



RURAL COLLABORATIVE

Empower Schools

The Rural Collaborative model empowers rural communities to forge sustainable partnerships that allow schools to provide students with a variety of robust college and career pathways that lead to success in school and life.

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OVERVIEW

Approximately one in five American students attends a rural school and in most states the majority of districts are considered rural. It can be challenging for small, rural school districts to provide a robust array of college and career options for students on their own as compared to their urban and suburban counterparts. The Rural Collaborative model enables rural communities to come together across various sectors to create innovative and relevant learning opportunities for their students.

By activating collaboration and partnership among geographically proximate school districts, higher education institutions, and industry partners, the Rural Collaborative model increases the value of existing community resources by making them available to more young people. This also helps to build the skilled, regional workforce needed to strengthen the local economy because programs of study are aligned to data about regional workforce needs and projections.

The Rural Collaborative model is currently being implemented in Texas, Colorado, and Indiana across more than 20 school districts, enabling students to earn career-specific certifications and dual credit hours while gaining hands-on experience. The Rural Schools Innovation Zone (RSIZ) in South Texas is an exemplar Rural Collaborative and, as such, worked with Empower Schools and the Texas Education Agency to create a free toolkit to support the design and launch of the model in other regions. [▶ Introduction to the Rural Schools Innovation Zone](#) [Rural Collaboration Toolkit](#) [Rural Schools Innovation Zone](#)



What Makes This Model Innovative?



Relevance

Students learn in real-world contexts while earning postsecondary credit or industry-based certifications for high-need jobs in the regional community.



Rigorous Learning

The Rural Collaborative model engages students in real-world contexts where they think critically to apply lessons, solve problems, and demonstrate competencies.



Active Self-Direction

Students develop agency by making purposeful decisions to navigate their chosen program of study, knowing that their actions will have an impact on their future.

DESIGN

Goals

The ultimate goal of the Rural Collaborative model is to provide students in under-resourced rural communities greater access to learning opportunities and programs that set them up for postsecondary success within meaningful career paths.

Future-Ready

Students earn postsecondary credit or industry-based certifications that align their skills with high-demand jobs in their geographic region.

Opportunity-Informed

Students develop greater awareness of their potential as they explore the different career pathways that are available to them.

Agency

Students can choose from several different pathway options and through this, they learn that their own initiative and efforts determine what is possible in their lives as they explore postsecondary pathways.

Experience

Core to the Rural Collaborative model is expanding student access to a number of relevant, high-quality college and career programs of study. A program of study is a learning and career pathway that a student chooses as a larger focus in their education. Rural school districts are often under-resourced, so sharing programs and/or facilities to form a Rural Collaborative gives students opportunities they could not otherwise access.

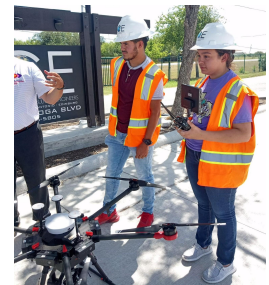
In a Rural Collaborative, there are multiple options for how programs of study are shared. In most of the current models, each school district offers one or more career-specific pathways,

sometimes called Academies, that it specializes in so that programming is diverse and not duplicated across districts. During a typical week in the RSIZ, for example, students attend core classes at their home district school and attend their program of study twice a week. For some students, that includes traveling to other districts; in this case, transportation is provided at no cost to students. There are also options for programs of study to be based in a centralized career and technical education center, to have instructors and/or equipment traveling to districts, or to operate a hybrid option for virtual coursework.

Each program of study offered by a district is aligned to regional labor market data, and information about career outlook and job opportunities is shared with students. In South Texas, welding, electrical, HVAC (heating, ventilation, and air conditioning), healthcare diagnostics, engineering, and teaching and learning are among the programs of study that students can pursue. [▶ A Rural Schools Innovation Zone Story](#) In terms of pedagogy, each program of study is designed to include career exploration, project-based learning, and work-based learning.

Career Exploration

In rural communities, students may not have the opportunity to be exposed to occupations and careers that are realistic opportunities in their lives. The Rural Collaborative model is deliberate about exposing young people to career opportunities that are available to them in their region based on labor data. Having the opportunity to explore viable career options gives students from small towns a broader vision of what they can be in the world, expanding their sense of self and possibility.

