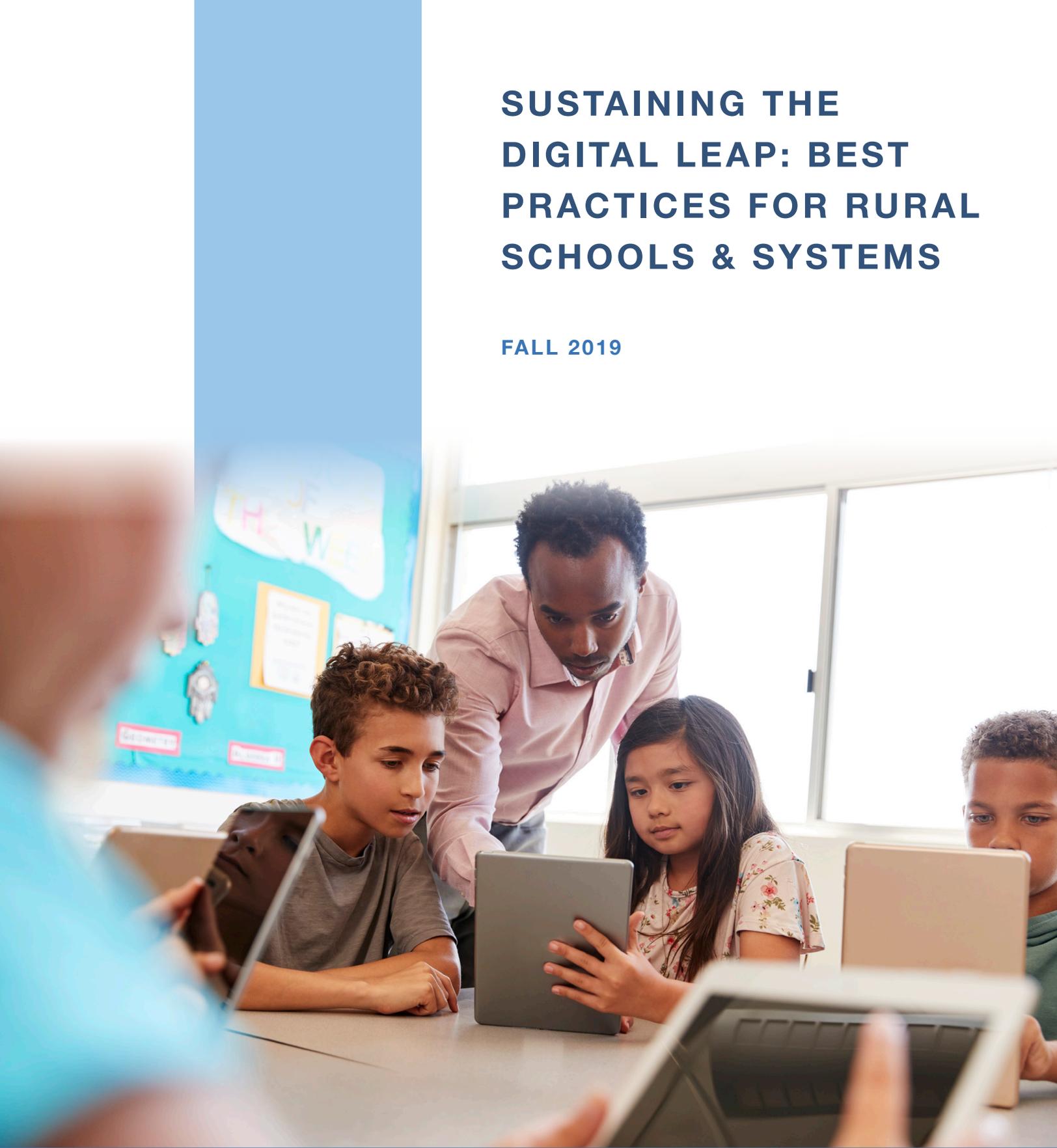


SUSTAINING THE DIGITAL LEAP: BEST PRACTICES FOR RURAL SCHOOLS & SYSTEMS

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When districts rely on grants, bonds, or other one-time infusions of funding for technology, the program may not be financially sustainable over time. This creates a strain on schools and threatens future opportunities for innovation. A sustainable program plans for replacement cycles, infrastructure upgrades, and additional purchases beyond the initial capital investment. Additionally, as teachers discover new ways to leverage technology with their students, a sustainable program can adapt to meet increased demand. This document describes three common sustainability challenges and offers strategies to address each one.

