



**The Rural Alliance
Response to Gates Foundation
Networks for School Improvement: Request for Information
November 2017**

1. Tell us about the schools and their students. What did the schools have in common?

The Rural Alliance (Alliance) is the grass roots human and social capital of eastern Washington rural schools and districts.

Rural schools and students experience many successes and many common challenges. Mostly, they share a strong sense of community and belongingness. Because schools and districts are often small, students are well known by superintendents and all teachers and staff. Rural schools celebrate a personal connection to each student. Rural school districts in Washington are as small as 69 students in LaCrosse to 2,370 in Wahluke. They are rural, isolated, in most cases impoverished and far from services (i.e. college prep, professional development, etc.) and general amenities that most urban students experience. In spite of school and district efforts, the impact of these challenges are often realized in student achievement.

Rural Students:

Ask rural middle school students if they plan on attending college, and 80–90% will say they do. This is not surprising. Students and families regardless of income level know that education is important. But something happens between middle school and high school. By the time rural students graduate from high school, the number who actually enroll in a 2–year or 4–year college is cut almost in half.

According to ERDC 2011–15 reports, Washington data for college–going students has flat-lined.

% enrolled in 2- or 4-year colleges	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015
All students	60	60	62	61	60
Low-income	47	48	49	49	48
Non low-income	67	68	69	69	65



Hispanic	48	48	50	51	50
Rural Alliance	X	X	X	X	51

Note: Rural Alliance enrollment available only for 2015

Based on available information, Rural Alliance students access college at a rate similar to Washington’s low-income population.

The disparity in access to college is serious enough but the income-based differences in degree completion is even more alarming. A 2015 report from the Alliance for Higher Education and Democracy indicates affluent students are making adjustments to economic changes while lower income students are falling further behind. These statistics are not rural specific but reflect what we see in rural schools.

Family income	College Completion 1970	College Completion 2013
Top quartile	44%	77%
Bottom quartile	6%	9%

The 2015 National Student Clearinghouse Research Centers found the effects of geography on college enrollment and completion equally disheartening.

All income levels	Rural	Urban
Enrolled in college 18-24	31	46
Earned college degree 25 and older	17	34

Rural Schools: Rural superintendents have the same responsibilities as superintendents in large districts **and** lack the support of a central office to meet these obligations. On any given day these superintendents handle transportation, food service, building maintenance issues in addition to the academic and social emotional welfare of their students. The lack of central office infrastructure is a double-edged sword. On the one hand, there is the obvious need of support. On the other hand, there is the enormous potential of empowerment for teacher-led improvement. ■

Teachers in rural schools often have no subject area or grade level colleagues. A math teacher, for example, might teach all of the high school math offerings. This absence



of grade level and content peers mitigates professional growth opportunities readily available in large districts.

This professional isolation was one of the main reasons for the development of The Rural Alliance. Creating a superintendent network to share expertise and workload, bringing teachers, counselors and superintendents together to identify and implement solutions to problems of practice, has become a cornerstone of what the Alliance does.

The lack of infrastructure in rural districts removes layers of insulation between administrators and students. Rural superintendents are directly involved with education and in daily contact with students. This immediacy and deep understanding of student needs pushes superintendents past the daily workload into extraordinary efforts.

Rural superintendents are more than familiar with the poverty, trauma and in many cases adverse childhood encounters that these students experience.

Rural Communities:

The last 10 years have witnessed major changes in rural communities and schools.

Most Washington districts and communities are getting smaller—some precipitously. Colfax enrollment has declined from 732 to 599. In the same period Chewelah, experienced jolting attrition--1122 to 809 and Republic went from 459 to 333.

Additionally, in many communities the ethnic makeup shifted dramatically. As one example, Manson School District, swung from 56.1% white to 68.1% Hispanic. Many other school districts showed less dramatic but significant trends towards increasing diversity. Nearly all Alliance districts have gotten poorer.

The 2015 Census Report shows Washington's median per capita income at \$35,284. The Rural Alliance communities median per capita income averages \$22, 128. The bottom quartile of Alliance districts is 30% of the state median. Further:

- Poverty in Rural Alliance communities is 28% higher than the state average, with the bottom quartile of Alliance districts three (3) times the state average.
- High school graduation: 33% of Rural Alliance communities outperformed the state average of 90.8%. But the bottom quartile of Rural Alliance districts average a 56.7% graduation rate.
- College BA or higher: No Rural Alliance community outperformed the state average of 35.1%. Rural Alliance communities average 22.5% college BA. The



lowest quartile of Rural Alliance communities are one third of the Washington average.

