RURAL SCHOOLS COLLABORATIVE

Impact Report

July 1, 2025 - June 30, 2026

Contents

Who We Are

Board of Directors & Staff..... 03
Year in Review..... 04
Rural Education Summit..... 06
Regional Hub Network..... 08

Programs

Grants In Place..... 10
Rural Teacher Corps..... 12
I Am A Rural Teacher..... 14
GRAD Partnership..... 16

Looking Forward

Investing in Rural Communities..... 18
Donor Spotlight..... 20
Donor Recognition..... 22

Our Mission

Building sustainable rural communities through a keen focus on place, teachers, and philanthropy.

Front Cover (top): Shameka Woods and Nancy Van Milligen at RSC's annual Summit

Front Cover (middle): Kim Walter's Grants in Place students in Chillicothe, MO

Front Cover (bottom): Monmouth College TARTANS Rural Teacher Corps, Monmouth, IL

Back Cover (top right): Rural teacher panelists Paula Tonn (WI) Ruth Owusu-Ansah (IL) and Jenna Spain (IA)

Back Cover (bottom left top): Student and parent Grants in Place volunteers in Lodi, WI

Back Cover (bottom left): Members of the Wyoming Rural Teacher Corps

Pictured (right): 2026 RSC Board and Staff

Welcome from the Chair

Over the past several years, I have had the great pleasure to learn about the extraordinary work of Rural Schools Collaborative, and in recent months to gain the privilege of chairing our Board. Rural Schools Collaborative truly is a one-of-a-kind national network that unites rural educators, communities and leaders in service of a central mission - to strengthen public schools so they remain central to the vitality of rural communities. The Collaborative does so as a place of collective learning and sharing of strategic actions among 30 Hubs of educational leaders and institutions, and the hundreds of educators of the Rural Teacher Corps that together serve rural regions in almost every state across our country. As you will see from this report, Rural Schools Collaborative also has direct, observable impacts through projects like Grants in Place that not only contribute to positive outcomes for students and educators, but also deepen their connection and love for their communities' unique assets.

As you read this report, I invite you to consider the many impacts of our powerful network, now ten years old, and growing every year. I trust you will be as inspired as I am about the current work and future promise this network holds in helping to assure our rural communities and schools remain vibrant, joyous places.

Happy reading!

Cyrus Driver

Cyrus Driver
Board Chair

Board of Directors

Term: July 1, 2026 - June 30, 2027

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Brian Fogle
Drury University
Springfield, MO

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Dakota Resources
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Nate McClennen
Getting Smart
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Megan Cremeans
Managing Director, Rural Teacher Corps
Columbus, OH

Joel Boettger
Strategic Fellow
Wichita, KS

Directors Note:

Across the country, Rural Schools Collaborative's partnerships are growing. Yes, we are guided by a Theory of Change, a Strategic Plan, and a spiffy metrics dashboard...those are important. They keep us organized and focused.

But my hunch is that this expansion is less about our manifestos, and more because the heart of RSC remains the same, year-after year. For over a decade, it's still about people who authentically show up, who care, and who choose to work together.

Through the Regional Hub Network, RSC's partners are expanding opportunities for rural educators and students alike. From place-based classroom grants to tackling the rural teacher shortage to boosting student wellbeing, the whole is greater than the sum of its parts.

We're glad you're here. Thanks for being a part of #TeamRural!

Taylor McCabe-Juhnke
Executive Director,
Rural Schools Collaborative

BY THE NUMBERS:

Our partner organizations received **$5.1 million** through RSC letters of support and funder connections.

Rural Teacher Corps programs impacted over **1,250 rural teachers** in the 2025-2026 school year.

More than **$615,000 in philanthropy** passed through RSC to the rural education field.

75+ rural advocates from across the country attended RSC's Summit in Madison, WI.

RSC staff made **30+ visits** to partners, schools, and events throughout the Regional Hub Network.

Pictured (right): Laterica Burton's class in Blytheville, AR, Grants in Place recipient

WHAT WE'RE LEARNING:

Place-Based Education benefits rural students AND teachers.

- In a retrospective study led by Vanderbilt University, 97% of educators said that building a Place-Based Education (PBE) project increased their professional purpose, agency, and autonomy.
- A 2026 program evaluation led by Teton Science Schools showed statistically significant improvements in engagement of both teachers and students from RSC's Grants in Place.
- Students also reported significant gains in their academic support and their sense of place through place-based learning projects.

Student agency, belonging, and connectedness are key levers for student success.

- Participating in the GRAD Partnership for Student Success has helped schools reduce chronic absenteeism by an average of 20% and reduced course failure rates by 44% over three years.
- More than 50 rural schools across RSC's network worked hand-in-hand with local intermediaries to build locally-responsive student success systems.
- Over the last 3 years, GRAD Partnership has successfully increased the number of students on track for graduation and postsecondary success.

