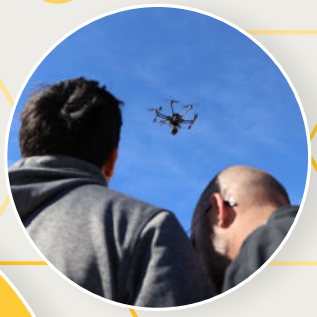
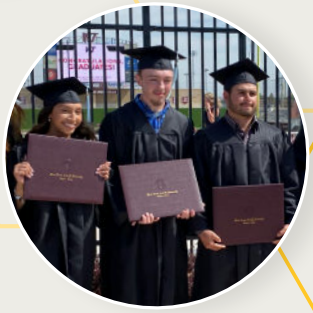
ASU Prep Global
Arizona State University


Redesigning Rural

Building new learning models
through edu-preneurial strategies

Kay Johnson, Director of Strategic Communications

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Why Entrepreneurship Matters

Enrollment drops are particularly difficult in rural areas, where schools are losing the students they exist to serve. How are rural leaders intentionally trying to change the tide?

In select rural school districts and small towns nationwide, traditional learning structures are being unbundled, re-shuffled, and re-imagined. Reimagined learning paths are serving to broaden learning options, deepen career exposure, reduce post-secondary financial burden and risks, and re-engage students. Yet, rethinking the K-20 learning path is anything but simple.

Just ask Dr. Cory Steiner, Superintendent of Northern Cass School District (NCSD) in North Dakota, where the entire district shifted to a competency learning model, capitalizing on the notion that learning happens everywhere. It's been a long journey.

"Doing the right things for kids is hard, but I always tell people, 'hard' is not a piece of evidence that something's wrong."

It took several years for NCSD to redesign their school, requiring input and coordination from everyone. When talking with leaders in other rural districts about innovating, Steiner often hears, "We're rural. We can't do that." He begs to differ.

"I'm working with a school district in Wyoming that [provides] 400 course offerings, and it's a school district of 200 kids."

The challenge, he says, is more about mindsets than resources, "It's a little bit of 'woe is me' when you're in rural areas instead of 'let's be the model for what rural should be.'" Steiner and rural leaders like him are endeavoring to do just that–create new learning models that, in addition to serving their communities, provide points of inspiration and potential direction for other entrepreneur-minded rural leaders.

> **Doing the right things for kids is hard, but 'hard' is not a piece of evidence that something's wrong.**

Investigate like an Edu-preneur

To begin designing solutions, entrepreneurs first identify a gap. They then create a solution or a product to fill that gap. How might rural education leaders use entrepreneurial mindsets to meet the needs of students, the community, and employers?

One challenge with this is that educators aren't trained to be entrepreneurs or business leaders. In fact, they may not even like the idea. After all, many choose education precisely because they want to do something meaningful and make a difference. Entrepreneurship, business development are not typically the things that drive educators.

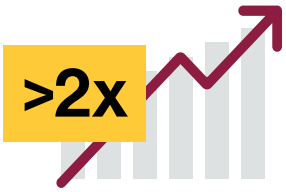
Yet, educators may well find themselves in direct competition with entrepreneurial endeavors, including privately held schools or increasingly sophisticated learning platforms. To help students navigate our "always connected" world and to re-engage them as proactive learners, educators will have to model entrepreneurial habits of curiosity, questioning, and problem solving.

Thankfully, creative rural educators and leaders are doing just that, teaming up with equally creative community members and business leaders to free learning systems from historic time and place-based restraints.

Educators everywhere can glean from such pioneering work. Step one in any entrepreneurial endeavor is to deepen understanding of the "customer"–in this case, the students, families, the community, employers, and the landscape they live within.

The Rural Landscape

In rural schools, enrollment drops can be devastating. Every loss of a student represents a loss to schools in terms of both families and dollars. Even pre-pandemic enrollment rates were dropping, fueled partly by declining birth rates.



Between 2015-16 and 2018-19, the percentage of rural elementary schools with enrollment declines greater than 20% more than doubled (up from 5% to 11%).

(Burtis & Goulas, 2023)

The pandemic made things worse, some drops persisting even today, putting not only schools at risk but also communities.

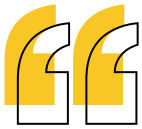
Rachel McClain, President of Collegiate Edu-Nation (CEN), a network of high-performing rural schools based in Texas, argues that failing to protect our rural communities is failing to protect our nation.

"We have to put an emphasis on rural. That's where our food comes from. It's where our fuel comes from. It's where our clothing comes from–all the things that keep society going from a foundational aspect–that's coming from rural."

Yet, getting rural students who left the system to re-engage requires offering personalized reasons to come back. Rather than facilitate personalization, though, our education system was designed to move students uniformly through curriculum in lock-step time frames and locations. Calendars and bell

schedules force educators to “cover the material” before state testing kicks in versus cultivating curiosity, gifts, and purpose.