Rural Alliance Student Demographics (Predominately eastern WA)					
Number of districts	Number of students	FRL	Hispanic	Native American	Black
~70	~46,508	67% (true weighted average)	44%	6% (3 times the state average)	3%

2. Please describe how and why these schools came together as a network.

The history of The Rural Alliance is a story of how a group of rural schools and districts in eastern Washington collectively sets high expectations and works to mitigate the challenges that come with ensuring success for rural students and their families.

In July 2010 The Rural Alliance for College Success brought together small, isolated rural school districts

to make sure geography did not determine our students' postsecondary opportunities and success. With the assumption there is strength in numbers, districts came together to collaborate around common needs, set region-wide goals, mitigate isolation through professional networking, to share resources, and disseminate and replicate promising practices. Realizing that other entities were also focused on providing rural students a strong future, the 35 founding districts invited community colleges, universities, and a diverse range of non-profit and community organizations to combine efforts with us. Over time, these partnerships and collaborative efforts have built strong relationships and increased social capital.

Today, The Rural Alliance partners have doubled, with over 70 mostly eastern Washington rural school districts (46,508 students), 15 colleges and universities, 22 education organizations and nonprofits and 2,878 teachers to increase options and opportunities for rural students, families and communities.



Together we define priorities and design solutions to the obstacles rural students face in accessing equitable college, career and life opportunities. We believe that the Alliance demonstrates in its daily practice, a network of rural schools and districts (inclusive of secondary schools) working both collectively and individually with an intermediary (The Rural Alliance) towards the outcome of improved college, career and life opportunities for rural students. Given the Alliance's new status as a non-profit entity we are poised as an **existing** network with strong human and social capital to initiate and implement a continuous improvement process that improves student outcomes by tackling challenges that are common across The Rural Alliance network.

The Rural Alliance has been and continues to be an organization that has facilitated secondary school networks for School Improvement (focused on students in grades 6–12). We also believe that now that the Alliance is a nonprofit with a full time Executive Director we are poised to facilitate these efforts with our rural secondary school partners in the future.

See Questions 4, B2 and B3 below for demonstrated impact.

3. What were the school-based roles of those who participated in your network?

Superintendents and school staff provided the human and social capital to run the network projects (i.e. Personalized Learning, K–3 Math, Counselor Network, Social Emotional Learning etc.) in addition to their regular school work efforts. Joint projects have been initiated and implemented by district superintendents and school staff (teachers and counselors) based on need. All necessary funding for implementation comes from small grants. All of the project work (from writing the grants, implementation, reporting, evaluation, etc.) is simply added on to the already existing staff tasks.

4. What common problem or “problem of practice” did the schools share?

Early on, the Alliance schools identified common problems of practice as a lack of rigor and college prep. There was also very little AP coursework, AVID, and/or college in the classroom. More specifically, these problems of practice impacted math fluency, graduation rates, summer melt, and enrollment and retention in college.

Schools decided to focus on increasing college prep classes with a special focus on Mathematics so students would enter college without the need for remediation. As



well, districts collectively developed projects that provided access to college in the high school, AP coursework and college and career guidance programs.

As identified through a variety of surveys and large and small group activities, the following are more current (2017) identified need areas: See attached for a complete listing of the specific needs.

- Superintendents Network: Expand and deepen the superintendent network
- Pivotal 9th grade: Study and develop strategies to increase 9th grade success
- Counselor network: Implement counselor network to improve college and career guidance programs
- Early Learning/Preschool): Expand access to quality preschool to get children off to a good start

B. PLEASE TELL US ABOUT THE NETWORK.

1. Over what time period did the network exist?

2010 through September 2017 as the Rural Alliance for College Success

October 2017 to present as The Rural Alliance (a 501c3)

2. Describe how your network operated. Feel free to upload artifacts that demonstrate the range of activities you facilitated with individual school teams and with the network of schools.

From 2006–2017 The Rural Alliance has operated as a collective of rural school districts, university partners and non–profits. Partners simply participated and collaborated on projects where they could add value to a project or simply had an interest or need. Alliance direction has largely been superintendent driven, supported and outcome based.

The Rural Alliance engaged in a Strategic Planning Process in mid– 2016 with strong stakeholder engagement. The Lead Superintendents Team went through a facilitated strategic planning process (SWOT) over the course of approximately 6 months. The Alliance mission, vision, and strategic goals were each presented and described with feedback solicited via an electronic survey from a large sector (over 125 individuals) of Alliance partners at the annual conference. Partner feedback was analyzed and incorporated into the plan.



The Alliance has recently achieved nonprofit status through the state of Washington (October 2017) and are still in the process of creating a 501c3. The Rural Alliance is led by a fulltime Lead Superintendent/CEO (Former rural district superintendent) and as funds allow, 3–4 contracted part–time “staff”.

