

# Learning Through a Pandemic

Lessons from a Rural District Network

Winter 2021



# TEACHING AND LEARNING IN 2020-21

While school closures resulting from the pandemic in spring 2020 created challenges for every school district, districts serving predominantly rural communities faced even greater obstacles. Lack of access to broadband internet connectivity in rural and remote areas complicated many students' efforts to participate in remote learning. In addition, without the resources of larger districts, planning for multiple reopening scenarios, establishing health and safety protocols, and addressing immediate needs such as distributing school lunches all fell on the same few district leaders.

To address this challenge, The Ayers Foundation, the National Institute for Excellence in Teaching (NIET), the Ayers Institute for Teacher Learning and Innovation, and the Statewide Collaborative on Reforming Education (SCORE) created a partnership to support 15 Tennessee rural school districts in addressing the challenges of teaching and learning during COVID-19. This partnership – the Tennessee Rural Acceleration and Innovation Network (TRAIN) – supported rural districts to design and implement comprehensive plans and professional learning for supporting the continuity and acceleration of learning throughout 2020-21, including both virtual and in-person school settings.

The work districts and schools did together to strengthen virtual instruction created an opportunity to better understand existing instructional challenges that needed to be addressed regardless of modality. The strategies and

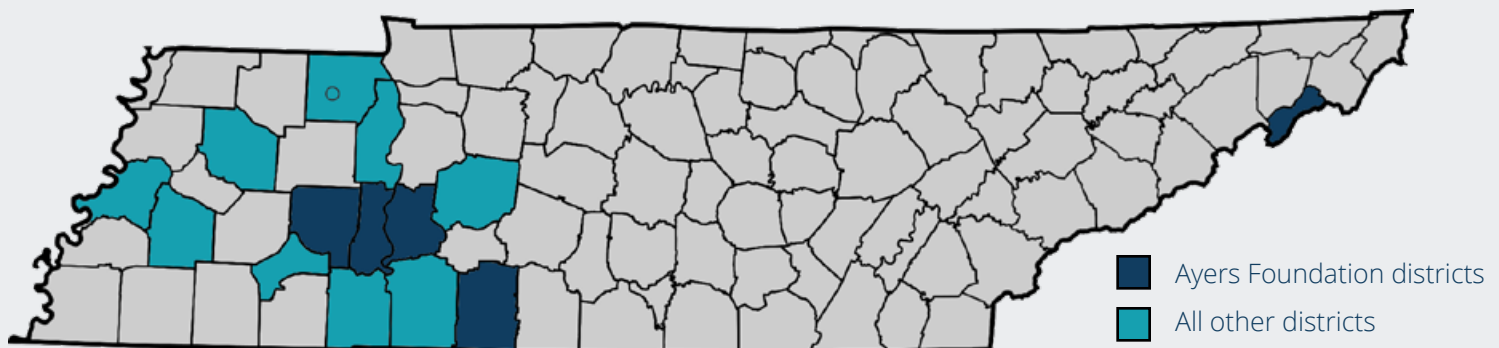
solutions they have put in place to strengthen instruction, address students' social and emotional needs, and increase collaboration is laying a stronger foundation for the future.

The network includes five districts that The Ayers Foundation supports – Decatur, Henderson, Lawrence, Perry, and Unicoi County Schools – and 10 others that were selected to further The Ayers Foundation's and Governor Bill Lee's efforts to support and prioritize those in rural Tennessee. Those districts include Benton, Chester, Gibson SSD, Hardin, Haywood, Henry, Hickman, Lauderdale, Paris SSD, and Wayne County Schools. Together these districts serve about 45,000 students. Of the 15 TRAIN districts, eight are considered economically distressed or at-risk.

"This year created a range of urgent, new challenges for rural school districts. Our goal was to help ensure that rural Tennesseans had what they needed to respond," said Janet Ayers, president of The Ayers Foundation. "What we are learning together in the process is providing new energy, new strategies and new tools to improve rural education. The work in these districts gives me hope that rural educators will be able to take advantage of the hard won skills and knowledge of this year to continue to support students to be successful."

Based on the experiences of these districts, key strategies emerged that provide a foundation for better supporting rural schools and districts this school year and next.

