOCAPS), part of the national network of Centers for Advanced Professional Studies (CAPS) programs. CAPS programs are open to high school juniors and seniors and allow students to explore and experience potential professions while developing their professional skills and preparing for college and career. CAPS demonstrates how businesses, community organizations and public education can partner to produce personalized learning experiences that educate the workforce of tomorrow, especially in high skill, high demand jobs.

The district also partners with local businesses in other ways. Many local businesses participate in the "Adopt-a-Class" program, which leverages community resources to support educational needs. For example, as part of their school partnership, employees from a local bank taught students about basic financial literacy. These partnerships often lead to informal internships for students. Because community involvement is a two-way street; the districts sponsors a "Day of Caring" during which all secondary students sign up for community work projects such as mowing, weeding, or painting for businesses, organizations or other community members in need.

NPS also leverages community resources to provide students with real-world experiences in civics education. For example, the district operates a school farm at which students grow, market, and sell their products. When students expressed an interest in raising chickens on the farm, they first had to successfully navigate the city council approval process, providing them first hand experience with navigating city government.

Nixa Public Schools is an excellent example of how both students and the local community can work together to enhance learning and support mutual goals.

## How Mohawk Trail Regional School District Banded Together with Other Rural Districts to Advocate for Funding

Mohawk Trail Regional School District serves over 950 preschool through 12th grade students in rural Western Massachusetts. In a state where 85% of school systems are classified as urban or suburban, the district covers 250 square miles - one of the largest geographical regions in the state.

Like many other rural districts, Mohawk has faced declining student enrollment in recent years. Mohawk Trail student enrollment has dropped by almost 40% since the 1990's, resulting in a significant loss of state funding. However, due to the size of their geographic footprint and the low student population density, reducing operational costs has been difficult.

Recognizing that rural schools could achieve more by banding together, the district founded the Massachusetts Rural Schools Coalition (MRSC) in 2016 to find solutions to the challenges faced by financially distressed Massachusetts rural schools. MRSC members are primarily Massachusetts rural school districts, represented by their superintendents and school committees. Working together, the coalition successfully lobbied the state to establish rural school aid of \$1.5M in the 2019 budget.

Following their successful lobbying efforts, the MRSC plans to further support rural Massachusetts districts by:

- Increase operational efficiencies by seeking partnerships that enable rural school districts to share services
- Identify revenue sources to create funding for low-density rural schools lacking economies of scale, modeled after those already in existence in 32 U.S. states
- Promote innovation by creating a rural education research center at the University of Massachusetts Amherst, with the purpose of identifying and promoting best practices

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