The Rural Alliance is guided by its Strategic Plan, mission, vision, strategic goals and deliverables. Staff utilize a Management Plan to facilitate this work.

One demonstrable example of how the **RA is already engaged in and supports a Network for School Improvement** is the Summit Learning (Personalized Learning) initiative that is now 2 years in the making. In late 2015, the Mary Walker School District (the lead Rural Alliance district) met with Washington Summit Charter School staff to learn about Summit Charter schools. As a result of that initial meeting The Rural Alliance invited Summit Charter school staff (and other Washington charter school staff) to its 2016 Rural Alliance Conference. Summit staff presented the Summit Personalized Learning platform and engaged in conversation with interested schools. That summer four (4) rural schools staff attended the Summit Base camp training in Oakland, CA and implemented personalized learning in their middle and high schools that fall (2016). The Alliance has continued to have the Summit Learning staff as well as the participating middle/high school staff, present impact and new learnings, at the annual conference. Additionally, The Rural Alliance hosted the 2017 regional Summit Learning summer training in Spokane. There are currently six (6) Washington rural schools (3 in their first year, 3 in their second year) implementing personalized learning.

While we only have one year of personalized learning data, initial student proficiency data is very encouraging. Summit Learning is an opportunity for the Alliance to establish a continuous improvement process which aggregates and analyzes academic data. Anecdotal data from first–year implementation is very encouraging. Teacher buy–in is high. They find the professional development to be high quality and have made a deep commitment to implementation and improvement. Students are engaged. Middle school students are talking about academic, college, and career goals. Students unengaged the previous year passed their classes. Many students were able to accelerate. One 8th grader, completed all sophomore core subjects. The initial data below demonstrates part of the challenge of reporting achievement data with small school N sizes.

Rural Alliance Implementing Personalized Learning



School District	Grades receiving Personalized Learning	% FRL
Northport	MS, HS	55.8
Mary Walker	MS, HS	93.3
Wellpinit	MS, HS	69.8
Selkirk	MS, HS	58.3
Curlew	6-12 Math	43.2
Republic	MS, HS	77

As another example of the Alliance’s current network efforts, one of The Rural Alliance’s strategic goals is to: Research, Implement and sustain innovative solutions for rural challenges. Existing and demonstrated Rural Alliance school network examples being implemented under this strategic objective are part of an intentional **continuum** of projects and activities Pre-K-postsecondary which prepares students for career, college, and life success. The Alliance partners believe that college, career and life success begins in pre-school and is supported by a continuum of services throughout students’ lives. The Alliance has recently (early October 2017) engaged its partners in identifying where the indicators of postsecondary success exist on this continuum of services– in an effort to meet students where they are at. In addition to the middle/high school personalized learning project, other Alliance projects include:

Early Learning: The Design Team has met several times, and is currently focused on identifying rural **preschool** capacity and need (A survey of Alliance districts was conducted in spring 2017). The team is actively livepage.apple.com researching preschool rural projects that meet the identified needs. As noted earlier, ensuring success in college, career and life starts early. Kindergarten readiness data shows Alliance children are significantly behind the state average in both literacy and math.

WA State	WaKids Literacy K-ready %	WaKids Math K-Ready%	3 rd SB ELA %	3 rd SB Math%	7 th SB ELA%	7 th SB Math%	11 th SB ESL%	11 th SB Math%
Rural	38.2	28.7	38.2	44.6	45.7	36.9	62.7	23.7
State	54.3	37	54.3	58.9	58.5	49.8	75.5	21.7



Note: The limitations present in this data are acknowledged. The data are not longitudinal so comparing WaKIDS to Smarter Balanced may be shaky at best. However, the comparison does suggest rural students start out behind and have a steep climb catching up.

- **K–3 Math Project:** Goal: Students at grade level in math by 3rd grade. The K–3 project is focused on sustaining, building upon, and expanding the existing work. Data from the schools indicate that in fact students are progressing. The technology that this project brought has allowed for differentiated learning at all levels and real-time data for improved instruction. The intent is to add a **Middle and High school blended math** project.
- Expand and enhance the **College in High School** Programs and offer high quality college experiences to rural students in their home high school.
- Implement and sustain **Social Emotional Learning (SEL)** project. The indicators are to decrease discipline referrals and absences in the project schools. This project just began its second year – there has been no deep analysis of data yet. We do have anecdotal data that has already provided specific information regarding adaptations and modifications to the project delivery.
- **Rural Counselor Network:** This project was developed from the grass roots input of teachers, counselors and superintendents in a large group session. Needs were identified (January 2017) and a design Team was developed (all voluntary). The design team met for a full day in March 2017 and has had monthly conference calls. The next full partner meeting is March 2018. The focus of the Counselor network is to ensure the provision of effective guidance services to all rural students.
- **Superintendent Network:** was initiated in January 2017, bringing 40 plus rural district superintendents together to identify strengths and challenges. The Superintendents' network recently distilled the original list of challenges to 5 major focus areas that will be supported by the Alliance (See uploaded materials for Question A4).
- **Pivotal 9th grade:** This critical project has yet to get off the ground. Input was solicited from well over 100 Alliance partners in January 2017. A trend