Real-world learning experiences are challenging to design in any location, but in rural areas, limited access to the workplace can be especially challenging, blocking early exposure to careers, work-related mindsets and habits, and feedback to shape career decisions.



We have to put an emphasis on rural. That’s where our food comes from. It’s where our fuel comes from. All the things that keep society going–that’s coming from rural.

Know What Your “Customers” Need

In her work at Collegiate Edu-Nation, McClain often finds herself urging educators to understand that if they don’t take the time to deeply understand the pain points of the students, families, and employers they serve, others will. In fact, others already are in the form of tech-supported learning opportunities, and this leaves schools at a disadvantage.

Increased competition, however, can be a catalyst, encouraging rural leaders to blend their educational expertise with innovative approaches regarding how, where, and when students engage in learning.

“Educators sometimes feel like they’re not in the business of customer service, but the reality is, we are.” The struggle to see students or families, much less local industries, as “customers” is, she says, common. The word conjures ideas about winning deals or even manipulating target audiences into buying something they may not even need.

Yet, businesses without a pulse on how customers perceive and value what they have to offer are extremely vulnerable to the competition. Smart business leaders continually collect customer feedback so they can react swiftly to customer needs. Schools should do no less if they want to design learning that actually addresses stakeholder needs. For families in most rural communities, three specific needs rise to the surface:

Reducing financial risks

Mitigating “brain drain” caused by outmigration from rural communities

Increasing local learning opportunities that lead to high-wage jobs

Reduce financial risks

Three unique post-secondary learning challenges for rural areas stand out: financial risks, “brain drain” due to outmigration, and lack of local post-secondary learning options. Other needs are less unique to rural students but still vital to keeping students engaged. Providing flexible learning paths, for example, allows

students to establish effective habits of self-driven learning, a clear demand in today's workforce. Students may also need pacing leeway to address learning struggles, participate in internships, hold down a job, or leapfrog into early college credits and industry recognized certifications while in high school.

Families and students need financially viable post-secondary learning paths to living wages that don't require mortgaging the house. As families increase scrutiny on post-secondary learning investments, they need help reducing the financial hits that occur if, for instance, a student doesn't complete the degree or switches majors. Tens of thousands in debt hang in the balance.

"We have tried to design models that give students room to explore and try new things early so they can refine their choices before they get to college," says Amy McGrath, Managing Director of ASU Prep Academy. "Too often kids graduate with no idea about what they want to do simply because they lack exposure to various types of work. They need that to figure out what fits their interests, aptitudes, and even a sense of purpose."

Reduce Local "Brain Drain"

For rural communities, keeping kids in school and talent in the community are increasingly challenging.

About 60% of rural students who earn a degree do not return to their communities, according to the National Student Clearinghouse Research Center.

Even established rural professionals are lured to higher wages in metropolitan areas (U.S. Census Bureau, n.d.) The talent and labor market drain leaves rural areas struggling to staff even basic services, like schools and health care, putting the very community at risk (Johnson, 2024).

Yet, McClain argues that businesses still love rural areas. Property is more affordable, and employers can offer competitive wages at less cost than urban or suburban areas. The challenge is securing an efficient workforce pipeline.

As emerging technologies spin up at dizzying rates, job-specific training will increasingly fall to employers, but they need a workforce that knows how to learn and how to analyze, problem solve, project manage, pivot and adapt quickly, and work flexibly with others.

When it comes to "brain drain," the thing to avoid is retreat.

"We're our own worst enemies," says Allen Pratt, former Executive Director of the National Rural Education Association and current Director of the Center for Excellence and Innovation in Education at the University of Tennessee. Pratt cites a "deficit mindset" that he worries could be the undoing of rural schools. "We've got to look at what we can do and be competitive." Rather than retreating to "the way things were," rural schools have to up the ante.

Increase Learning Options

One way to raise the stakes is to design new learning choices. Yet, even while empowerment options like Education Savings Accounts (ESAs) are on the rise, ostensibly for the very purpose of widening school choice options, such programs may not actually help many rural families. Work schedules may eliminate homeschool as a choice. Transportation to a nearby private school may be a block, or in many cases, there may not even be a private school nearby. In many rural areas the public school is the only game in town.

By diving deeper into the needs of those they serve, rural educators can themselves design attractive solutions that open doors to long-term careers, even right within the area, preventing brain drain and the diminishment of the community. As part of the process, educators must understand who their competition is, along with how and why alternative options draw students away.

Know Your Competition

Rural public schools are not alone in terms of the rise in competitive options that students can potentially access outside of the public school system. Today's competitive educational landscape offers opportunities unheard of just a decade or two earlier. Students can enjoy flexible learning pathways available to anyone with Internet access. Increasing competition to traditional rural schools includes:

Online School:
Public and private-pay online learning programs at little or no cost.

Empowerment Scholarships:
ESAs, vouchers, and tax credits programs give access to education funds that parents can use for homeschool or to pay for private school.

Online Certifications:
Industry-recognized certifications that even high school students can access andcomplete on their own. Google, Microsoft, Cisco, and Adobe all offer certifications to any takers, opening doors to starting jobsalaries ranging from $35K to $60K.