Equitable funding, geographic isolation, and data capacity are key hurdles in rural education.

- 20% of all public school students in the US attend a rural school, but rural places receive an estimated 3.5% of national philanthropy, and 1% of venture capital.
- Mentorship for rural teachers is an emerging strategy for connecting specialized knowledge and reducing geographic isolation through programs like MentorMT in Montana and RuralThrive in Maine.
- Local partners consistently report shortages of certified rural teachers and essential support staff, but the impact of these shortages are underresearched, localized, and poorly understood.

Pictured (right top): Arkansas Rural Teacher Corps members

Pictured (right middle): Black Belt GRAD Partnership Lead Annah Rogers and RSC's Henry Whitehead

Pictured (right bottom): RSC's Savannah Hippen (left), Henry Whitehead, Grants in Place recipient Matt Beatty, and RSC Iowa Hub Lead Josie Manternach

Pictured (above): RSC advocate Babak Mostaghimi (left), RSC Executive Director Taylor McCabe-Juhnke, RSC Board of Directors Vice Chair Melissa Harris

Pictured (above): RSC Oregon Regional Hub Lead Dave Dallas (left), Grants in Place recipient Ben DeCarlow

Rural Education Summit

In June, Rural Schools Collaborative hosted the fourth annual Rural Education Summit in Madison, WI. Educators, higher education leaders, nonprofit partners, and community advocates gathered to share innovative strategies, build relationships, and advance solutions that support thriving rural schools, educators, and communities.

Together, attendees explored critical conversations focused on key challenges and opportunities in rural education, including educator pathways, community partnerships, and artificial intelligence. Conversations centered on:

- **Building the rural educator pipeline:** Practical solutions for recruiting and retaining teachers, including "Grow Your Own" programs, flexible preparation pathways, and robust mentorship models.
- **Strengthening Place-Based Education:** Leveraging local assets and community knowledge to create meaningful experiences rooted in place.

- **Supporting local innovation:** Experienced rural educators underscored that, while systemic challenges persist, rural schools thrive through local solutions, strong community relationships, embracing innovation, and the expertise within their own communities.

This summit created space for meaningful conversations, inspiring new partnerships and actionable learning among leaders dedicated to helping rural schools and communities thrive nationwide.

Special thanks to the ECMC Foundation, Margaret A. Cargill Philanthropies, Compeer Financial, and The Madison Club for their support of the Rural Education Summit.

Pictured (left top): Laura Bean, University of Maine Rural THRIVE

Pictured (top right): Elizabeth Heatherington and Brandon Lucius, Arkansas Teacher Corps

Pictured (middle): 2026 RSC Summit Attendees

Pictured (Bottom right): Jordan Spence, Building Bridges to Careers (left) with Al Schademan, California State University - Chico

Regional Hub Network

RSC's Regional Hub partners are dedicated to strengthening rural education across the communities they serve. Guided by a diverse coalition of higher education institutions, nonprofits, and community foundations, the Regional Hub Network provides a flexible framework for collaborative partnerships. Through the ongoing exchange of stories, resources, and strategies, these organizations collectively impact more than 2.5 million students across rural school communities. We extend our sincere gratitude to the following Regional Hub leaders for their commitment to this shared work.

By the Numbers

30+
Regional Hub Leads

2.5+ million
rural students served

1
shared vision

Regional Hub Leads

July 2025 - June 2026

Nicola Mason
1. Appalachia
Morehead State University

Allen Pratt
1. Appalachia
University of Tennessee-Chattanooga

Jaime Festa-Daigle
2. Arizona
Arizona Rural Schools Association

Melissa Sadorf
2. Arizona
Northern Arizona University

Brandon Lucius
3. Arkansas & Delta
Arkansas Teacher Corps

Candace Williams
3. Arkansas & Delta
Rural Community Alliance

Jan Miller
4. Black Belt
University of West Alabama

Robert Fulton
5. Colorado
University of Northern Colorado

Tim Buttles
6. Driftless Region
University of Wisconsin-Platteville

Joshua Gibb
7. Illinois
Galesburg Community Foundation

Jim La Prad
7. Illinois
Western Illinois University

Tammy La Prad
7. Illinois
Monmouth College

Steve Combs
8. Indiana
University of Indianapolis Center for Excellence in Leadership of Learning

Renee Cocanower
8. Indiana
University of Indianapolis Center for Excellence in Leadership of Learning

Josie Manternach
9. Iowa
Community Foundation of Greater Dubuque

Karen Eppley
10. Kansas
Kansas State University

Patti Permenter
11. Mississippi
William Carey University, Mississippi Rural Education Association