- analysis of the data was conducted and the outcomes bring us back to a continuum of services. Postsecondary success – begins early on in a student’s life. The Alliance is researching a fund source to cover Design Team exploration and deeper understanding of the need and viable entry points into this project.
- **Initiate research and dialogue regarding incentive projects for college and/or career success.**
 - **Identify and address high school transition to college issues.**
 - Develop a Design Team to research and explore strategies to mitigate 12th grade to college summer melt in rural districts

Please see the .pdf document with the following supporting artifacts for **question B2**

- Strategic Plan
- Logic Model
- See also, Question 4 feedback data

3. How did you engage key stakeholders who were important to the success of your work, such as parents, community partners, technical assistance providers, or the school district/CMO?

Grass roots engagement and key stakeholder engagement has always been a strong component of Alliance decisions and projects. There has consistently been a strong and critical Lead Superintendent group that has provided input on need and direction. Early on this was a largely informal group of rural districts superintendents. As of 2016 and the strategic planning process, that superintendent group has become a bit more formalized and will likely be the 501c3 Board.

The annual Rural Alliance conferences (two annually) have always been about information dissemination **and feedback** from the Alliance partners. Sessions are designed with feedback and project direction opportunities.

As of 2016 there have been intentional efforts and activities (surveys, large and small group feedback activities, etc.) to solicit, collect, and utilize partner, (school staff, community based partners, technical assistance providers, school districts, State DOE, Higher Education, nonprofits, Charter Schools and ESDs) feedback on the Strategic Plan and future Alliance projects. The current focus for the Alliance is completing all the non-profit status activities and locating resources to assist with the coordination and implementation of what the data tells us are critical next steps. Alliance coordination,



support and technical assistance to school and district projects are critical to their success.

The Alliance structure is becoming more formalized as it moves toward becoming a 501c3. That formalization will help with continuous improvement.

The Alliance has spent much of its formative years developing relationships. The strong social capital that exists among its partners –whether they be schools, districts, community based organizations, or other non–profits, sets a strong foundation for establishing outcomes, goals, and targets and doing the work. The nature of our organization to be organic and grass roots. Our focus areas must be authentic to our partners. Schools know what they should be focusing on. We have to work this out amongst ourselves to instill ownership in the work. So, while the formality of being a non–profit is a reality – the informality of the relationships and the strong social capital is the real driver of the work.

One other key stakeholder engagement project (The Rural Alliance Partnership: Rural Education Spotlight) has recently been initiated with KSPS Public Television. This partnership with KSPS aligns with a strategic plan goal to highlight the successes in the education of rural students – in–spite of the many challenges they face.

In partnership with Alliance schools and districts, KSPS will tell the story of rural schools and districts as they embrace, incorporate and promote the positive (and sometimes difficult) changes as Rural Alliance projects are implemented.

KSPS will create 6 video stories that will make the case for six Alliance projects. The stories will be available on the KSPS and the Alliance website for use as informational tools for parents, teachers and policy makers. KSPS will assemble all six stories into a broadcast to the approximately 92,000 students in their viewing region, 43,000 of whom learn in small rural districts. There will additionally be a web–based program that will share the innovation and inspiration with all regional school districts.

Lastly, The Rural Alliance has been actively engaged with the National Rural Collaborative Network (RCN). The N is a national network of 14 rural collaboratives working together to advance learning access, equity, and success for all rural students. The Alliance has meet and collectively engaged in rural education advocacy, sharing resources, challenges/successes, professional learning, Learning for life, and national initiatives with 13 other rural consortia from across the country. As a note, the NRC has encouraged the Rural Alliance to respond to this RFI both individually and collectively with the NRC. Both entities have valuable experiences and information to share regarding continuous improvement efforts in rural schools. Our individual and



collective responses are demonstrative of our collaborative efforts on behalf of rural students.

See the uploaded documents that demonstrate stakeholder feedback from the following groups.

- Superintendents
- Pivotal 9th grade
- Counselor network
- Preschool

C. PLEASE TELL US ABOUT THE CONTINUOUS IMPROVEMENT MODEL WITH WHICH YOU WORKED.

1. In less than 500 words, describe the continuous improvement model you used. If it's a widely-used model, feel free to simply provide the name and/or a link to a published description.