CHALLENGE #1:

TECHNOLOGY EXPENDITURES ARE DIFFICULT TO JUSTIFY

Each school has its own context and culture. If technology has not previously been part of that culture, then a large technology expenditure may seem out of the norm and difficult to justify given other concerns. However, by communicating the greater purpose of the program and demonstrating the value of investment, rural leaders can improve their chances of securing sustainable funding.

STRATEGY: COMMUNICATE THE WHY

Too often, technology conversations start with the “what.” Instead of beginning with devices and infrastructure, leaders must first articulate the greater purpose behind the initiative and seek buy-in from community stakeholders - especially teachers, students, and families. A strong “why” for implementing technology guides purchasing as well as future budgets, professional learning plans, and staffing decisions. Further, when everyone understands the intent behind the technology, then it becomes easier to get long-term support. (For more about starting with the “why” see [here](#) and [here](#).)

Strategy: Communicate the Value of Investment

Any financial investment needs to demonstrate value or a return - whether that return is financial, in human capital, or even social. Having first defined a strong “why,” leaders can articulate the costs and benefits in terms of how they help the school or district to meet its mission and achieve its greater purpose.

Think of the [Value of Investment](#) as a way to show a return using both quantitative and qualitative data. In addition to calculating the total cost of ownership of the program - as well as any savings that may occur as a result of this investment - leaders also measure how the technology supports the broader goals and mission. For example, if the goal is to help students learn about the world beyond their community, then a measurement might be the opportunities that students gain by connecting with others via technology.

CHALLENGE #2:

ONGOING TECHNOLOGY EXPENSES ARE DIFFICULT TO BUDGET

Determining the Total Cost of Ownership - the initial purchase price as well as the cost to maintain that purchase over time - is a critical component of calculating the Value of Investment. However, this poses a challenge as it can be difficult to know what costs may emerge in the future and how prices fluctuate over time. As leaders strive to not only make initial purchases but also plan for replacement cycles, budgeting can become a challenge.

STRATEGY: EVALUATE LEASING OPTIONS AND CLOUD SERVICES

A shift to leasing hardware and using cloud-as-a-service solutions can make budgets more predictable and sustainable as schools and systems no longer have to make large capital purchases every few years. Especially when technology may be state, bond, or grant funded, subscription models and leasing programs can be easier to justify than large expenditures. Additionally, these programs can help move the costs into general operating funds and create a culture that expects annual payments. (For more, learn about [CoSN's Smart Education Networks by Design](#) program)

CHALLENGE #3:

LACK OF FUNDING TO MAKE CAPITAL INVESTMENTS

A major challenge arises when a school or district lacks the funding to make a large capital investment for a one-to-one program or a refresh of existing devices. To address this challenge, rural leaders might look to outside funding or a re-budgeting of existing funds.

STRATEGY: SECURE OUTSIDE FUNDING

Funding does exist to offset the cost of technology purchases. From the federal [E-Rate](#) program to help pay for school infrastructure, to hotspot grants like the [1Million Project](#), and organizations such as [EveryoneOn](#) that provide low-cost devices, outside organizations do provide support for technology. Rural leaders can also approach their communities for bonds or SPLOST (Special Purpose Local Option Sales Tax) money. Finally, leaders can form partnerships with anchor institutions like libraries and healthcare providers to approach local banks for CRA funding. Under the [Community Reinvestment Act \(CRA\)](#), banks can meet their obligations for community reinvestment by donating old computers, providing low-interest loans, and making donations. This funding is available in low-to-moderate income as well as rural communities.

STRATEGY: REALLOCATE MONEY FROM THE EXISTING BUDGET

A technology investment creates the opportunity to reconsider the existing budget from a blank slate perspective. Rather than assuming all current expenditures to be necessary, critically assess what is needed to support teaching and learning. For example, printers and copiers may become superfluous as assignments become digital. Transitioning to cloud-based services may free up funds once used to maintain expensive servers and computer labs. Utilizing free or low-cost services like Google for Education and Microsoft Education can reduce software licensing fees, and free Open Educational Resources might lessen textbook costs. By evaluating their options, rural leaders might find more money in existing budgets than initially expected.

Rural schools and districts face unique hurdles when building sustainable technology programs. This document presents a few strategies that leaders might employ to overcome these challenges.



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