## 2020-21 TENNESSEE RURAL ACCELERATION AND INNOVATION NETWORK



- Benton County Schools\*
- Chester County Schools
- Decatur County Schools
- Gibson Special School District
- Hardin County Schools\*
- Haywood County Schools\*
- Henderson County Schools\*
- Henry County Schools

- Hickman County Schools
- Lauderdale County Schools\*\*
- Lawrence County Schools
- Paris Special School District
- Perry County Schools\*\*
- Unicoi County Schools\*
- Wayne County Schools\*\*

*Designated as economically \*at-risk or \*\*distressed by the Appalachian Regional Commission (ARC) annual index*

## FOUR STRATEGIES FOR STRENGTHENING TEACHING AND LEARNING IN RURAL SCHOOLS

1.

Build networks and opportunities for district and school leaders to collaborate.

3.

Support virtual instruction and the integration of technology into classroom practice.

2.

Train teacher and school leaders to increase support for classroom teachers, and share practices across schools.

4.

Apply learning from virtual instruction to classroom practices, and provide support throughout the year.



## Strategy 1: Build networks and opportunities for district and school leaders to collaborate.

Rural leaders typically wear many hats, with the same handful of leaders tasked with every district office job. The simple task of setting aside weekly, scheduled time to thought partner has given district leaders permission to step back and take the time to think bigger picture during a moment when there is a rush to solve every challenge. Checking thinking and researching ideas together has been a primary part of the network as we introduce templates, tools, and resources that can assist with planning and implementation.

For example, TRAIN network consultants all used the Tennessee Department of Education's Continuity of Learning Plan rubric and NIET's 2020-21 Planning Guide to discuss scenarios, expectations, and ideas to ensure district plans had considered this year from every angle – unfinished learning from the spring, support for virtual instruction, curriculum expectations for each modality, staffing ideas and scheduling, equity for all students, and family communication. Many templates and tools that resulted from these discussions have helped the entire network, and they have also built districts' capacity to efficiently problem-solve and communicate throughout the year.

In addition to ongoing collaboration with members of the Ayers Institute and NIET, TRAIN districts gather for regular network meetings throughout the year to identify trends and problem-solve common challenges. They also receive professional learning tailored to their district needs as they learn and talk with teachers about what they most need. In addition to these direct supports, SCORE provides support by learning along with the network and sharing best practices that have benefited other Tennessee districts.

## Strategy 2: Train teacher and school leaders to increase support for classroom teachers, and share practices across schools.

While the TRAIN districts vary in approach, they all prioritized teacher support. Districts with formalized



lead teacher roles – positions with clear expectations and additional pay, often supported by CARES Act funding – elevated those educators to lead their virtual transition, which has built capacity. Teacher leaders have gone first to show their peers what virtual instruction can look like, and they are continuing to develop and share common lessons and videos or their grade or subject so other teachers don't have to start from scratch.

Many teacher leaders came back to school early to support the transition and collaborate with their principals around a virtual or hybrid approach, and some are continuing to lead virtual professional learning communities throughout

the year to support collaboration and sharing of best practices. Teacher leaders are identifying and sharing successful strategies with teachers in their own school, while also sharing these strategies with teacher leaders and school leaders in other schools in the district. This has built new connections and relationships between individual schools and increased the district's ability to share best practices and resources within and across schools. This collaboration has also given district leaders a new window into instructional practices and needs in each school, including where there are disparities.

### Strategy 3: Support virtual instruction and the integration of technology into classroom practice.

To support teachers, the partnership provided templates and tools to plan for virtual instruction, and a series of videos highlighting specific instructional strategies, such as how to provide quality feedback remotely, and how to use success criteria and exemplars of strong student work in a virtual classroom. To help teachers understand what high-quality instruction looks like across different settings, the partnership provided a companion tool describing high-quality teaching practices in synchronous and asynchronous instruction. From July through December 2020, specialists and staff from NIET and the Ayers Institute provided 61 days of intensive training to teacher and school leaders across the network.

Being intentional and consistent when introducing technology tools and platforms helped teachers use the tools effectively and connect the new tool to how they would actually use it. In TRAIN districts, leaders asked teachers to use the new tool or platform as a student would, and the leaders modeled the role of the virtual teacher, showing how lessons and strategies can transform into the virtual space. This highlighted how professional development can be embedded in everyday context to provide educators with more focus and clarity, building their confidence instead of their fears.