While individual Alliance projects have engaged in continuous improvement efforts, the Rural Alliance has not implemented any one model of continuous improvement. As the Alliance moves towards the 501c3 status, it is embarking on the exploration phase as to how it will design, develop and implement a continuous improvement process that demonstrates improved student outcomes and meets the needs of its schools and districts.

Various Alliance projects have engaged in continuous improvement as demonstrated below.

For continuous improvement processes see K-3 and counselor network data. in other question responses.

Key, is that the understanding and determination of needs is school based with projects focusing on specific areas of need. This is being done at the teacher (K-3 Math), counselor (Counselor Network), and superintendent (Superintendent Network) levels.

In spite of these successes, implementation science research tells us (Fixon and Blasé, 2009) that the implementation (of any new concept) occurs in the following additive stages – **it takes time...**

- Exploration
- Installation

These additive stages take between 2-4 years and involve simultaneous and multiple levels of implementation.



- Initial implementation
- Full implementation

2. Tell us how you introduced the continuous improvement model to the schools in your network and how you built their capacity to use it.

As a new nonprofit organization, the Alliance has not introduced or implemented any specific continuous improvement model, though, it has worked with schools and districts in collecting, aggregating and analyzing data on the school projects. When a potential need surfaces, the Alliance has facilitated stakeholder engagement, the establishment of Design Teams and Design Team facilitation and support in establishing goals and a viable path to addressing the need. Additionally, the Alliance is providing support to project Design Teams as they look for fund sources to support their project goals.

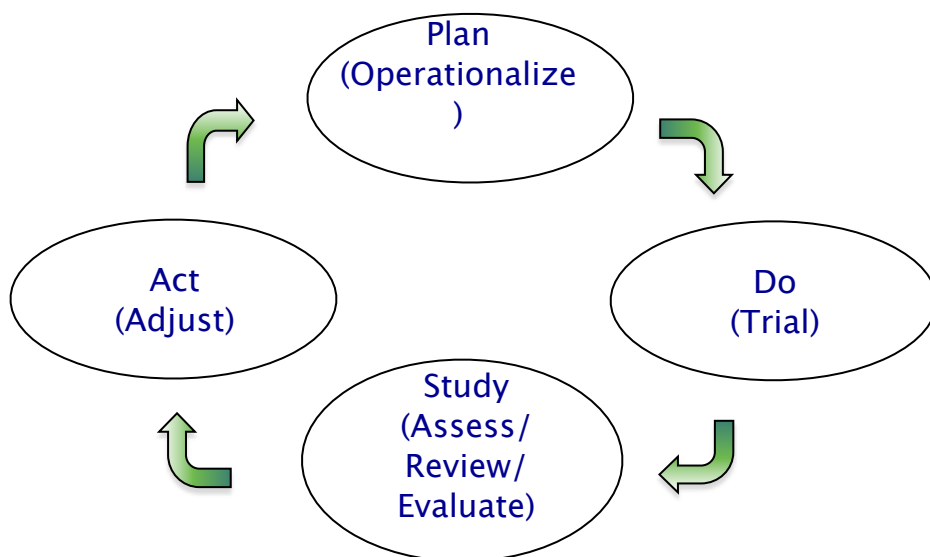
The K–3 math project is one example of longitudinal efforts and data to improve learning. The project coordinator recently completed an analysis of a strong stream of achievement data for this project. The outcome of that analysis indicates great student growth and progress in math and teacher growth. The Alliance has built teacher capacity in this project with ongoing professional development for teachers. Additionally, the technology and real-time data has helped teachers see the value in using data to improve instruction. Lastly, the Alliance brings together Lead Teachers to further analyze the data and make changes to improve outcomes. See uploaded .pdf for data.

The personalized learning project has already been noted as an example of a network of schools collaborating around the implementation of a project. Schools and districts were informed of the opportunity (Summit presentation), they attended the training, came home, continued to work through what it would look like in their school, implemented. After the first-year staff have examined student data, solicited teacher feedback, attended further training and have adapted and modified the platform and implementation to best meet the needs of students and teachers in their schools. While not using a model by a specific name –these schools have implemented a continuous improvement process.



Lastly, the School Counselor Network, engaged in substantial stakeholder engagement to identify and deeply understand needs surrounding the critical intervention points to get students off to a strong future. The Alliance crowd sourced the initial brainstorming of needs. As noted earlier, the Design Team has met on a monthly basis to refine the initial data into targeted areas of focus. The goal is to establish specific targets - to get us from where we're at - to where we need to be.