Charlene Atkins
12. Missouri
University of Central Missouri

Beth Hersh
12. Missouri
Community Foundation of the Ozarks

Barri Tinkler
12. Missouri
Missouri State University

Jayne Downey
13. Montana
Montana State University

Cat Biddle
14. New England
University of Maine

Mike Bitz
15. North Dakota
North Dakota Small Organized Schools

Karen Schreder
16. Northern California
California State University-Chico

Onica Mello
16. Northern California
North State Together

Leslie Cook
17. Northern Rockies
Teton Science Schools

Tasha Werry
18. Ohio
Building Bridges to Careers

Jacqueline Yahn
18. Ohio
Ohio University

Dave Dallas
19. Pacific Northwest
Eastern Oregon University

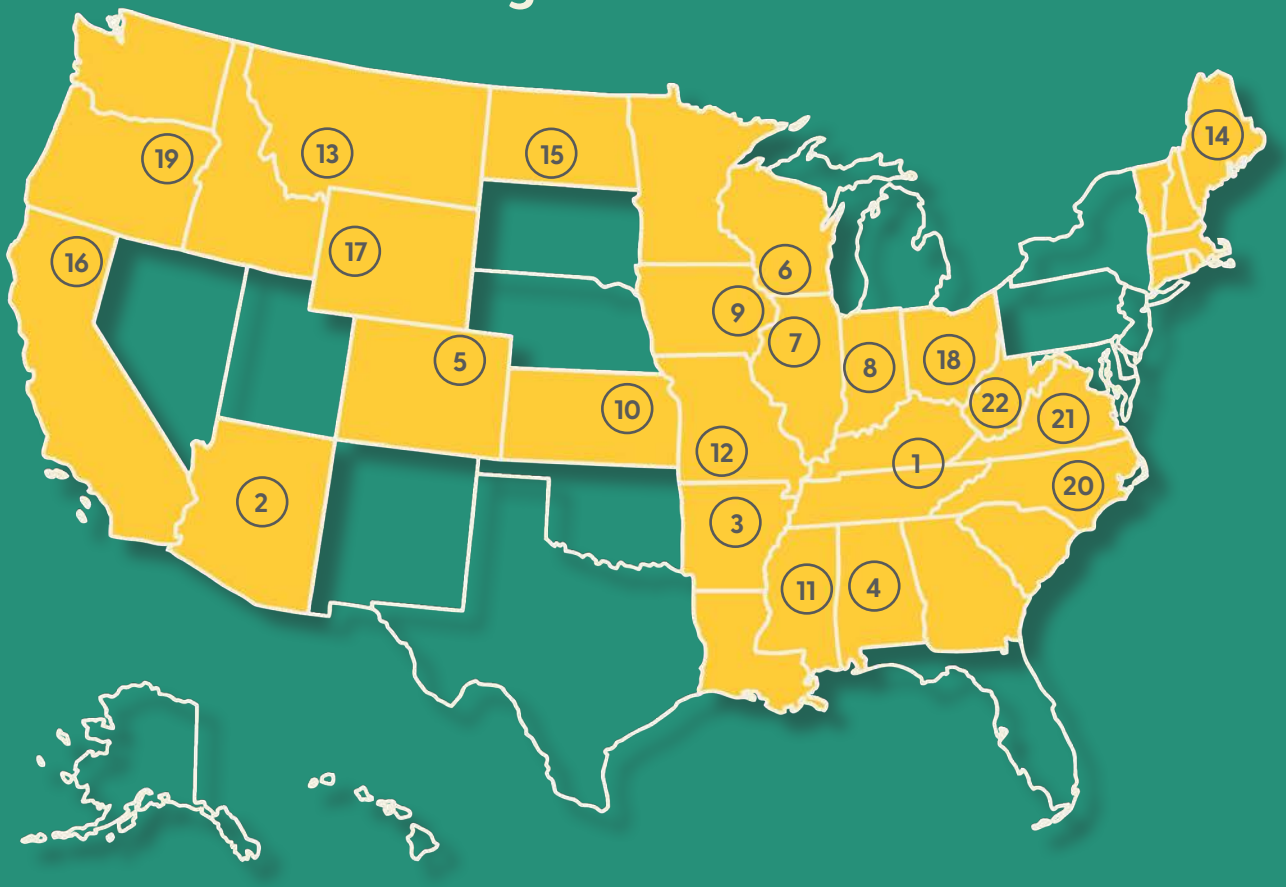
Loni Crumb
20. Southeast
East Carolina University

Amy Price Azano
21. Virginia
Virginia Tech

Clint Whitten
21. Virginia
Virginia Tech

Erin McHenry-Sorber
22. West Virginia
West Virginia University

Regional Hubs



Grants in Place

Since 2015, Rural Schools Collaborative and our Grants in Place partners have awarded over $800,000 to rural teacher-leaders. Each year, RSC's Grants in Place program provides a rural teacher from each of RSC's Regional Hubs with an award up to $2,500 to pursue a Place-Based Education project with their students, connecting classrooms and communities through shared learning.