Entering the Workforce:
As a partner, we're committed to your success, providing dedicated support, resources, and updates.

Options like these can pull students out of their rural schools, making it all the more challenging for the schools to design new models that re-engage the students they've lost or retain students they still have. To make schools and local school programs relevant, It's important for rural leaders to consider how they might directly design and offer programs that offer the same advantages and then some.

Design Solutions

Find Your People

The first step in any design endeavor is listening. In order to design an effective solution, it is critical to first gain a deep understanding of the pain points, gaps, needs, and even culture or mindset of the people who will ultimately benefit. Listening well often begins with getting the right stakeholders around a table.

The communities of Globe and Miami in the foothills of the Pinal Mountains of Arizona, collectively representing about 9,200 residents, enjoy both a high Hispanic population and strong community sensibilities. Located in Arizona's "copper corridor," where the mining industry has been the source of economic boons and devastating busts. Limited job diversity due to over-dependence on the mining industry, high poverty rates, and workforce shrinkage due to outmigration, have together fueled unemployment and underemployment.

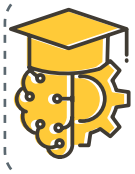
Miami Independent School District Superintendent, Dr. Richard Ramos, was one of those students who left the area and didn't come back. He grew up in Globe, graduated from ASU, and worked in education mostly in the Phoenix area for many years. After moving back to the Globe-Miami area, he accepted the superintendent role, prompting him to begin imagining the future for students in the area.

"I needed to give back to my hometown community," Ramos says of his return. Undaunted by the area's challenges, Ramos was less worried about improving student outcomes than increasing the expectations, excitement, and buy-in of the community.

"This is my 29th year in education. I've been a teacher in some of what people would consider the most challenging areas. But my kids were never challenging–ever. They were some of the best children that I've ever had the opportunity to interact with."

To get the adults on board, Ramos recruited a team of parents, teachers, non-profit leaders, about 50 business leaders–as well as students–who all met regularly through "Business Partner Cafés." His goal? Redistribute ownership of student success to the whole community.

Using systems improvement frameworks, research, and stories from other districts, the team met for months to identify challenges, brainstorm solutions, and answer key questions together, such as:



What do we actually want our students to know and be able to do by the time they graduate?

What skills, insights and values will help them get through life?

Through open discussion, debates, sticky notes, and consensus gathering, each draft was revisited until a plan emerged that everyone owned–critical to holding the line when changes begin to be implemented.

For example, to bolster student success, a high uptick in phone calls, text messages, emails, and personal

contact meetings with parents was added to teachers' responsibilities. When asked whether teachers would balk, Ramos was quick to note that the idea didn't come from him. It came from the teachers. Ownership in designing solutions equips stakeholders, including students, to be activators and agents of change versus passive receivers.

Quarterly reporting links each strategic goal to quantitative and qualitative data that offers visibility into progress and keeps everyone accountable to metrics they themselves have set. Ramos sees the plan as a living document that stakeholders will revisit and refine as part of their shared ownership.

Ownership in designing solutions equips stakeholders, including students, to be activators & agents of change versus passive receivers.

Find Opportunities in Local Challenges

"If students graduate today with only a high school diploma, they're essentially dropouts in today's economy," McClain explains. To help rural schools offer competitive and affordable options for high-opportunity post-secondary learning paths, Collegiate Edu-Nation (CEN) works with rural districts to ensure that students earn, at the bare minimum, an industry-recognized certification attached to a high-wage job opportunity. CEN also brokers relationships with industries to open corresponding jobs in the area.

In Roscoe, Texas, a town of about 1,250 residents near Abilene, local leaders know first-hand the struggles of losing talent as students leave for college and find jobs elsewhere. When this farming and ranching community lost its only veterinarian, the local school offered space for a vet clinic. It was a win-win. Students interested in veterinary medicine now get hands-on experience, while also providing critical lab testing services for the industry.

"Roscoe is the furthest along in this," McClain noted, referencing the idea of co-locating a business within the high school. "The [vet] clinic has an embryology lab that supports the local beef and dairy cattle industry."

Roscoe Collegiate Independent School District's (RCISD) space-sharing partnership is just one example of CEN's stated commitment to "break cycles of generational poverty" through education.

CEN got its start when a 2006 research project with Texas A&M and Texas Tech led to a year-long initiative in Roscoe to launch Texas' first rural Early College in 2009. CEN has since designed multiple post-secondary pathways with stacked credentialing, college coursework, internships, and on-the-job training all in the mix.

What started as K12 programming has expanded to adults as well. As K12 students gained access to more credentialing opportunities, as well as potential matriculation into college programs, CEN saw an opportunity to serve adults who likewise still needed continuing learning opportunities. Using design

principles and frameworks that have emerged from their 20+ years of working with rural districts, CEN is building a growing national network of like minded rural school innovators.