The Alliance is in the exploration phase of continuous improvement processes. The Alliance looks to models that include the following evidenced based professional development cycle which is somewhat aligned to the Foundation's continuous improvement components 1) deeply understand a problem, 2) set an improvement goal, and 3) test multiple solutions to address the problem and reach their improvement goal.





In many ways, the Alliance projects have always followed this iterative process. Once a need is determined, the schools have taken programs/best practice, adapted and modified it to fit rural school needs and implemented within the context of the school. Said in a different way, strict fidelity to a model is not always best practice. So much of what we do in education is about fidelity to the model –when in actuality, we simply need the framework of the model and local ingenuity to adapt and modify to fit local needs.

Using a bike analogy, we may know how to build a bike and ride it in the sunny, dry streets of southern California. Though, if we moved to rural, snowy and icy Alaska – we could potentially use the basic frame but would need to use fat tires and a different braking system when riding on frozen tundra. Or, we may need to come up with an entirely different mode of transportation. One that would serve the same purpose as the bicycle– getting us to our destination. The Summit personalized learning platform is an example of Alliance partner schools obtaining training on the use of a solid framework/platform and then adapting to their local needs. The schools implemented for a year, studied processes, content, student use and outcomes, adjusted, and made changes specific to their schools.

As the Alliance moves forth on a continuous improvement model –it will be a model with a solid framework and one that is adaptable to specific school/district needs. Additionally, we would see these sub-components:

- Training
- Coaching
- Evaluation (Process and Outcome)
- Revisions/System Interventions

What we also know from implementation science research is that:

- Innovative practices do not fare well in existing organizational structures and systems (legacy systems)
- Organizational and system changes are essential to successful use of innovations

This is especially important for enacting change in rural schools and communities that are known for their “existing structures and systems”, mostly because “that’s the way they’ve always done it”! While change is not impossible – **how** it is enacted is critical to its implementation and sustainability. Being able to adapt and modify any system or process is important in rural and urban districts and schools. The solid relationships and strong social capital among the Alliance partners is a value add in implementing continuous improvement processes in rural schools and districts.



3. How did the network use the continuous improvement process to identify changes or interventions to test approaches to the problem of practice?

As noted earlier, the K–3 math project is an example of a continuous improvement effort to improve learning. The goal of this project is all third graders at grade level in math. The analysis of achievement data for the participating schools demonstrates student growth and progress. More specifically, the data shows that students at all levels are progressing in math. The technology and software has allowed advanced students to progress at a rate that moves them beyond grade level proficiency (personalized learning). And the technology allows a student who struggles, to progress at a rate that stretches them to growth at a pace that is more amenable to their learning style (personalized learning). Additionally, the real-time data has informed teacher practice. These improvements would not have happened without the project and the technology it brought. The Alliance has built teacher capacity in this project with ongoing professional development for teacher and in bringing teachers together to share best practices. Lastly, the Alliance brings together Lead Teachers to further analyze the data and make changes to improve outcomes.

4. What role did distributed leadership play in your strategy?

Distributed leadership has played a huge role in The Rural Alliance strategies. It is the essence of how the Alliance has always operated – through the distributed leadership of the Alliance superintendents and school staff. All partners are encouraged and given the opportunity to initiate, develop and implement projects and to set the direction. It is about relationships. The Alliance is a very grass roots structure that allows for autonomy, voice and ownership. See also other responses.

4. How did school teams address the organizational culture and/or other systems that contributed to the problem, such as professional development, curricula and assessment, youth development, community and family engagement, and instructional quality?

When developing projects, the Alliance consistently addresses the geographical and place based concerns (i.e. curriculum, ACEs, assessment, youth development, community and family engagement, and instructional quality, etc.) that contribute to rural challenges. Each is looked at in the context of the school, its student



demographics, teacher capacity and other related factors. There is no one size fits all response to these challenges. What the Alliance does obtain teacher, counselor and superintendent input on the need and potential entry points to respond to that need. All Alliance projects come from the schools and the people closest to the need. Often the Alliance will provide support in facilitating that inquiry/ understanding process, and /or facilitate the convening of various teachers, counselors or superintendents to dialogue and explore programs that may address need areas.

D. PLEASE TELL US ABOUT STUDENT OUTCOMES THE NETWORK AIMED TO ACHIEVE.

1. What was the primary aim or goal of your network in terms of student outcomes?

Ultimately, the vision is: Success for every rural student, family, and community. That means, college, career and life success for every student.

The everyday mission (the work) is: Partnering to increase options and opportunities for rural students, families, and communities. This is accomplished through individual and collective efforts around need. (See the Logical model for Q4).

An example in terms of an Alliance project is the K3 Math project goal: every student at grade level in math by the third grade. Growth and proficiency in terms of common core state standards is important. How that is accomplished for every student requires differentiation in terms of resources, instruction and support.

