

## Providing Professional Development to Educators in Rural Areas

Teachers in rural or remote areas face special challenges, including accessing high-quality professional development that will enhance instruction.

Imagine teaching in the Kenai Peninsula Borough School District (KPBSD) in Soldotna, Alaska. The peninsula has 44 schools, 9,200 students, and approximately 700 teachers. The smallest school has 10 students; the largest, 550. There are four native Alaskan “village” schools. For students who do not live in the community, the schools are only accessible by plane, and there is also a school in the Russian Orthodox community that is only accessible by four-wheeler. Some schools are up to 100 miles away from the district office.

“The professional development needed by the veteran teachers in our Russian Orthodox community school is quite different from what is needed in our native Alaskan village

schools,” says Doris Cannon, director of elementary education and curriculum for KPBSD. Cannon addresses rural educators’ varying needs, using strategies including hiring retired teachers to teach professional development (PD) classes. She also occasionally uses Title IIa funds to bring in experts to train a handful of teachers who can then pass on what they have learned to their colleagues.

In an effort to deliver stronger, more targeted staff development, the KPBSD established a PD advisory committee two years ago comprising teachers from each area in the district and each grade level as well as principals and administrators. The committee meets five times a year, conducts an end-of-year survey to identify teachers’ learning needs, and develops a plan for the annual PD training held during the summer, addressing topics such as technology integration.

Cannon says the committee includes representation from schools in the more remote areas, which helps the district shape its PD offerings. For example, the district offers PD training in July in addition to its regular August classes because smaller rural schools start the school year earlier than the urban schools.

Although the remoteness of KPBSD’s rural schools is an extreme example, it’s not just schools in Alaska that have difficulty offering valuable staff development. Rural and remote districts all over the United States face similar challenges.

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### Making PD Timely and Accessible

Teachers in rural areas need access to PD, resources, and tools that address the specific challenges they face as educators in rural areas, as well as resources to improve student achievement overall. But Doris Terry Williams, executive director of The Rural School and Community Trust ([www.ruraledu.org](http://www.ruraledu.org)), says that most rural districts don't have access to PD that addresses their immediate, unique needs.

Online learning offers a quick, easy way for educators to access PD and resources to improve teaching. The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill School of Education offers LEARN NC ([www.learnnc.org](http://www.learnnc.org)), which provides PD courses, lesson plans, and other teaching resources. According to Melissa Thibault, executive director of LEARN NC, 67 percent of the state's rural schools use the Web site.

Districts also use the site to provide opportunities that are otherwise unattainable. For instance, a rural district with only one calculus teacher may not be able to afford to bring in a \$1,000-a-day training specialist to improve instruction in that area, but it can pay the nominal fee LEARN NC charges for online workshops. LEARN NC offers PD courses on a wide range of topics, including using data for school reform, enhancing classroom instruction using technology, and collaborating and teaching in a virtual world.

LEARN NC also helps rural schools deliver state-mandated training if they do not have the capacity to do so. If a rural school lacks the infrastructure and resources to offer the 10 days of new-teacher training required by the state, the teachers can log on to LEARN NC. "Our rural [educators] thank us because they don't have the scale to meet basic policy requests from the state board or legislature," says Thibault.

In Parker, Ariz., almost half of the 117 teachers at Parker Unified School District have taken an online course

through PBS TeacherLine ([www.pbs.org/teacherline](http://www.pbs.org/teacherline)). The courses are offered through ASSET, the local PBS station operated out of Arizona State University. Teachers can also select classes aligned with local or state standards. The district pays for the courses with grant money.

Arkansas IDEAS ([www.arkansasIDEAS.org](http://www.arkansasIDEAS.org)), created by the Arkansas Department of Education in 2006, is a state-funded portal that provides thousands of online courses. "We provide free synchronous and asynchronous courses that supplement or supplant PD," says Deborah Coffman, associate director of professional development with the Arkansas Department of Education. "About half of our state educators are registered users."