While some public-facing, school-based business enterprises, like a coffee shop, a t-shirt business, and a welding shop are not the high-wage jobs CEN targets, these smaller student-led enterprises are strategic to CEN's design. Students learn principles of financial and inventory management, problem solving, time and people management, and customer service.

To get students into higher-wage, high-demand careers, CEN uses regional workforce data to identify businesses in need of a workforce. They routinely broker agreements with industries, non-profits, local and regional community colleges and universities, and with other rural communities to co-design accessible programs around industry needs.

Nate McClennen, Vice President of Strategy and Innovation at Getting Smart, especially likes the idea of tapping underused school facilities to bring business and education together.

Getting Smart is an advisory firm that blends design thinking with partner building, advocacy, and organizational development to address educational challenges. He sees location-based strategy as a smart move.

"The agreement is you get decent rent and terms, but in return you have to offer up internships and apprenticeships," says McClennen. "How do we co-locate and partner to attract real world learning opportunities in places where they might not exist?"

In North Dakota, Dr. Cory Steiner, superintendent for the Northern Cass Independent School District, puts students to work right within the district. When they struggled to pay for tech-support, they trained and employed students. "Our director of technology and our kids run our help desk," Steiner says, noting that his team has since designed internships in everything from food service to library support.

Creative solutions like these address real local challenges, attract businesses, and give students a chance to gain a variety of work experiences to inform their own career planning.

Design for "Learning Everywhere"

While we are all learning from the day we are born until the day we die, formal education only gives us credit for what we learn in school. It begs the question: How can learning experiences be designed to reflect and reward the reality that learning happens everywhere?

Northern Cass embraced ubiquitous learning by implementing a competency-based model. Located about 25 miles northwest of Fargo, Northern Cass is a consolidated district serving six small rural communities.

"We are literally located in a cornfield," said Superintendent Dr. Cory Steiner. Situated centrally between the communities it serves, Northern Cass serves 660 pre-K-12 learners.

According to Steiner, building the competency-based model has been anything but easy, requiring a huge mind shift and years of significant work for everyone involved. Yet, the desire to capture learning that happens even outside of school has galvanized students to actively seek out opportunities to learn.

Traditional learning model ⟼ Competency-based model

The Northern Cass team developed proficiency scales to guide articulation of mastery into credits. Instead of requiring students to take four years of English, Steiner explains, their competency approach flips the ownership to students to say, "Here's the standards. Tell me how you've mastered them." When one student returned from a trip to visit family in Norway for the entire summer, Steiner challenged him t o create a presentation about his time in Norway.

"Look at the skills listed in the district's 'profile of a learner,' and show us how your time in Norway helped you develop them."

Students no longer focus on earning credits –they focus on learning.

When NCSD began their work, they soon realized that the system itself could derail their vision. There was only one solution.

"We decided to tear down the system and rebuild," Steiner said. Because competency-based models advance learners on mastery versus grades or even grade levels, proficiency models are critical to validate learning, but building them is not for the faint of heart.

"It's been the hardest work in our careers but also the most fulfilling."

The payoff for students is a growing awareness of their own power to identify new learning opportunities themselves. While core academic studies in classrooms or online are still part of the mix, students can also demonstrate and receive credit for skills and knowledge they master via extracurriculars, volunteer work, an after-school job, or on their own.

NCSD has also integrated paid internships. Students can submit evidence of work-based learning, and the school articulates the learning into the student's permanent record. Talks are underway with the Mastery Transcript Consortium to create a digital learning record that enables students to showcase and demonstrate their proficiencies to higher ed and to potential employers.

Watching students shift from "what's my grade?" to "what am I learning?" is especially satisfying. "That's a beautiful thing," Steiner says. The mindshift to shared responsibility, where students are "finders" of learning opportunities and co-owners of designing their own pathways, offers a compelling vision.

"Do the *students* know where they are and where they are going in terms of the specific outcomes they need to master?" says McClennen. "That's a powerful, powerful idea for a learner to own. You move from an adult-centered, compliance-based system to a student-centered agency-based system. Mastery learning helps with that."

Issue Credit for "Learn Everywhere" Progress

Assessing and articulating ubiquitous learning is admittedly challenging. Standardized tests assess a tiny blip in the student's actual learning trajectory. McClennen would like to see schools create better signals of progress than "a set of courses and letter grades that are fairly arbitrary." Technology may offer an alternative.

"How can we use AI to effectively translate learning anywhere into a currency that matters, and the currency in this case is a set of durable skills."

From there, a digital wallet, essentially a record of mastered standards and skills, earned certifications and credentials, allows students "to store a lifetime of cradle to grave learning."

Weave Postsecondary into the Model

While a bachelor's degree still offers higher lifetime earnings, it can be difficult to get around the upfront time and financial investment for many rural families, who essentially have to finance not only tuition but also the living expenses that come with students moving away for college. Keeping students on an ongoing post-secondary learning track, while reducing financial risk is a real challenge.