By the Numbers

$99,730
Place-Based Education funds awarded

38
Rural teacher place-based grants

100%
of awardees saw improved collaboration between community and school

CHALLENGE

Disconnected Learning

Place-Based Education is a promising strategy for rural learners. RSC's Grants in Place program celebrates the creativity and leadership of rural teachers by funding hands-on projects that engage students through real-world learning, strengthening the bonds between rural schools and communities.

STRATEGY

Investing in Community

Each year, RSC's Regional Hub organizations connect local teachers to Grants in Place awards. In addition to receiving flexible funding, teachers gather virtually throughout the spring to exchange ideas, share progress, and celebrate each other's work. Grounded in the research-based Place-Based Education model from Teton Science Schools, Place-Based Education can increase student engagement, strengthen teacher-student relationships, and support academic outcomes.

IMPACT

Making a Difference

Place-Based Education benefits both rural students and teachers; a 2026 retrospective study led by Vanderbilt University showed that 97% of Grants in Place educators reported increased professional purpose, agency, and autonomy in the classroom, and a 2026 program evaluation from Teton Science Schools showed statistically significant increase in student engagement.

And, the generosity of these grants are contagious. The 2026 cohort was supported by the Bezos Family Foundation, but many teachers also received additional local matching funds or in-kind contributions to expand the impact of their projects. Plus, additional Grants in Place projects were made possible through funding opportunities via The Roundhouse Foundation, Community Foundation of Greater Dubuque, Community Foundation of the Ozarks, East Carolina University, and North Dakota Small & Organized Schools. RSC would also like to thank The Maxwell/Hanrahan Foundation for additional support of the Grants in Place program. We're deeply grateful to these champions for expanding access to meaningful learning experiences for rural students, teachers, and communities.

SPOTLIGHT

Paula Tonn

School Forest Revitalization, Lodi, WI

Paula and her team at Lodi School District utilized their second Grants in Place award to support continued development of their school forest, a place where students can gather, learn and play. This spring, every student from elementary school through high school planted a tree for Arbor Day, forging personal connections between students, school, and community.

"I think the more that you can involve community members, that is going to be a public school strength. For us, it's just been really key to have a tangible spot that kids feel connected to."

Pictured (right): Lodi School District students at their school forest with Smokey the Bear

SPOTLIGHT

Laterica Burton

Art Roots, Blytheville, AR

Laterica's project engaged K-6 students to create murals, mixed-media pieces, and public art installations that reflect Bytheville's heritage. Students explored Blytheville's history, geography, and cultural identity through the lens of art. As a result of this project, student artwork was displayed in public spaces– libraries, parks, and local businesses– turning the town into a living gallery of youth expression, with the town now hungry for more.

"It was really powerful to see them take ownership of something so visible... This project allowed students to express themselves, build confidence, and see how art can make a real impact."

Pictured (left): Laterica Burton's students sharing art with their community

SPOTLIGHT

Bre Cretser

Salmon at School, Donnelly, ID

Bre's ***Salmon at School*** project provided an immersive investigation of the Chinook Salmon, as students acted as classroom aquatic-culturists raising 50 salmon eggs. The unit integrated hands-on science with Idaho history, featuring Nez Perce Tribe members and biologists who taught salmon anatomy, environmental challenges, and cultural connections. The project concluded with a regional camping trip and a fish release ceremony on the Salmon River alongside the Nez Perce Tribe.

"The project has been an impactful interdisciplinary learning experience that has deepened students' understanding of local ecology, culture, and environmental responsibility."

Pictured (right): Bre Cretser's students observing salmon eggs

Rural Teacher Corps

The Rural Teacher Corps Community of Learners is a growing network of diverse organizations, united by a strong belief that teachers play a vital role in fostering vibrant rural communities. Made up of 20+ partner organizations (and counting), this network aims to grow and sustain programs that recruit, prepare, and retain passionate educators dedicated to rural schools and students.

By the Numbers

1 in 5

Of all public school students in the US attend a rural school

1 in 8

Teaching positions nationally were unfilled or filled by under-certified teachers in 2025, with rural schools impacted the most

1,250+

Educators impacted this year across RSC's Rural Teacher Corps network

CHALLENGE

Tackling The Teacher Shortage

Many rural schools across the country face a continuing shortage of teachers and essential support staff. Because rural schools play an outsized role in their communities – often serving as the largest employer and providers of public infrastructure – these shortages significantly impact students, families, and the vitality of rural towns. The reverse is also true; increasing the number of caring rural educators can have an outsized positive impact on a community's future.

