

In Washington State, Covid-19 created a unique opportunity for charter-district collaboration, but reach is limited without systemic change

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When COVID hit in March 2020, the transition to remote learning was challenging for rural teachers. [The Rural Alliance](#), a consortium of rural Superintendents across central and eastern Washington was looking for ways to help leaders train and support elementary teachers. Notes Kevin Jacka, who runs The Alliance, "There was frustration from teachers. They had very little opportunity to better themselves as they prepared for the change from traditional teaching and learning to online/blended teaching."

Rural superintendents found the professional development they needed at [Impact Public Schools](#), a network of elementary charter schools in Washington that quickly pivoted during the pandemic by launching new platforms for elementary students and focusing leadership efforts on training and supporting K-5 teachers.

Rural Washington districts and a charter school form a learning partnership

When Jacka approached Jen Wickens, CEO of Impact Public Schools in 2020, she was more than happy to help. "We have so many other things to share. I see charter schools leaning into system-wide innovation. COVID-19 was a catalyst to share what we had created."

For Wickens and 15 rural districts in Washington, COVID-19 helped accelerate collaboration to support rural students as they transitioned to hybrid learning and tried to catch up on missed instruction from the spring of 2020. Wickens and her team put together in-person and virtual professional development modules on topics like culture setting, project-based learning, and social-emotional learning--all modified to support students in remote and hybrid learning models. They also created training to support young children to develop literacy skills after months of disrupted learning. Said Wickens, "Learning acceleration is embedded, it is part of everything we do. We had training in interventions, guided reading, what to do if kids are not on track."

CRPE has studied district and charter school collaboration [in 23 cities](#) across the country, where educators across district and charter sectors worked together to tackle shared challenges. Many of the efforts were started by a desire similar to what we see with Impact Public Schools and the Rural Alliance: to spread ideas that have been tested and proven in charter schools to the larger education sector, fulfilling one of the original, if often overlooked goals, of the charter school movement. These efforts often succeeded at establishing relationships and building good will, which laid the foundation for collaborative knowledge sharing or partnering on common policy goals.

Relationship-building was essential to the success of Impact's training last year. Consistent facilitators worked with the same group of teachers throughout the year last year, following up after each module and offering assistance if teachers needed someone to reach out to for additional help.

This trusting relationship also allowed for learning to go both ways. Wickens noted that the rural districts pushed Impact's thinking. One rural principal asked for training for young students to help them be strong students in a distance learning environment. The charter school initially balked at the idea. "We thought of the training as something to teachers and leaders, not students," Wickens explained. "But the more we thought about it, the more we realized that principal was right. Students need support too to know how to learn." Thus, Impact designed a module for young learners in the rural districts and their own students.

Even as remote learning ended, rural districts continue to find benefit in partnership and collaboration

The partnership between Impact Public Schools and rural Washington districts is continuing in the 2021-22 school year. Training and support will continue for early literacy and math. About half the training sessions will be in-person, in order to establish the close relationships with the facilitators that rural teachers benefited from last year. The biggest change will be a greater focus on project-based learning (PBL). Jacka notes that for their rural districts it is, "a little harder for us to find really solid examples of project-based training for elementary teachers."

Building expertise in project-based learning is part of a move in a number of Washington rural districts to better prepare youth for life after high school. Jacka notes that many of their high school graduates, especially men, are increasingly choosing career over college. He explains, "Through project-based learning we can go forward with internships, apprenticeships and other work-based experiences. PBL is an excellent learning opportunity for students. It is personalized; projects can be student developed and community based." Districts moving in this direction want project-based learning to start in elementary school so students can start to build soft skills like communication, collaboration, and problem solving that they will need for complex, community-based projects once they reach high school. And that will serve them well once they go on to the workforce or college. The Rural Alliance hopes to deepen their partnership with Impact to support project-based learning in the early grades and secondary teachers at [Lind-Ritzville Cooperative Schools](#).

Without systems change, reach is limited

But the disruptive year in 2020-21 also highlighted how important systems change is to adequately support teachers. Jacka noted that when all rural districts were remote, teachers had the time to work with coaches and each other to understand and implement the training. The trainings were designed to be full-day, using a cohort model so teachers could build community with one another. But once schools moved to hybrid and in-person learning, the school schedule changed and teachers lost the time they had in an online environment to work and collaborate with one another. Impact delivered the training as asynchronous modules that schools offered on professional development days or as resources for teachers to watch on their own. Said Jacka, "Superintendents said they liked the professional development content, it was valuable, but teacher PD time was very limited."

Cooperation between district and charter schools is often difficult to sustain - preserving the time and space for educators to collaborate was [a common challenge](#) in efforts we studied, especially those teacher-focused efforts at the heart of improving [instructional practices](#). This was true when collaboration

was seen as a time-limited add-on or "nice-to-have," rather than a regular component of the academic schedule.

When Washington state voters approved charter schools in 2012, piloting new educational approaches and creating systemic change was among the goals. COVID-19 accelerated these needs and created a unique opportunity to work alongside district schools. The Rural Alliance and Impact have built trusting, mutually beneficial relationships even if the systems required for enduring collaboration are slower to evolve. If The Rural Alliance and Impact can find ways to sustain their work together, they may be able to fulfill this promise.