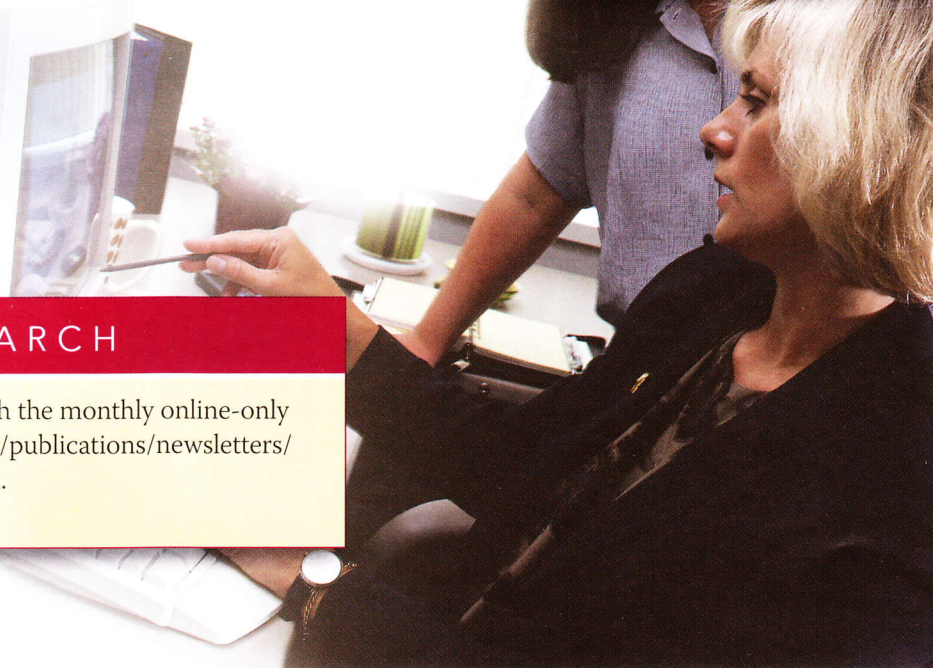
On average, teachers earn 19 hours of PD through the Arkansas IDEAS portal, with three of the most popular classes being Cooperative Learning, How to Deal with Difficult Parents, and Understanding Technology Integration in the Classroom.

### Making PD Relevant for Rural Educators

"The rural teachers I've spoken with don't want to collaborate with someone who is one of 14 algebra teachers; they want [to work with] someone who is the only one or one of two—just like them," says Larry Rausch, executive director of the Wabash Valley Education Center (WVEC) in West Lafayette, Ind. WVEC is a service center that helps communities of schools learn from each other. Almost every week, Rausch facilitates a virtual teacher meeting using Elluminate (virtual conferencing software),

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in which teachers can listen to a presentation, chat about a relevant newspaper article, or discuss a variety of topics.

Tami Hicks, a professional development coordinator at WVEC, makes PD affordable for the 190 rural schools that pay \$3.80 per student to join the collaborative. When she heard that teachers wanted to learn about leveled literacy interventions, she hired an expert to come to the center to provide a training. Each attendee paid \$500; a school normally would have paid \$10,000 for that lecture. Hicks also brought in an author and educator for a weeklong literacy series. Teachers paid \$450 for the series; a school would have been charged \$4,000 per day.

Hicks invited 30 Algebra I teachers from rural high schools to start a professional learning community (PLC). They met face-to-face and virtually (using Moodle) to design PD workshops, do curriculum mapping, and review math textbooks. Tom Bajzatt, who directs the math department at the Tri-County Middle-Senior High School in Wolcott, Ind., is part of the math PLC. Before joining the PLC, Bajzatt felt like he was on his own. "To find anything I needed, I'd have to start from scratch. It was time consuming." Now he just e-mails a PLC colleague. "I now have the same resources as a school of 5,000."

## Providing PD Through Collaboration

When schools can't afford to send teachers to training or tap into distance learning, utilizing the resources and knowledge of teachers within the building provides a valuable opportunity for learning and collaboration. Administrators can encourage teachers to share best practices.

In her second year of teaching at Bradford High School in Starke, Fla., Ingrad Smith placed a row of chairs in her class so that other teachers felt welcome to come in and observe. She offers administrators the following advice: "Find teachers who are doing good things and make it optional [for other

teachers] to observe; that often leads to learning opportunities," says Smith, who now serves as executive director of the Association for Rural Education Policy.

At Parker USD, pooling educators' knowledge is an important means of offering PD to the district's teachers. Twice a year, for the district's Gold Mine Day, teachers and administrators sign up to do presentations, sharing their expertise on everything from using PowerPoint to balancing the budget to making graphic organizers. In addition, the teachers are required to do four observations a year with any other teacher in the district and follow up with a peer-learning conversation.

Thanks in part to online professional development offerings and virtual learning communities, rural and remote teachers are enjoying the staff development that, for many years, they have had difficulty accessing. By sharing information in the building and between schools, they are able to bridge gaps in knowledge to improve their instructional practices and provide rich educational opportunities to their students. **EU**

—ELLEN ULLMAN

## → MORE ONLINE

In sparsely populated areas of Australia, educators face obstacles accessing necessary resources, including professional development, but new initiatives at the federal and state levels provide teachers with online tools to help them improve instruction and collaborate more effectively.

Read "Finding Innovative Ways to Serve Teachers in Rural Areas" at [www.ascd.org/publications/newsletters/education\\_update/jan10/vol52/num01/toc.aspx](http://www.ascd.org/publications/newsletters/education_update/jan10/vol52/num01/toc.aspx).