Yet, entrepreneurial rural leaders are leaning into this challenge to design pathways to post-secondary credentialing and degrees right within the local community. Optimally, programs like CEN and ASU Prep are also creating locally based low or no-cost bachelor's degrees, an option slowly being realized in pockets of the country. The goal is to keep as much talent in the local area as possible and to offer affordable learning paths.

When post-secondary opportunities are woven into K-12 models, a powerful vision unfolds where students can explore career paths, test drive their interests, and gain marketable skills–all with little to no financial risk. Besides earning industry recognized credentials, students are now able to participate in high-demand, high-wage CTE programs, and gain college credits that seamlessly transfer to colleges and universities.

While the high school graduation rate is higher in rural versus metropolitan areas, the college going rate is lower. Early access to college is a powerful way to address that problem.

"We think it's an equity issue," says Steiner, whose district earmarks funds for college credits both through district budget and fundraising. "Students should be able to take as many [college] courses as they want."

Northern Cass partners both with community colleges and with ASU. The ASU partnership provides access to self-paced ASU courses, allowing students to balance work, sports, and other community activities.

> "The high level of student engagement at Northern Cass is the best evidence that the creative work they are doing is working," said Teresa King, Executive Director of Partner Success for ASU Prep Global. "Their vision is a great fit with our own mission to build new school models that make learning everywhere a reality."

Partner to Problem-Solve Like a Boss

Broker Industry Relationships

Convincing rural school leaders to forge partnerships with higher ed and with industry is another matter altogether. While educational leaders may have the desire, many lack the time and experience for dealmaking. They may also find it difficult to navigate non-educational revenue sources, such as federal workforce development funds. Though partner building can be unfamiliar territory, organizations like CEN can bridge the gap.

"We have someone on our staff very familiar with setting up apprenticeships and using available funds," says McClain, "Making that connection between K12 and the workforce is where we can help."

CEN helps rural communities recruit business partners, explore industry needs and determine the business community's commitment to co-designing K-12 learning experiences, including paid internships. In their quest for high-wage, high-demand jobs with solid career growth paths, a recent addition was a cyber security program.

"The cyber industry is an excellent career opportunity, because you can work in your community at your own home and graduate with four certifications. We build those with associate degrees because we want every kid to have that option," McClain explains, noting that the certifications alone can demand jobs at $60K to $70K right out of high school.

The goal is to create a win-win-win for businesses, students, and local communities. McClain's message to business and industry leaders is simple.

"If you're willing to train people or partner with us to help train people, we can provide a workforce."

In Colorado City, Texas, Trane, a global commercial and residential HVAC industry, a division of Ingersoll Rand, built a new facility and agreed to a learning partnership with CEN to advance opportunities in the region. Located between Abilene and Midland, Colorado City has a population of 3,800 and is a historic hub for the cattle and oil industries. In recent years, however, the area has seen growth in the renewable energy space, specifically wind energy.

Through this partnership, Trane is focusing on sustainable energy solutions, such as hybrid and smart HVAC technologies designed to reduce carbon emissions. Trane's investment into Colorado City students includes a dedicated lab for training students on cutting-edge equipment. Besides graduating with HVAC certifications, students also develop expertise in advanced energy conservation and sustainability principles—skills aligned with high-wage, high-demand careers in the growing clean energy sector.

By leaning on the expertise of organizations like CEN to design such partnerships, rural educators can focus on designing relevant learning opportunities. The resulting programs can transform local economies by growing and retaining skilled talent.

Finding higher education partners is also important. As a partner in the Miami-Globe school district, ASU and ASU Prep were invited to participate in the discovery sessions that Ramos hosted. Amber Morrow, Senior Manager of Community Outreach and Engagement at ASU Prep, saw the meetings as an opportunity to watch community development in the making.

“People who thought things should be done differently were challenging some of the new ideas. Ramos would invite them for a cup of coffee, sit down with them, listen, and get to the root of the challenges.”

Before ASU and ASU Prep offered any direct services, Morrow notes that they simply supported the community building process over several months. For Morrow, bringing in partners to listen and participate in that process was the “secret sauce” to creating a foundation for change. As thought partners and potential providers, they saw their role as listeners and learners so that any future recommendations would be grounded in a deep understanding of local needs.

“It’s not about ASU being the driver. They’re driving their own success, and we’re taking the back seat by being a great partner and helping provide resources and opportunities that are going to elevate and lift not only their community but their kids.”

Finding such willing partners will jump start new models by providing buy-in, insights, connections, and champions for change.

Potential Opportunities for Industry Partnerships:

Co-design Paid Internships & Apprenticeships: Collaborate with local industries to develop hands-on training programs. *Example: Cybersecurity programs with certifications that lead to $60K–$70K starting salaries.*	**Create Dedicated Training Labs:** Provide industry-specific labs or facilities within schools. *Example: Trane’s HVAC lab in Colorado City, focused on renewable energy and advanced technology.*
Utilize Underused School Facilities: Offer space for businesses to co-locate within schools in exchange for training opportunities. *Example: Veterinary clinic in Roscoe, providing students with real-world experience.*	**Leverage Industry Expertise for Curriculum Development:** Partner with businesses to design courses aligned with workforce needs. *Example: Developing hybrid and smart HVAC technology training with Trane.*
Broker Agreements for High-Demand Careers: Work with regional businesses to create pathways for students to enter growing fields. *Example: Collaborations with industries in renewable energy, cybersecurity, and advanced manufacturing.*	**Incorporate Industry-Recognized Certifications:** Align educational offerings with certifications that lead to immediate job opportunities. *Example: Certifications from Google, Microsoft, or Adobe that provide competitive salaries. technology training with Trane.*

Expand versus Contract!