As noted earlier, while the Counselor Network is still in its understanding need phase, the School Counselor Network, engaged in substantial stakeholder engagement to identify and deeply understand needs surrounding the critical intervention points to get students off to a strong future. The Alliance crowd sourced the initial brainstorming of needs. As noted earlier, the Design Team has met on a monthly basis to refine the initial challenges/need data into targeted areas of focus. The goal is to establish specific targets – to get us from where we’re at – to where we need to be regarding student support services.

2. What leading indicators did the network review regularly to determine if school teams were addressing the problem of practice and making progress toward



reaching the network's overall aim or goal for student outcomes? Describe how the leading indicators moved over time.

The Alliance has not done this, though individual projects have. Leading indicators on various projects include student growth and achievement, discipline referrals, attendance, and graduation rates. Schools have also addressed student, parent, and teacher satisfaction.

3. Did your network attain its overall student outcome aim or goal? How much did overall student outcomes change during the period when the network operated?

The Alliance as an organization does not yet have definitive data to demonstrate this. It has assisted various Alliance projects and networks in continuous improvement as noted in questions C3, D1 and others. See specifically K-3 and personalized learning data where participating schools have made definite progress toward the goals. These collective network efforts help many low-income students overcome the odds and take the college path.

There are inspiring examples of student achievement in Rural Alliance schools and districts. In Wellpinit a graduating class of 14 produced three Gates Millennium Scholars and a full scholarship to Berkeley for another student. It was not accidental. The school does everything it can to fan aspiration and support it with college preparatory counseling and academics. Something to celebrate, but no cause to think all is well. These rural stars would seem less a wonder and more a commonplace in affluent suburban districts.

Rural schools do a lot. They just can't do enough individually. Joining forces is key to creating equitable services.

4. How do you know your actions contributed to the school team's success? In other words, how do you know school teams wouldn't have had this same success without your contributions?

At this point in time we believe we have **demonstrable evidence** that the K-3 project has positively influenced K-3 math learning in participating schools. This is evidenced by low (below the state) and flat (minimal to no growth) math proficiency **prior** to the K-3 project implementation. We now have a substantial stream of data that demonstrates growth and proficiency.



Because the program is self-paced – students with more advanced skills can master above grade level. Anecdotal data has teachers saying this would not have been possible without the technology. Students would not have been able to accelerate at the rate that they have. Another improvement indicator – has been using this common program to improve actual instruction. Because teachers have actionable data in real-time they are able to immediately modify instruction. The Alliance brings K–3 math teachers together to work on blended strategies to build teacher skill. Teachers attribute at least the acceleration as a direct result to access to the software and technology.

E. PLEASE TELL US ABOUT THE COST OF THE WORK AND HOW IT WAS FUNDED.

1. Estimate (ballpark) the average cost of running the network for one year. If possible, please indicate costs to the intermediary, the schools, and the district.

While the Alliance has operated as a network and intermediary to school and district partners – the Alliance as an entity, has not received funds to do so. Since its inception The Rural Alliance partnership of schools, higher education and non-profits has existed through the strong human and social capital that makes up the network. Existing rural superintendents met to dialogue around need. Superintendents and staff provided the human capital to run the projects, conduct the annual conferences and provide support to network projects in addition to their regular work efforts. Joint projects have been initiated by district superintendents and school staff based on need with the necessary funding for implementation coming from small grants. All of the project work is simply added on to the already existing staff tasks.

Since the inception of The Rural Alliance (2010) no honorarium or payment was made to staff for Rural Alliance work. All Alliance efforts were voluntary until 2015 when the volume of the work increased –and the Mary Walker School District was able to obtain funds for two years for one paid staff person to coordinate projects and the annual convenings.

Individual project funds went directly to the lead school district.

2. What major costs did the network incur up-front when forming the network?

Since the Rural Alliance has just achieved non-profit status, the average cost of running the network for a year at this point in time is a projected costs. Currently the Alliance has an annual projected budget of \$341,000/year for three years.

The major projected yearly costs break down into:



WHO	ACTIVITIES	COSTS
Lead Superintendent/CEO (1 FTE)	All alliance oversight, communications, project Coordination	\$177,000 (inclusive of benefits)
Contractors	Project coordination, support, Website, grants, facilitation, etc.	\$92,000
	Travel, office supplies, misc.	\$35,000
Design Team/ Partners	Convening/facilitation/technical assistance	\$37,000

3. What were the five most expensive line items in your network’s budget?

As noted, The Rural Alliance has never had an Alliance budget – until September 2017. In the past, when project funds were available, the major line items included:

- Staff professional development or materials for the project (from small grants)
- Conduct of the Superintendent’s Leadership Team meetings (i.e. venue, meals, facilitation)
- Conduct of The Rural Alliance Conference (i.e. venue, printing, coffee etc. We do not charge conference fees or pay for presenters)
- One paid staff (Two years only. The budget was about \$89,000 to cover staff, travel, and convening)

4. Describe your major sources of funding.

In the past, major sources of **project** funding includes district in-kind and support, school human capital and small grants (see list below). Project grants go directly through a project lead district.