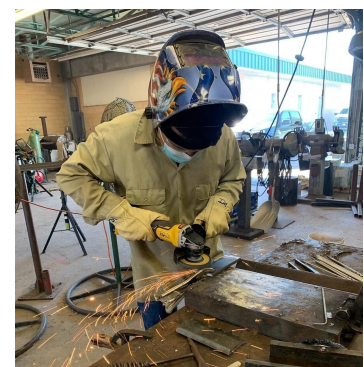


Within the RSIZ, 8th graders begin preparing for future career opportunities by touring all of the Academies within the Zone. Each Academy offers various programs of study that a student can choose as a focus. When students enter high school, they develop a personal plan within the program of study they are most interested in. Career exploration continues over the next few years when students hear from guest speakers and visit work sites as they find a focus for their studies within a specific Academy. [Rural Collaborative Career Planning Guide](#)

Project-Based Learning

All programs of study in a Rural Collaborative leverage project-based learning (PBL) to engage students in experiences similar to those they might have in the workplace. By working on projects that provide them with industry skills, students know that they are in a program of study that is relevant to their postsecondary pathway.

PBL begins with identifying real-world problems related to a specific program of study based on input from stakeholders in the community. Students then investigate the problem and work to develop solutions just as they might in their future professional lives.



PBL creates an experiential learning environment in which students are coached by teachers and guided through inquiry as if they were being trained or mentored in a workplace. Because of this repositioning of the teacher's role, students develop deeper levels of understanding how to solve problems and collaborate while also developing greater agency.

For example, the RSIZ was selected as one of five programs nationally to participate in the Rural Tech Project, where a team of RSIZ students engaged in the Leaders in Future Technology (LIFT) Startup Incubator Program, which helps students identify a problem facing their community and create a technological product to solve that problem using a design process. Within that program, a team of RSIZ students recognized that the closest hospital is at least an hour away from the community and that there are high costs for X-rays and emergency room visits. So students from the Grow Your Educator and STEM programs collaborated to design a portable X-ray machine that could be used by rural athletic departments, enabling them to determine if an injury warrants a trip to the hospital, thereby saving families both time and money.

Work-Based Learning

Across all programs of study, students participate in work-based learning (WBL) to enhance their academic and career interests with real-world experience. WBL programs in Rural Collaboratives provide meaningful, developmentally appropriate opportunities for students to demonstrate skills and knowledge. By applying their skills and knowledge in a workplace, students learn more about the realities of a profession, which in turn helps to increase the relevance of their education and improve postsecondary outcomes. WBL also helps students develop confidence in navigating the world outside of school because they must work more independently while facing accountability beyond grades.



To become familiar with the type of work to be done in a specific pathway, students job shadow to learn more about an occupation and expand their professional network. This entails accompanying a volunteer into their workplace to observe and learn about roles, responsibilities, and required skill sets associated with that occupation. This gives students a realistic perspective into the daily life of someone who works in an industry that interests them and adds context to what they are learning in their program of study.

Internships are the most significant feature of WBL because students actually perform the roles and functions of an occupation specific to their program of study in alignment with their personalized plan of study. Working with their internship supervisor and program of study teacher, students set clearly defined goals for how the internship should advance their skill sets and allow them to demonstrate their knowledge through applied learning. In Rural Collaboratives, internships typically take place in the summer but may include winter and spring break opportunities.

Supporting Structures

The Rural Collaborative model amplifies the strengths of individual districts and community partners through leveraging programs and sharing resources. The following structures are essential to building a Rural Collaborative.

Districts must design programs of study in alignment with regional labor needs.



CURRICULUM, INSTRUCTION, & ASSESSMENT

In the Rural Collaborative model, districts must analyze regional labor trends to determine which programs of study to offer students. The emphasis on the context of the local community ensures that learning has direct relevance because students are preparing for careers that are in demand in the area where they live. This alignment also allows school districts to develop high-quality programs because of specific industry focus while knowing that their programs will be sustainable.

Coursework in Rural Collaboratives follows a traditional Career and Technical Education (CTE) model, incorporating PBL and WBL to provide students with practical skills and knowledge that are directly applicable to specific careers or industries. Districts also offer students the opportunity to earn college credits, receive industry certifications, and fulfill graduation requirements as part of a Rural Collaborative program.

Adopting the Rural Collaborative model requires districts to actively build regional community identity.