While many factors contribute to rural teacher shortages, the benefits and opportunities of teaching in rural places are too often overlooked in the national conversation. Intentional efforts to recruit, prepare, and retain rural educators are therefore needed to highlight these assets and promote a holistic, community-based approach to rural teaching.

STRATEGY

Rural Teacher Corps Network

A three-year initiative called the Rural Teacher Corps Community of Learners emphasizes collaboration across geographies, with particular focus on supporting rural teacher candidates through Place-Based Education, mentorship, and support systems. Programs in the RSC's Rural Teacher Corps Network offer models that leverage regional identity and community assets to recruit, prepare, and retain educators.

Together, the Community of Learners:

- Engage Rural Teacher Corps stakeholders via convenings, site visits, and capacity-building grants to facilitate knowledge sharing, funding strategies, and best practices;
- Bolster the rural teaching field through shared resources and storytelling and connecting early career educators through the Emergent Educators Advisory Council;
- Build a research and learning framework to explore program essentials, alumni tracking, and future recommendations.

Pictured (right): Members of the Great River Teacher Corps at Western Illinois University celebrate community during a rural teaching retreat

IMPACT

Catalyzing New Connections

The Rural Teacher Corps Community of Learners connects rural teacher initiatives for honest dialogue and shared problem-solving. RSC serves as a central host for the learning community, supporting both established and emerging programs to learn from peers, explore problems of practice, and share lessons learned.

"The most valuable part of participating in the Community of Learners is the connections and friendships formed with others who are working toward the same goal. The program creates a supportive space where we learn from one another, feel encouraged, and leave each session more energized and inspired."

- Beth Hersh, Community Foundation of the Ozarks

Pictured (above): A robust student organization, ED ASTRA is the rural teacher corps program at Kansas State University

SPOTLIGHT

What We're Learning So Far

#1 The Community of Learners leads to stronger program design and capacity. Programs report greater clarity around rural teacher program structure, recruitment strategies, and phased support for educators at different career stages.

#2 Peer learning and in-person engagement is invaluable. Site visits and regular convenings create rare opportunities for candid dialogue on similar challenges in different contexts. Participants consistently name site visits as particularly impactful for deepening shared understanding and generating more responsive, locally adaptable strategies for their rural teacher initiatives.

#3 Programs share an increased focus on sustainability. National, regional, and individual philanthropy all have a role to play in the success of rural teacher ecosystems. Challenging federal and higher education funding landscapes can be a barrier, but many established Rural Teacher Corps began as small initiatives that built sustainability over time through community partnerships, school foundations and endowments, and stories that helped attract additional philanthropy.

Pictured (above): Students with the Montana State University ASPIRE program

"Engagement in the Community of Learners project has strengthened our efforts to recruit, prepare, and retain rural educators by giving us structured opportunities to learn together with our colleagues who are running similar initiatives and to engage with partners to hone objectives and refine implementation plans."

- Dr. Jayne Downey, Director, Montana State University Center for Research on Rural Education

I Am A Rural Teacher

I Am A Rural Teacher shares the stories, experiences, and aspirations of America's rural teachers. By highlighting the narratives of veteran, new, and future teachers, the project strives to support an education ecosystem where rural teacher-leaders are front and center.

By the Numbers

From inception

300+

Total rural teacher stories shared

1,327,000

Views across digital platforms since inception

CHALLENGE

Negative Narratives

Rural communities and the teaching profession as a whole are often framed through a deficit lens: rural places are struggling, and teaching is no longer a career worth pursuing. These narratives often lack the perspectives of rural teachers themselves, whose experiences highlight the many assets of teaching in rural places. Teachers consistently describe the deep love and community they form, highlight their close relationships to students and families, and appreciate the flexibility of rural schools.

STRATEGY

Elevating Teacher Voice

I Am A Rural Teacher creates space for the voices of rural teachers to shape the national conversation, highlighting not only the challenges rural educators face, but also why they choose to teach, stay, and recommend rural teaching to others. Sharing the experiences and perspectives of these rural leaders is essential to elevating the teaching profession and shining a spotlight on the power of education to empower rural students and communities.

IMPACT

Amplifying the Profession

RSC's stories reached 350,000 views this year across platforms like websites, social media, newsletters, and podcasts. These asset-based rural perspectives bring the realities and strengths of rural education into the national conversation.

Scan or visit
iamaruralteacher.org

"Choose rural education if you are driven by purpose and service. Your influence will extend far beyond the classroom."