The Rural Alliance does not charge partnership/membership fees. The Alliance currently only receives funds from a Gates Foundation grant* (9/2017–2020).

- College Spark Education Northwest,
- College Success Foundation/Washington College Access Network
- Hagan Foundation
- Inland Northwest Community Foundation
- Gates Foundation (*The Rural Alliance has received a new three-year operational grant. See Question E2 budget response)
- Boeing



- Discuren Charitable Foundation

The following include Rural Alliance **partnerships** where no direct funds are provided.

- Summit Learning– provided professional development and training at no cost to the district teams (hotel was direct billed)
- Batelle for Kids– National Rural Collaborative (Note: Each organization, is aware that each is responding to this RFI. Individually and collectively, we felt it was important to respond this collaboratively and individually, with the belief we all have diverse experiences and information to share regarding continuous improvement efforts.
- Chen/Zuckerburg Foundation– initial dialogue re: personalized learning efforts

F. WHAT ELSE SHOULD WE KNOW?

Please share any other comments here.

The Rural Alliance is excited to share more information regarding rural schools and districts and the **sense of place** that comes with living in a rural community – and how that sense of place is a wonderful opportunity to be innovative and think out of the box in Gate’s continuous improvement design efforts to improve postsecondary outcomes for students.

While the Alliance has obtained Nonprofit status and feeling the “growing pains”, The Rural Alliance has accomplished a great deal in moving to its new status, this last year. The Alliance has a demonstrated track record of stepping up to the plate and doing what is necessary to ensure college, career and life success for rural students.

How a continuous improvement process is implemented – looks different across entities...

“Because when we seek to scale things up, we move vertically, we presume linear time, we build on what has become before. But constant forward progress is an illusion. In reality, life is cyclical, undulating in loops and waves; two steps forward, one step back – and a whole lot of steps sideways.” –Margaret Wheatley (2011), p.23

Wheatley has proposed the notion that there are no universal solutions, or absolute replications of programs, standardization, best practice and/or compliance. We need to



let go of the notion “which holds what has been invented and perfected can be parachuted or transplanted into another” (p. 35). Essentially, Wheatley (2011) suggests “co-motion” as a horizontal movement, “rooted in one’s own purpose and **place**” (p. 26).

“What does work is when teams from one organization travel to another and, through that experience, see themselves more clearly, strengthen their relationships, and renew their creativity. Like a learning Journey, these are the visits that disrupt our old ways of seeing and widen our views of what’s possible”. (p. 35). This allows for adaptations and modifications that fit the local needs.

We know this to be true for teachers as much as it is true for students. We have seen it in the Alliance personalized learning training and other areas of our work. While the Alliance has predominately existed on strong social and human capital – that has its limits. Knowing what to do, is different than having the resources and/or capacity to do it.

We encourage the Foundation to think about continuous improvement programs and supports that are place based, and to facilitate strong existing networks with continuous improvement capacity, as well as, strong existing networks **new** to building capacity in continuous improvement. Supporting rural networks with strong human and social capital and ready rural spirit and grit is an innovative opportunity for the foundation to look at embedded continuous improvement work that utilizes meaningful and varied data and research to 1) deeply understand a problem, 2) set an improvement goal, and 3) test multiple solutions to address the problem and reach their improvement goal –while dealing with geographic challenges.

Continuous improvement is an adaptive challenge for both rural and urban districts, who do not all independently and collectively have the human or financial capacity or capital to implement. That is to say, it is a complex challenge with complex solutions. Because it is an adaptive challenge, it requires more than just a solution. It requires a deep understanding of the process and the challenges of implementing that process. One advantage of partnering with the Alliance and other rural entities is the leanness of structures in rural districts. While that leanness has its downside (need for more resources and capacity), the advantage of lean structures is that rural districts can be more agile, nimble, and responsive. They are a good lab for quick turnaround and quicker results than a larger district with more layers between Superintendents and students.

Additionally, rural schools and districts basically engage in some sort of continuous improvement on a daily/weekly basis, testing promising practices, examining results and making modifications to fit local context.



The Rural Alliance looks forward to a continued and ongoing sharing of knowledge and experiences with the Foundation to support innovative approaches that ensuring college, career and life success for all students, including rural students.

Thank you for the opportunity to share this information.