

## IMPACT STORY

# Bringing Rural Education Leaders Together in a High-Impact Community of Practice

Rural schools face unique and complex challenges and opportunities specific to rural contexts. Recognizing this, the Region 15 Comprehensive Center (R15CC) created and facilitates a community of practice (COP), the Rural COP, focused specifically on rural education in Arizona, California, Nevada, and Utah. The goals of this COP are to share information, build trusting and supportive networks, and co-construct systemic solutions to address the challenges facing education in the rural context.

## Rural Educational Leaders Have Unique Needs

The lands, people, economies, and diverse ways of life in rural

communities mean there is no single description that adequately captures the range of contexts termed rural. Rural environments have many advantages, including the opportunities afforded by having smaller schools and cohesive communities. There are also often higher levels of family and community engagement. However, rural educational leaders juggle many roles and responsibilities and are often professionally and geographically isolated with limited access to effective teachers and services,



*[The COP] helped me to realize that I'm not alone and I'm not in isolation in my tiny little world. . . . [T]hat's an amazing support system for small and rural [schools].*

—Rural COP Member



inadequate fiscal and physical resources, and persistent poverty impacting the rural educational context.

The Rural COP takes an assets-based approach to understanding the rural context and provides a much-needed space in which members share similar experiences and a collective identity related to rural education.

## The Rural COP Fills a Critical Gap

To fill a critical gap for rural education leaders, the R15CC initiated the Rural COP in 2020 with careful planning based on members' needs. Building on their deep understanding of the unique roles that rural educational leaders play, the R15CC invited a variety of rural educators and leaders to join the rural COP, including rural superintendents, principals, state education agency (SEA) staff from a variety of departments (e.g., educator development, systems of support, family engagement, student support); leaders from regional service centers and county offices of education; and leaders of rural education support associations (e.g., rural school associations, small school district associations).

Since its inception, the Rural COP has met approximately once a month for virtual convenings followed by regular communication and follow-up between sessions. Rural COP members explore problems of practice as a group. Members surface issues they are facing and the group reflects on them together. The R15CC co-facilitates sessions with rural leaders, ensuring purposeful and engaging interactions among members.

In addition to providing high-quality and relevant information and resources, the R15CC also builds knowledge by spotlighting members' own successful models and practices. The intentional,

research-based design of the Rural COP includes peer-to-peer learning, cross-state and within-state sharing, and spotlighting of promising practices. This design has led to an expanded understanding of the challenges, opportunities, and adaptive leadership capacities of rural education leaders across the region.

The Rural COP's consistent convening has fostered the development of trusting relationships that allow for deeper dives into a range of issues and problems of practice in a collaborative setting. Participant-identified topics for the Rural COP have included Digital Equity and Rural Connectivity, School Climate and Culture, Utilizing Federal and State Dollars, Rural Educator Recruitment and Retention, and Instructional Leadership.

## R15CC Facilitates Effective Spaces for Learning and Collaboration

The R15CC uses evidence-based practices to design and facilitate the Rural COP. The guiding principles for the Rural COP include the concept of joint ownership. Accordingly, convening topics, presentations, problem-solving, transforming practice, and reflective conversations are shared responsibilities among members as they explore different perspectives and how they can apply new learning in their particular contexts.

*“Everything that we have talked about has been on point, but I think that the bigger picture takeaway for me has been the relationships that I now have across these four states. And I know that I have people that I can send an email to, or pick up the phone and call and get ideas, or have a thought partner, or ask questions about a particular topic.”*

—Rural COP Member

Although the Rural COP design has been flexible, convenings generally include content presentations from an expert, small-group breakout discussions, and member spotlights. In addition to the relevant and timely content, Rural COP sessions are designed to support members in brokering relationships so that members get to know one another, build trust, and reciprocate in helping one another address complex issues. An example of this relationship-building is the Rural Leadership Network, which was created by active members of the Rural COP from California, Arizona, and Utah. They are now working together to specifically support rural principals by convening them in a network similar to what they have experienced in the R15CC's Rural COP.

Just as members suggest topics and issues for the monthly convenings, they also play leadership roles by sharing their expertise, challenges, and promising practices via “member spotlight” presentations. The R15CC helps identify promising practices across the region and coordinates with the Rural COP members involved to deliver a presentation that highlights how they engage in work related to a problem of practice. These spotlights serve to illustrate concrete ways in which SEAs, local education agencies (LEAs), and schools work to address problems of practice. The member spotlight sessions include reflection questions that guide discussions between SEAs and LEAs through the lens of the rural context.

## Participating in the Rural COP Leads to New Insights, Expanded Networks, and Lasting Impact Beyond the COP

Since the launch of the Rural COP, members have reported feeling much more connected and supported in their various roles. The Rural COP has fostered a cross-state learning community that will continue to build the capacity of participating members to address the ongoing and changing needs of the rural landscape. Sharing their experiences and hearing about promising practices has stimulated new insights and understanding. Participants have reported high value in the ongoing and consistent opportunities to network, form lasting relationships, and collaborate with others regarding issues facing rural education.

One sign of a healthy COP is that members of the group demonstrate a willingness to work together to accomplish common goals. As the Rural COP continues to highlight successful and innovative solutions and identify emerging problems of practice for future discussions, several new projects have been initiated as derivatives of the Rural COP.

For more information about the Region 15 Comprehensive Center, visit the [Center's webpage](#).