- Ava Hollins-Rogers, West Memphis, AR

"Like many rural educators, I am candid about the hurdles – from limited funding and professional isolation to common misconceptions about a lack of opportunity in rural areas. Instead of viewing these as barriers, I choose to see them as opportunities to think creatively and build strategic partnerships. I've learned to turn our community into our greatest resource."

- Crystal Barnett-Sheaves, Marietta, OH

Pictured (above): From left to right: Emma Tupper, ME; Kailyn Hoesman, IL; Shelby Starbuck, KS; Emma King, OH; Nicole McCain (Cooper), MO; Toni Myers, OR; Amelia Woollard, OH; Corey Pevitz, IL

GRAD Partnership for Student Success

The GRAD Partnership, led by the Everyone Graduates Center at Johns Hopkins University, unites 12 organizations to help schools implement evidence-based student success systems. Now in its fourth year, the GRAD Partnership has reached 200+ districts in more than 25 states. RSC is proud to contribute by supporting a rural schools cohort through our Regional Hub Network partners.

By the Numbers

50+

Schools are supported by RSC's partner network of Intermediaries

50% to 40%

Average chronic absenteeism declined from 50% to 40% over three years

39% to 22%

Average decline in course failure over three years

CHALLENGE

Declining School Engagement

Student attendance and academic success face growing challenges, particularly in the wake of pandemic-related disruptions. Chronic absenteeism is varied and complex, but is often fueled by weakened student-school connections, lack of reliable transportation, and feelings of isolation or exclusion. Growing numbers of students report that school feels unwelcoming or irrelevant, with limited access to meaningful relationships, extracurricular opportunities, or culturally responsive curriculum.

STRATEGY

High Quality Student Success Systems

To improve student attendance and engagement, GRAD Partnership schools are increasingly adopting strategies that build stronger connections between students and their school communities. High quality student success systems bring together four essential elements: supportive relationships, actionable holistic data, strategic improvement actions, and shared student-centered mindsets. Increasing school connectedness is one of the strongest interventions available to tackling chronic absenteeism. By bolstering student **agency, belonging,** and **connectedness**, schools can ensure that students feel supported, valued, and motivated to succeed.

1.

Pictured (right, 1-3):

Two students on the Paloma Elementary (AZ) student council have helped encourage their peers to attend school every day

Northern California GRAD Partnership lead Onica Mello (left), Southern Trinity Principal Andy Felt, and CTE teacher Cindy Dixon (right)

Fall River Junior Senior High School students

IMPACT

Rural Schools Cohort

Rural Schools Collaborative leads a Rural Cohort of the GRAD Partnership, coordinating with Regional Hub partners who serve as intermediaries between the GRAD Partnership and participating schools. These partners play an essential role by recruiting schools, offering implementation support and technical assistance resources for student success systems, facilitating data collection, fostering connections among schools, and highlighting their achievements.

The RSC Rural Cohort is composed of schools from Arizona, Black Belt, Missouri, Northern California, Oregon, and Southeast Regional Hubs. Additionally, our hub partners at the University of Indianapolis Center of Excellence in Leadership and Learning and the Community Foundation of Greater Dubuque also serve as GRAD Partnership intermediaries, bringing a diverse network of both rural and urban schools in Indiana and Iowa to engage in student success systems.

2.

SPOTLIGHT

McArthur, CA

3.

Fall River Junior Senior High School in McArthur, CA, serves about 200 students through a deep commitment to community and student-led success. As part of the GRAD Partnership Rural Cohort, supported by Onica Mello of the Northern California Regional Hub at North State Together, the Fall River leverages local support systems to boost student engagement, well-being, and career readiness.

Current efforts center on the "Every Day Counts" campaign, which uses incentives, peer encouragement, and family outreach to promote regular attendance. The campaign has thrived under the leadership of dedicated students, who have taken ownership of creating a culture of belonging at Fall River.

At Fall River, the close relationships and emphasis on connectedness has led to high participation in extracurricular activities, with over 80% of students involved in sports, peer mentorship, and local clubs. This strong focus on student agency and supportive adult-student relationships has cultivated a thriving school culture—driving Fall River's attendance rate up from the high eighties to 92% and demonstrating the power of relational, community-centered rural education.

"We want to be able to help kids and encourage them to be coming to school, because we want to hope that they can see these kinds of skills and find themselves a 'patchwork' and a club, something that really wants them to be here every single day, whether it's a friend, a club or something that's drawing them here."

- Caoimhe, Fall River Student Leader

Investing in Rural Communities

Rural communities are not waiting to be transformed, they are already creating solutions that work for their students, schools, and communities. Philanthropy has an important role to play in rural communities, not by prescribing solutions, but by investing in the educators and local leaders who know their communities best.