TRAIN districts realized the importance of all teachers gaining confidence with virtual instruction, including those who started the year in person. Districts are also working to use virtual tools to increase collaboration across their district so teachers can share resources. Many mapped out lessons with teacher leaders during the summer so they had a bank of virtual resources for the first several weeks of school. Additionally, districts are supporting teachers to use the skills and strategies they developed through online teaching to integrate technology into their lessons and create opportunities for students to engage remotely when necessary as they navigate blended and hybrid environments.

This can only continue to happen if there are meaningful investments by internet providers and government officials to ensure connectivity in rural America. Many TRAIN districts now have devices and educators equipped to teach online but are limited by the lack of bandwidth in rural Tennessee.



**45,000 students**  
served through the  
TRAIN partnership



**61 days**  
of intensive training over six  
months for TRAIN teachers and  
leaders

## Strategy 4: Apply learning from virtual instruction to classroom practices, and provide support throughout the year.

In planning a virtual lesson, teachers took a fresh look at the critical links and alignment between student learning standards, the depth of knowledge to reach those standards, tasks assigned, and whether student work and assessments demonstrated that students were moving toward mastery. Analyzing and planning for virtual lessons enabled teachers to see where gaps might exist in their in-person classroom instruction and how to close those gaps. Teachers were supported to create alignment between standards and objectives, student work, and assessment, leading to a deeper understanding of the link between each and how this impacts planning and instruction.

Training provided by the partnership guided district and school leaders through a process of analyzing

spring 2019 learning for priority standards that were not fully addressed and helped them plan for how they will cover those in 2020-2021. These leaders in turn supported teachers to identify unfinished learning, and plan how to address individual student learning loss. The support provided by teacher and school leaders helped teachers to see how improvements in their practice directly impact student learning. This process gave teachers new skills to better identify and create a plan to address learning gaps for individual students during in-person lessons as well as in virtual lessons.

Virtual learning shone a very bright light on the importance of student engagement – whether students were engaged in productive learning tasks and taking ownership for their learning. For example, educators analyzed lesson plans for student thinking and problem-solving in virtual instruction, and they quickly realized that the teacher was doing most of the thinking and problem-solving. Changing the lesson so that students had plenty of opportunities for problem-solving and describing their thinking brought new insights for strengthening student engagement in virtual and in-person lessons.

*TRAIN participants meet monthly online to collaborate on best practices, receive professional development, and reflect together. This also provides opportunities for support partners, including NIET, The Ayers Foundation, the Ayers Institute, and SCORE, to talk with district leaders and stay connected to the broader work.*



While the classroom may look different, the principles of effective teaching are the same whether learning is happening in-person or online. As teachers get to know their students, they can learn where to modify assignments, enhance or adjust visuals, or step in with 1:1 support – just as they would in a physical classroom.

And in a virtual environment, they have learned that it can be seamless to accommodate some aspects of a student's individual educational plan, such as read-aloud or contrasting text. TRAIN districts are planning now for how they can provide ongoing support and coaching to help educators understand how to continue to leverage virtual tools within the context of holding a high bar for all students, particularly as they transition in and out of hybrid environments and accelerate learning recovery.

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What we are learning together in the process is providing new energy, new strategies and new tools to improve rural education.

– Janet Ayers, president of The Ayers Foundation



# CONCLUSION

When the TRAIN partnership launched in July 2020, an immediate need for district leaders was targeted advice around the multiple learning scenarios schools faced as they came back in the fall. Guidance and tools from the Tennessee Department of Education, NIET, and the Ayers Institute for Teacher Learning and Innovation supported districts to plan for a variety of scenarios as school opened and over the course of the year. The partnership provided training and coaching to help districts identify and address learning loss and students' social and emotional needs, as well as create an instructionally rich learning environment across multiple modalities from in-person to fully virtual learning.

Districts used the network and collaborative opportunities facilitated by the partnership to share information, resources, and strategies. By working together, they were better able to address challenges

each struggled with independently. While their challenges initially focused on virtual teaching and learning, districts quickly saw how they could use new tools, networks and collaborative opportunities to create stronger supports for teachers and leaders throughout the year. Their learnings in the virtual space led to a clearer understanding of ongoing instructional needs and challenges. The systems and strategies districts put in place with the support of the partnership prepared them to be ready for a variety of scenarios in 2020-21, and now the network is working together to prepare for 2021-22 and its new set of unknowns.

Continued investments in these successful strategies will help teachers and leaders to strengthen instruction – regardless of in-person or virtual teaching – while building relationships with students and supporting a deeper level of learning.