SCHOOL COMMUNITY & CULTURE

As part of the long-term health and sustainability of a Rural Collaborative, districts must take steps to create collective support for their initiative across the region. This can be done by working to establish the mindset that every student in the Collaborative is one of “our students.” Districts can build toward this by, for example, creating a welcome ceremony for students from neighboring districts or having Rural Collaborative students wear caps and gowns with a special designation at graduation. Any time school districts join together in collaboration, they should acknowledge and celebrate the fact that they are doing something for their students and community that they could not do on their own.

Rural Collaboratives must hire a leader to run the work on the ground and manage agreements between school districts and other community partners.



ADULT ROLES, HIRING, & LEARNING

Sharing resources across school districts creates unique needs, beginning with a leader who is trusted to make key decisions. Districts adopting the Rural Collaborative model will need to hire a leader to manage the work between the Rural Collaborative partners so that roles and responsibilities

are clear and the partnership is sustainable, even if administrative leadership shifts in a district. More specifically, the leader will manage support for budgeting and operations, track key performance measures, and ensure access through setting of enrollment policies.

Ideally, two other roles would be included in a Rural Collaborative staff: a college and career counselor and a director for academics and partnerships. Depending on the makeup of existing school district staff, a Rural Collaborative could fill these roles in a variety of ways. In South Texas, the partnering school districts established the RSIZ as a nonprofit entity with its own independent executive director and staff to maintain the interest of the Collaborative rather than an individual school district. Other Rural Collaboratives have been nested within an existing community-focused nonprofit organization, an institute of higher education, or an education service center.

School districts must work together to align master schedules so that students can access Rural Collaborative programs.



**SCHEDULE & USE OF
TIME**

In order for students to be able to attend programs of study in neighboring school districts, partners in a Collaborative must do their best to align their master schedules. This can be a challenge and a source of tension between districts because of contending interests ranging from travel time between districts to ability for students to participate in extracurricular activities. Partner districts need to plan for scheduling in advance and be willing to compromise. In some cases, institutions of higher education may also need to be included in planning to ensure that students have the opportunity to take advantage of dual credit courses.

District and community partnerships are the foundation of the Rural Collaborative model and they must be developed within this focus.



**FAMILY & COMMUNITY
PARTNERSHIPS**

By definition, the Rural Collaborative model is based on partnerships between school districts and community stakeholders. In rural communities, these collaborative partnerships can help young people attain family-sustaining careers—careers that will allow young people to meet the economic needs of their families in the future—and further regional economic development.

Rural Collaboratives are particularly strong when they are based on multi-sector partnerships with local industry and institutions of higher education. Setting up formal partnership agreements and appropriate management systems helps each partner know its responsibilities in the learning opportunities offered by the Collaborative.

Empower Schools can support the design and implementation of a Rural Collaborative by facilitating key processes in all phases of development. Whether it is organizing stakeholder meetings to explore the model, assisting in the identification and/or formation of a coordinating entity, developing sustainable funding structures, or facilitating the building of relationships with industry and higher education partners, Empower Schools can help districts build a successful Rural Collaborative.

The new learning opportunities created in a Rural Collaborative require school districts to share access to facilities and equipment that students cannot access in their own districts.



SPACE & FACILITIES

Rural Collaboratives are an opportunity to expand the programs that students can access because districts share unique facilities and equipment with partners. Many rural school districts have existing facilities to support some CTE coursework, but Rural Collaboratives create a broader range of programs of study for students to access.

These new learning opportunities can lead to increased student demand, which may lead to new facility or program needs. The RSIZ welding program was so popular that a new facility was built on campus grounds and its Next Generation Medical Academy converted an old home-economics kitchen into a realistic “hospital floor” with a reception desk, hospital bays with EKG machines, and other medical equipment.

To establish clear policies and procedures, a formal agreement must exist among all entities partnering in a Rural Collaborative.



BUDGET & OPERATIONS

The Rural Collaborative model allows for variation in governance, but all structures require a formal agreement among school districts, industry, higher education partners, and a coordinating entity. These agreements set the goals and vision for the Collaborative, making it possible to track progress over time and adjust courses along the way. It also makes student success a shared responsibility across sectors that typically operate in silos. Collaboratives typically work through the details of their agreement during a planning year when they also clarify how they will share services like budget, transportation, and anything specific that may be required by a state or teachers union.