Pictured (above): Daniel Meekins and RSC's Taylor McCabe-Juhnke with leaders at the Appalachian Future Educators program visit in Moorehead, KY

SPOTLIGHT

Why Rural Philanthropy?

"Creativity is required to meet student needs with limited resources. That's exactly what I see manifesting in the work of Rural Schools Collaborative, which leads with a rural-first lens and shines a light on these communities as engines of innovation."

- Daniel Meekins, Senior Program Officer, Bezos Family Foundations

"As a rural learner and rural educator, I have seen what a critical role access to opportunity and high-quality credentials plays in the lives of rural learners and communities. Rural Schools Collaborative's work supports rural educators on their journeys and envisions a future where all rural communities have access to a system that was built with their unique needs in mind."

- Julia Cunningham, Program Officer, ECMC Foundation

"We know that not everyone has access to the same opportunities and that support for rural communities is vastly underrepresented in philanthropy. Margaret cared deeply about educators and communities that are overlooked. Educators are critical to the vibrancy of their rural communities and investment in work that supports them through place-based collaboration will positively shape the future."

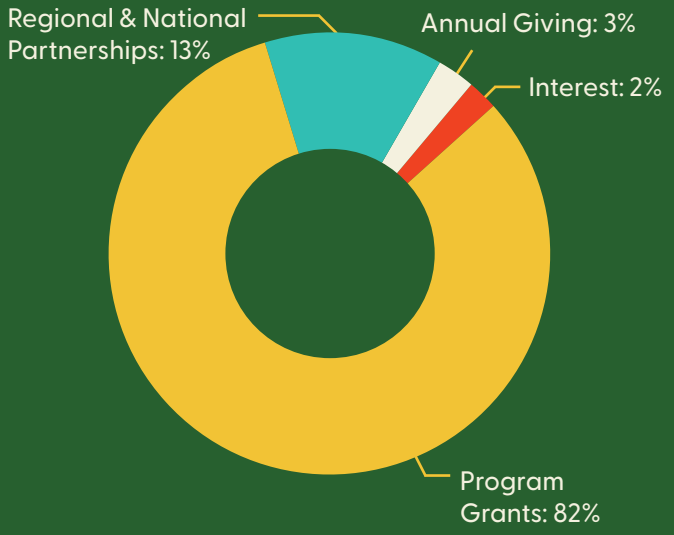
- Cay Kimbrell, Program Officer, Margaret A. Cargill Philanthropies

Financial Review

RSC is committed to stewarding every contribution with transparency, care, and purpose.

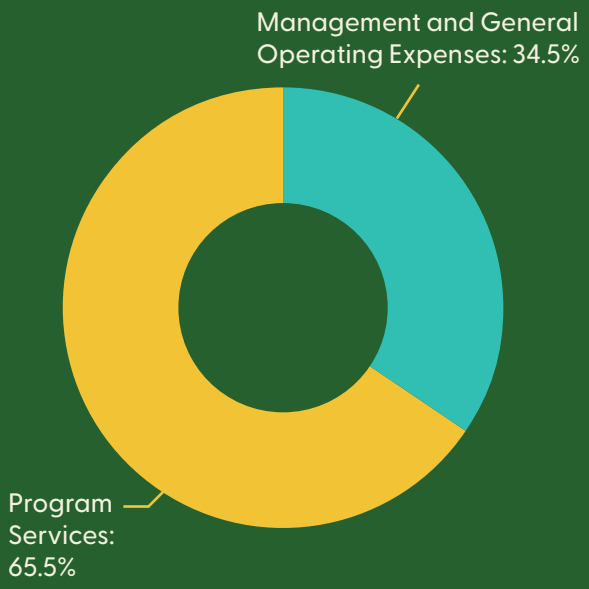
Revenue

in percent, Fiscal Year 2026



Functional Expenses

in percent, Fiscal Year 2026



Platinum Transparency 2026

Candid.

Rural Schools Collaborative is a lean, impact driven team committed to the sustainability of rural communities and schools. We take pride in our fiscal responsibility and transparency.

To view our full reports, scan or visit ruralschoolscollaborative.org/who-we-are/reports

DONOR SPOTLIGHT

Keegan Roth, Tampico, IL

Pictured (above): Opening Ceremonies for the FIRST LEGO League Challenge regional qualifier event, in the John Deere World Headquarters' Auditorium

Keegan Roth believes in supporting the places—and the people—that shape our future.

For Keegan Roth, rural education is personal. Growing up in rural Illinois, Keegan experienced firsthand the ways a strong school and a connected community can shape a young person's future. His own path is a reflection of the possibilities that can emerge when someone is given an opportunity to see what might be possible.

