

The Challenges and Opportunities of Rural Districts in Taking the Digital Leap

More than half of school districts and about one-third of public schools in the United States are in rural areas. Rural districts have unique challenges ranging from poverty (about one-fourth, or 23.5 percent, of children in rural areas were poor in 2016, according to the U.S. Department of Agriculture) to vast distances (many rural children ride the school bus for long periods a day) to a lack of affordable internet access.

The Consortium for School Networking convened two focus groups consisting of the CTO's and Superintendents for rural districts to ask them what their challenges and opportunities were. The focus groups each consisted of 10-15 leaders and was conducted via conference call. Below are their insights.



Four Challenges in Rural Districts

1. **Broadband Access** For rural districts, access is the most pernicious obstacle to taking the digital leap. Even if a school has internet access, it may not be up to par since it's not cost-effective for telecommunication providers to lay fiber to remote areas where some students live and many students live far apart from each other and the school. Satellite is an alternative, but it is too slow and expensive to really allow students to do their work. Even when broadband is available, it is often unaffordable in remote areas. Some districts try to address the gap by offering hotspots for students to check out and take home, but this only works in areas that have cellular coverage. A few districts have put up cellular towers to provide coverage for their most remote students, but this is an expensive task that may price out most districts.

Without ubiquitous access to broadband services, students can't participate in educational opportunities from home, including class discussions, research and interacting with classmates. They also lose access to student portals, parent portals and more that contain vital daily information.

Students without broadband also can't take advantage of virtual class attendance for circumstances where they may be able to attend class, but not in person. That leaves them behind. This issue of digital equity is a crucial one for rural students.

See CoSN's [digital equity initiative](#).)

2. Funding Rural districts are often funded from a smaller tax base and, because of their smaller size, have a larger percentage of per student spending go to overhead costs such as transportation. In a rural district each student is transported much farther than in an urban or suburban district, often one to two hours each day. When enrollment goes down in smaller schools, it also makes a greater proportional impact on their budgets.

3. People Rural districts have a difficult time recruiting staff, substitute teachers and support services personnel. The remote lifestyle may not appeal to teachers coming from college or other schools who can, incidentally, make more money elsewhere. As a result, many extra courses, such as advanced placement classes, are not offered and existing teaching staffs often have to teach courses that may be outside of their specialty.

The issue of staff is not limited to teachers. Rural districts are fortunate if they have even one person to be in charge of their technology, and that person is put in the position of having to be a jack-of-all-trades. It isn't realistic to have one person with some expertise manage all elements of a district's infrastructure and devices expertly. Often, rural districts and rural tech leaders can combine expertise and experience to help each other.

4. Understanding the 'Why' Finally, some rural communities may be skeptical of the role of technology in their schools and their communities. In some communities, they are protective of their small-town way of life and don't want to see that disrupted. Consequently, it takes some very clear and compelling communication to make the case to a rural community that technology has a meaningful role in their public schools.

Three Opportunities in Rural Districts

1. Smaller Size Rural districts have unique opportunities due to their smaller size. Because they are smaller, they often are more nimble, and district leadership has more ownership of the schools. This lack of entrenched bureaucracy makes it easier to effect change. It also makes it easier to envision change as holistic — where new initiatives are usually seen as an add-on to all other existing programs, taking the digital leap changes everything. In a small close-knit district, it is easier to see how old programs fit or don't fit within the digital leap. It is easier to remove programs that are no longer relevant and to repurpose resources to new goals and approaches. Also, relationships are often stronger in smaller districts where everyone knows each staff member and student. Districts can leverage their size advantage by including stake holders in developing a clear vision that drives their digital leap and then using that vision to make holistic, rather than add-on changes.

2. Community Rural districts often have terrific community involvement. They are often the center of their small towns and have the support of their neighborhoods and local businesses. This creates opportunities for student internships and mentorships and other programs involving the community. Rural districts find that the school is at the heart of their community in a way that brings parents and community members to the school for sports, events, and school activities.

3. Teachers Although rural districts may have trouble attracting teachers, they have an excellent track record of retaining teachers who grew up in or have adopted the small town way of life. Often teachers in the town were once students at those same schools.

Rural towns, while wanting to hold onto their way of life, often recognize that technology offers a future that will allow their children to return to their rural hometowns after getting an education[JP6] . Many small towns recognize that to obtain the highest quality of education for their children, their young people may need to travel outside their community for college. Technology helps students prepare for those academic opportunities by giving students skills in learning with technology and by offering more educational opportunities such as AP classes via blended learning. Technology also makes it easier for students to return to and prosper in their small towns. This is because some small towns have improved economically due to technological advances, and there are more jobs available that allow remote working or that don't require a specific geographic location.

Despite the unique challenges of rural districts, they hold tremendous promise to deliver 21st century skills with access to the internet as well as access to current hardware, software and the trained personnel necessary to employ it effectively.