The coordinating entity is a central component to the Rural Collaborative model. A coordinating entity can take several forms depending on what makes the most sense for the partners. The coordinating entity could be a nonprofit established for this purpose or an existing nonprofit within the region that assumes the role. It could also be an institution of higher

education or an education service center in the region that can support the cross-sector work of the Collaborative.

The financial arrangements within a Rural Collaborative are critical to ensuring success and sustainability and must be transparent, accurate, and fair. The two key components of the funding structure are start-up costs to build the Collaborative and its programming and ongoing operating expenses. In some states, there are grant opportunities to fund this type of innovative work in the start-up phase; a funding model can be developed that has districts pay a flat fee to cover the shared costs of Collaboratives. Technical assistance regarding financial policies and procedures and strategic guidance in setting up a collaborative can be critical to a successful program.

While students are attending programming in neighboring districts, it is typical for them to follow the specific school or district policies and the rules of the host campus. Students are also accounted for in their home school and district for per-pupil revenue purposes, but districts pay tuition based on mutual agreements and state CTE funding structures. [📄 Sample Rural Collaborative Nonprofit Annual Budget](#) [📄 Rural Collaborative Career and Technical Education Funding Analysis](#)

Transportation is also a critical element of Rural Collaboratives that districts must agree upon. Ideally, free transportation is provided to all students who participate in a Rural Collaborative. Paying for transportation is typically less expensive than hiring additional teachers and purchasing additional equipment for programs, and using Wi-Fi-equipped buses can make commuting a productive time.

To gain the support of multiple stakeholder audiences, it is essential for Rural Collaboratives to have a comprehensive communication plan.



COMMUNICATIONS

To engage a variety of stakeholders across a region, Rural Collaboratives should develop clear, branded communications for different audiences. Conveying the mission and message widely through a range of channels will help to generate the student participation and community buy-in needed for long-term impact in a region. These channels may include attendance at different school board meetings, newsletters, a website, annual reports, and engagement with families as well as local media. Some collaboratives dedicate funds to work with a communications and marketing partner to manage the demands of messaging across districts.

IMPLEMENTATION

Supports Offered

[Empower Schools](#) offers the following supports to help implement a Rural Collaborative.

Advisory and Consulting Services

Cost Associated



Empower Schools provides technical assistance and planning and launch support for Rural Collaboratives:

- Planning, launch, and implementation support, including readiness and viability assessments, goal setting and alignment, fundraising, and agreement drafting;
- Coaching and support for school leaders;
- Training for leaders to scale the model in their own regions;
- Learning across collaboratives to connect, share lessons learned, and build relationships.

[Express Interest](#)

Rural Collaboration Toolkit

Free



The RSIZ, an exemplar Rural Collaborative in South Texas, has developed a comprehensive guide to help interested school districts navigate the process of building a Rural Collaborative.

[Access Now](#)

Learning Visits

Free



The RSIZ has hosted around 20 learning visits for individuals from across the country who are interested in learning about the model.

[Express Interest](#)

Reach

21

School Districts

8,652+

Students

6

Rural Collaboratives

38%

Students of Color

Impact

Since the launch of the RSIZ in 2019, there has been significant growth in student outcomes and opportunities.

- The percentage of graduating students each year completing an industry-based certification since 2019 has quadrupled from 12% in 2019–2020 to 51.7% in 2021–2022. This was an increase of 2.5x the state average.
- The RSIZ, for the second year in a row, has outperformed the state and surrounding regions in graduation rate and dual credit completion, which grew from 15% in 2018–2019 to 65% in 2021–2022.
- Prior to the RSIZ, students had access to just 3 certifications (in only one of the districts). In 2021–2022, RSIZ students have access to 11 certifications, in addition to dual credit opportunities.
- This impact is even more significant given that the underserved population of students in the RSIZ is 80% compared to the state average of 52%.

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RESOURCES



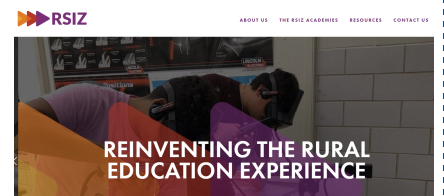
[Introduction to the Rural Schools Innovation Zone](#)

A video explaining the history and operations of the RSIZ in Texas.

The Rural Schools Innovation Zone:
A new approach for regional collaboration in Texas.

[Rural Collaboration Toolkit](#)

An online document that explains the steps involved in starting a rural collaborative.



[Rural Schools Innovation Zone](#)

The website of the RSIZ.