For rural leaders who are just struggling to squeeze every penny from tight budgets, the idea of expanding their programming may seem out of reach. Yet, leaders like Dr. Eric Holmes in Sierra Vista, Arizona, beg to differ. As the COVID crisis waned, school leaders like Holmes were alarmed to find that enrollments simply weren't returning to pre-pandemic levels, sending him to investigate why the students disappeared and how they might be re-engaged.

"We lost 1,100 students," says Holmes, Superintendent of Sierra Vista Unified School District (SVUSD). Accepting the drop as the new status quo and being satisfied to revert back to business as usual was not an option. Holmes was determined to offer something more attractive than homeschooling, where he discovered most of the missing students had landed.

SVUSD serves students in an area covering 108 square miles. Because of the large service area, Sierra Vista's schools face challenges typical in rural areas, like transportation or resource issues. A significant percentage of families (22.4%) live below the poverty line. The loss of 1,000 students was a huge financial hit to the district.

"If we don't have the kids, we don't get the [funding], and that means our budget is devastated, and we have to lay off people and close programs, and a downward vicious spiral eats us alive."

To re-engage those families, Holmes worked with ASU Prep Global, a K12 partner that provides school design consultation, direct instruction services, instructional resources, college access, and professional development. Together, the ASU Prep and SVUSD leadership team designed a hybrid microschool for students in grades 7-12. Flexible enrollment offers various start dates throughout the year. Once enrolled, students complete coursework online when and where they choose, attending class onsite at least 4 hours a week. Students can schedule onsite time as desired, whether once or twice a week or even an hour every day.

Recognising that these families had already rejected the traditional school model, the district housed the program in renovated space at their central offices. The space mimics a college study area, with private booths for "think time," and comfortable furniture groupings for collaborative time.

"If you don't want to be at the high school, then why would we put a program there like this?"

While onsite, students receive targeted support for academics, course selection, college applications, or project work. Since college coursework is also an option, onsite support also includes helping students enroll and complete their courses. Currently, Sierra Vista is serving about 30 students with a goal to grow to 200+ within the next couple of years.

Motivated in part to problem-solve for disenfranchised students and in part to strengthen the district's bottom line, the hybrid model meets both goals. Rather than force students into a model that wasn't serving them well, Holmes argued that the microschool demonstrates the district's willingness to "blow up the traditional model" to find what works for kids.

"Recouping those students will allow us to do more things for [all] kids."

Partner to Prevent Rural Talent Drain

Critical Career Fields with Shortages Include:		
Healthcare Professionals: Includes doctors, nurses, and specialists	**Teachers:** Especially in core subjects like math, science, and history	**STEM Fields:** Includes high-demand areas like cybersecurity and advanced manufacturing
Veterinary Medicine: Critical for rural agricultural communities.	**Renewable Energy:** Specialists focused on wind energy and sustainable technologies	

Finding and recruiting talent to fill jobs in rural areas is another ongoing challenge. In many rural areas, the education and healthcare systems are the largest employers, yet both industries are struggling to fill positions even in urban areas. National shortages in healthcare workers and teachers are reaching critical mass, and the pinch is especially felt in small towns.

“We just brought in 18 international teachers,” Dr Holmes shared. “This year, I was 23 slots short. There were literally no applications for 23 teaching positions.” Most of the empty slots were for core subjects like math, science, and history.

“It used to be that for an elementary position, you would have 20 applicants. Now you may have two or three. I had a middle school principal position open. I had one applicant. Elementary school position–one applicant.”

While “grow your own” initiatives are cropping up, where students gain a path to a degree in exchange for teaching locally, such programs are not likely to fix the problem.

“It is a stop gap. It’s not a fix because you’re going to have a limited pool of people you’re going to pull from,” says Dr. Allen Pratt.

Pratt believes the crisis demands a “moon shot” governmental response, but he also urges educators not to wait for the government to fix things. The remedy for teacher preparation may also be found in edu-preneurial thinking. New paths to certification are cropping up. Universities are offering paid internships or apprenticeships, hybrid learning programs, and funding initiatives that finance pre-service training in exchange for a rural teaching commitment.

“There are going to be multiple, multiple pathways to become a teacher,” Pratt says. He points to models that leverage Registered Apprenticeships and roll up to a college degree, greater use of Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA) dollars, and similar work-while-learning endeavors as flexible rural teacher prep opportunities.