That opportunity came from a Western Illinois University career fair and a summer internship with John Deere, which opened the door to a company and a community that would become a defining part of his life for over 25 years. Today, Keegan understands the lasting impact that a meaningful early experience can have and he is passionate about creating those same kinds of opportunities for young people.

That connection to rural education is even closer to home: Keegan's wife teaches in a rural school, giving him a front-row seat to both the challenges rural educators face and the incredible opportunities they create for students every day. The energy and commitment of the school's teachers, staff, and administration toward the students' quality education and successful futures were part of what led him to initially connect with Rural Schools Collaborative.

As a longtime supporter of Rural Schools Collaborative, Keegan believes in the power of Place-Based Education—the idea that students can learn deeply when their education is connected to the people, places, stories and opportunities in their own communities.

"Rural places are full of people, knowledge and possibilities worth connecting young people to. I support RSC because it helps educators make those connections - and helps students see that where they come from doesn't have to be separate from their future. It can be part of the future they build."

A commitment to the next generation

Keegan's commitment to young people extends well beyond his support of RSC. Keegan, with support from John Deere, co-founded their rural school's FIRST LEGO League robotics teams in 2016. With over 10,000 global FLL teams, most from larger cities, they coached their teams to re-frame their "uniqueness of place" as an advantage, and to take pride in their ideas and the opportunities to share about their place. "Our rural community isn't outside the world of innovation. We would highlight to our teams that they had a unique place from which to enter it - and a perspective and passion

for shaping what comes next in the places they live in, rely on, and that they know best."

For Keegan, where those experiences happen matters. Through his involvement coaching his robotics teams and being Volunteer Coordinator on the planning team for the four FLL tournaments in the Illinois and Iowa Quad Cities, Keegan has helped create opportunities for young people to explore STEM, problem-solving, teamwork, and the possibilities of their future.

For years, robotics competitions have brought students into John Deere's World Headquarters. But for Keegan, introducing young people to a place like John Deere World Headquarters is about far more than providing a space for competition. It allows students to imagine themselves there.

"John Deere World Headquarters is only 40 miles from where our teams live, but at first, it feels a world away. Throughout the tournament day, after being in the space and experiencing the energy of the event; you can almost see the shift from 'this is another world... someone else's world' to 'maybe I could see myself here."

They see the people, the technology, the work, the history and the possibilities. They begin to understand that a place they may have only known from a distance could one day be their place, too. That is the power of place.

Giving where you believe

Keegan carries that same philosophy into his philanthropy. His support of RSC is an investment in rural educators, students, and communities, and in the belief that rural places are full of possibility. He understands that when we invest in the people doing the work today, we help create stronger opportunities for the next generation tomorrow.

For Keegan, giving to RSC (and encouraging his colleagues to give through the employee match!) is one way to make sure rural schools have the resources, relationships, and support they need to continue doing what they do best: helping young people see a future for themselves in the places they call home.

A future to imagine

Education isn't simply about teaching students about where they live. It is about helping them understand that where they come from matters, and that they have a role in shaping what comes next.

Whether that happens in a rural classroom, on a robotics field, at a community business, or inside the headquarters of one of the world's largest agricultural companies, these experiences can change the way a young person sees themselves and their future. And sometimes, investing in that possibility starts with simply opening the door.

Keegan Roth understands the power of rural schools. That's why he continues to give back, year after year, so that young people have every opportunity to build their own futures.

Pictured (left): Deere Headquarters Display Floor; the "Team Pits" – a between activity space for hanging out, sharing time and their project with other teams

Celebrating A Legacy: Larry Lee

This year, Rural Schools Collaborative lost a longtime friend and rural advocate, Larry Lee, who passed away on June 22, 2026, at the age of 83 in Mobile, Alabama.

Larry was one of RSC's earliest supporters, serving on the Board of Directors from 2016–2021 and continuing to champion rural education long after his board service ended. He traveled countless miles across Alabama, visiting rural schools, delivering Grants in Place checks to educators, and telling the stories of the students, teachers and communities he encountered along the way.

"Larry Lee was a passionate voice for schools and communities. He was a steadfast advocate for rural education, and he had a keen understanding of the relationship between good schools and economic development," says Gary Funk, RSC Founder. "RSC would not be where it is today without Larry. Not only was he a joyful board member and an entertaining writer, but his early work with Dr. Jan Miller and her colleagues at The University of West Alabama was instrumental in advancing RSC, its Regional Hub program, and the Rural Teacher Corps initiative. Larry will be missed".

Pictured (above): Larry Lee presenting 2016 Grants in Place Award in Valley, AL

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Our strong supporters have propelled our impact! Generous donors like you have made Rural Schools Collaborative what it is today.

Rural Cornerstones: $250,000+

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