Rural students themselves are beginning to fill staffing gaps. McClain in Texas and Steiner in North Dakota have both seen students apprentice locally, earn college credits in high school, and then return home to fill roles in teaching, healthcare, and other professions.

"The Roscoe school district has several teachers on staff who came through their [pre-education service] program. Colorado City just hired two of their graduates to be teachers, and now it's started to spread," says McClain.

One student, who graduated both with college credits and an HVAC certification through a Registered Apprenticeship program, decided to return to college, finish his degree, and come back to his community to teach in the program.

The Rural Schools Collaborative is working with hubs nationwide to build out teacher corps programs that provide financial incentives to rural students who will teach in a rural space. Locally based programs can help pre-service teachers prepare for the unique challenges of rural schools.

"Traditional education programs don't really cover what it means to be in a rural school where you have to wear a hundred different hats," says McClennen. Rural teachers also have to know how to work in a place where everyone knows everyone. At the same time, McClennen argues that rural educators have access to all kinds of local assets, even in the landscape or local community, but they may need to gain skills in leveraging those assets for learning.

Other workforce needs are being filled by local students as well. A Texas A&M student who participated in Roscoe's veterinary program plans to return and work in the school-based lab after obtaining her veterinary license. McClain notes that a 3-way partnership between Roscoe, Cisco Community College and the University of Texas at Arlington now offers a path to a Bachelor's in Nursing. Several students currently completing that program plan to work in the area after graduation.

"The kids see the impact the program has had on their own lives, and a lot of them say, 'You know, I want to give that back.'"

Test. Iterate. Repeat.

Thomas Edison famously joked that his team's lack of success in finding a filament for the lightbulb after two years and thousands of tests did not represent failure. It represented discovery.

"I've just found 10,000 ways that won't work."

Hidden in the humor are wonderful insights into design thinking and an entrepreneurial spirit. Identifying problems and designing solutions are only the beginning. From there, edu-preneurs must relentlessly test their theories, humbly and repeatedly submitting their assumptions, prototypes, pilot programs, or artistic creations to the proving fires.

With each testing cycle, designers gain invaluable feedback about what works and, just as important, what doesn't. Each "failure" is a data point on the path to a winning solution.

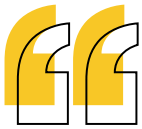
Customers are vital to this cycle. Even negative feedback–or perhaps more accurately, especially negative feedback–will drive improvements. A growth mindset is a disciplined mindset. It embraces setbacks and daily challenges, observes and learns from failure, and evolves tried-and-true solutions over time.

Contrast this flexible mindset, associated with businesses and startups, with that of education. While teachers can be the most creative people on the planet, the education system itself does not easily lend itself–or bend!–to adaptive innovation.

"One of the fundamental philosophical downsides of education is that education has not been on the forefront of change. We move at a glacial pace, and we're always following behind what the rest of society has done," notes Eric Holmes at Sierra Vista.

Yet, in the places where edu-preneurs are adopting entrepreneurial mindsets and are helping students do the same, the result is a range of deeply compelling and remarkably creative learning models.

Morrow sees an inspirational change at work, "The incredible shifts and movements amongst teachers, among stakeholders, is profound," Noting the mental shift in places like Miami-Globe, Morrow says even the students see themselves and their communities differently. "These kids want to stay. They want to be there. What is speaking volumes is when we're hearing kids say, 'I can't wait to come back and work for Resolution Copper as an engineer,' or 'I want to teach one day at the local high school.'"



These kids want to stay. They *want* to be there.

Sustaining New Models

Designing within and around the System

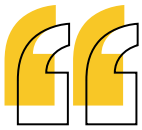
Steiner's team has had to create work-arounds for the system that exists while building for the system they envision.

Anyone who has tried to innovate will soon tell you that inadequate systems and infrastructure can thwart your best efforts. Whether we're talking grading or assessment systems, school systems, or even technological, organizational, legal, or financial systems–all are designed to support a way of work and of interacting with "customers." If you change the way you do business, so to speak, the system must also change.

However, because systems are structured to sustain predictability and accountability, they are typically change resistant, requiring innovators to slog through bureaucracy and deeply rooted norms as they build innovations.

Our education support systems were built for a bygone industrial era. Re-designing support for permissionless education, untethered from time and place is a decades-long and often heroic effort, requiring edu-preneurs to follow archaic rules while simultaneously pushing for reforms. With technology evolving at light speed, especially with AI quickly maturing, designing systems to keep pace can be maddening.

Nowhere is this reality more evident than in the battle to change legislation. Dr. Pratt notes that revising legislation to support rural innovation can be especially difficult because rural priorities tend to rise to the fore only during federal election cycles.
Legislative changes require participation, persistence, and a long-game view. A small percentage of legislators have direct education experience. Most come into politics either from other careers or as a lifetime career choice. Their expertise is often lawmaking, not education.



Our system is set up to help the most populous areas in the country. Yet, there's 9.7 million students in rural America. We have one person in D.C. in an office focused on rural education.

"Legislative and policy leaders depend on educators, students, and families to inform the policies they champion. Without direct input from these stakeholders, legislation often fails to account for the daily realities and pressing needs of rural schools, making it all the more challenging to implement new models and support structures," notes Julie Young, pioneering founder of Florida Virtual School and former Managing Director of ASU Prep. "Adding to the challenge, K-12 innovations also have to sync with industry and higher-ed systems."

In Northern Cass, the original plan to eliminate grades butted against systemic the challenge to matriculate into higher education. Though local community colleges conceptually support competency-based learning, they still operate in a system that ties admission and funding to GPAs and Carnegie units. Steiner's team has had to create work-arounds for the system that exists while building for the system they envision.

Keep Your Customer in View

As rural communities and workforce leaders collectively build new models, there is a temptation to perfect and scale the models nationally in cookie-cutter fashion, inevitably losing sight of local needs and resources in the process. As Dr. Pratt considers the wide variety of rural communities he has known first-hand, he cautions leaders to remember that these communities are "not monolithic."

"We're not the same everywhere. We're different, and we take different approaches. Just because it works in Metro Nashville does not mean it's going to work in rural East Tennessee."

He urges local leaders to take up the charge. Build a locally based coalition of stakeholders eager to work for change together, modeling the approach of leaders like Ramos, McClain, and Holmes.

"Get people to the table and talk to them," Pratt urges, encouraging experts to listen to local stakeholders. "It's not for me to say the 'three things' that need to change." Instead, Pratt urges leaders to keep local students front and center by gaining the input and ownership of parents, students, community members, and local or regional business leaders.

Government Leaders can remain student centered by removing legislative, regulatory, & funding barriers, particularly around time & place of learning.

Business & industry leaders can co-design programs & provide internships & apprenticeships.

Educators can coach & mentor students through the process of designing & owning their own unique learning paths.

"To keep ourselves on course, we keep coming back to our learners, often challenging ourselves to visualize the faces of our ASU Prep learners," says McGrath at ASU Prep. "Even the most well-intentioned projects can go off the rails if we fail to make the success and wellbeing of young people our focal point."

Summary

Entrepreneurship is challenging even in the business world where systems and structures are often more agile. Yet, the stakes for failing to innovate on behalf of students are high. The principles that guide entrepreneurship provide a way forward for educators to break free from models that no longer serve their students.

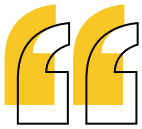
Educators who are eager to take the plunge don't need to go it alone. Multiple frameworks, models, and organizations exist to provide guidance. Like pulling a thread in a woven fabric, efforts to reconfigure traditional K-12 pathways students can result in unintended snags and snares. Using the community and drawing from the expertise of those who've done similar work prevent or unravel such snares.

"Surround yourself with a coalition of the willing," says Meg Grothman, Director of Arizona Impact for ASU Prep. "For rural schools especially, it's important that leaders are finding people who are keen to make an impact and who have enthusiasm to start dreaming and talking about possibilities to serve their communities."

For students lucky enough to live in areas where promising new models are available, "school"Bhas become a different place or, perhaps more accurately, school has become every place. Classwork, volunteer work, sports activities, jobs, or internships–all combine to offer rich learning and career-choice refinement long before students or families have to take out a college loan.

A common characteristic Grothman notes in Edu-preneures is that they are “all about focusing on what they have versus what they don’t.” Having like-minded leaders to “talk with, and start imagining what can be” is foundational. From there, she argues that a simple willingness to move forward is all that’s needed.

“You have to say yes.”



School has become a different place. Or, perhaps more accurately, school has become *every* place.

Take-Aways

- ☐ Know your stakeholders. What are their most pressing needs?
- ☐ Recruit a willing coalition of stakeholders to share ownership in designing solutions.
- ☐ Find alignment on mutual goals, commitments to reaching them, and progress metrics.
- ☐ Partner to maximize capacity.
- ☐ Leverage associations with experience in model design and partnership development.
- ☐ Tap into technology to increase capacity, accuracy, and flexibility.
- ☐ Design feedback loops to listen deeply and identify areas for continuous improvement.
- ☐ Collect throughout the process, using a data system guided by strategic goals, and make appropriate incremental changes.
- ☐ Be a voice in the education and legislative communities to build awareness of the needs and challenges of innovating.
- ☐ Share your stories. Be an unabashed marketer of the opportunities you are offering to students and families.

Resources

K-12 Innovation Alliance

National Rural Education Association

The Rural Collaborative

Arizona Rural Schools Association

Collegiate Edu-Nation Student Journey Graphic

Collegiate Edu-Nation's self-evaluation rubric to help education leaders evaluate their programs across 13 elements such as student ownership, innovation, growth mindset, and more.

Getting Smart's Portrait Models

Tools for system redesign and new outcomes creation.

Credentialed Learning for All

New ways to think about credentialing learning around core, technical, and transferablecompetencies that increase opportunity for every learner.

Unbundled Learning

Expanding learning beyond the classroom and school.

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