



FINAL REPORT

**RURAL
LITERACY
INITIATIVE
FOCUSED ON
EFFECTIVENESS**

NISWONGER FOUNDATION

2017-2023

Foreword



Dr. Richard Kitzmiller
Project Director, Rural LIFE
Vice President, Niswonger Foundation

Early in 2018, area middle schools began learning about a new project—a project designed to improve literacy among middle school students. Representatives from the Niswonger Foundation began detailed conversations with representatives from school systems about a new federally-funded project named Rural Literacy Initiative Focused on Effectiveness, or Rural LIFE.

We believe Rural LIFE was selected from the hundreds of applicants in the 2017 Education Innovation and Research (EIR) competition because of a few key factors. First, our proposal built on recommendations for sustainability and expansion of a previous federal grant project in area high schools. A strong recommendation was that academic improvements in middle schools were necessary to drive high school success.

Second, our proposal pointed out that middle grades were dramatically overlooked in school reform efforts. While there was considerable discussion about early grades and high school reforms, very few efforts had been made to support the teaching/learning process “in the middle.” Third, we focused on personalization. Middle school students vary considerably in terms of their academic preparation, interests, and aspirations. Similarly, middle grade schools vary considerably in terms of their grade structures, staffing patterns, and so on. So, Rural LIFE consistently supported efforts to personalize.

As we look back on our last five years, we see circumstances and changes few could have predicted. We have seen the effects of a pandemic and a time of significant reorganization of middle grade schools in several districts. We hope and believe that the Rural LIFE project, with our flexible strategies and personalized support, helped our schools and students through these turbulent times. We appreciate the support and cooperative efforts of all those involved in this exciting project.

Dedicated to Stella Hunter and Larry Neas

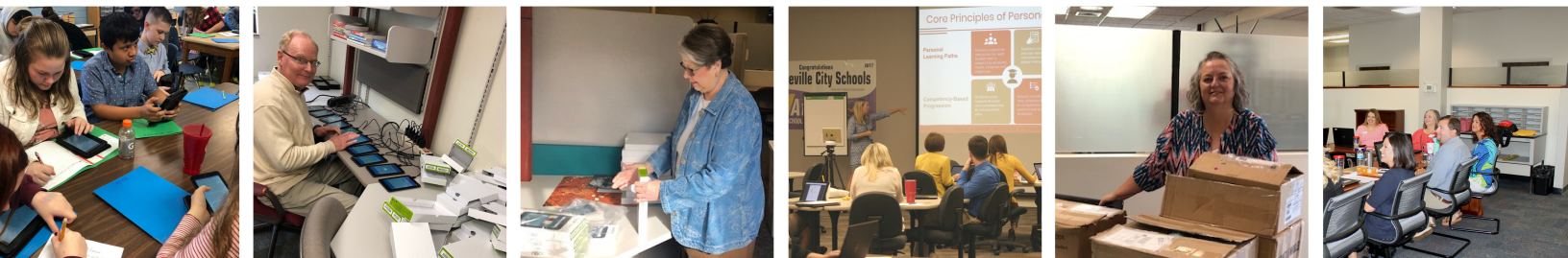


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Five Years of Rural LIFE: An EIR Grant Project



In 2017, the Niswonger Foundation received a federal Education Innovation and Research (EIR) grant to implement the Rural Literacy Initiative Focused on Effectiveness (Rural LIFE) program. Rural LIFE guided schools as they implemented personalized learning strategies to support the improvement of 1) **academic achievement for middle grades students** and 2) **literacy instruction for middle grades teachers**.

Throughout five challenging yet rewarding years, Rural LIFE's team of project leaders, professional learning partners, literacy coaches, and teacher leaders have changed practices in literacy instruction by keeping three practical **key actions** at the forefront of the project: 1) **meeting student needs**, 2) **supporting teacher development**, and 3) **creating a sustainable a vision**.

PARTICIPATING SCHOOLS

Rural LIFE has directly served over 60 schools in 17 school systems in Northeast Tennessee.



- Boones Creek Middle • Bridgeport Elementary • Bulls Gap School • Camp Creek Elementary* • Centerview Elementary
- Central Elementary • Chuckey Doak Middle • Church Hill Middle • Clinch School • Cloudland High • Cosby Elementary •
- Del Rio Elementary • East Ridge Middle • Edgemont Elementary • Fall Branch Elementary • Gatlinburg-Pittman Junior High
- Grandview Elementary • Grassy Fork Elementary • Gray Elementary • Greeneville Middle • Hampton Elementary
- Hancock Middle/High • Happy Valley Middle • Holston Middle* • Hunter Elementary Innovation Academy* • Jefferson
- Middle • John Sevier Middle • Johnson County Middle • Jones Cove Elementary • Jonesborough Middle • Keensburg
- Elementary • Lamar Elementary • Liberty Bell Middle • Maury Middle • New Center Elementary • Nolachuckey Elementary*
- North Greene Middle • North Middle School* • Northview Junior Academy • Northwest Elementary • Parrottsville
- Elementary • Pigeon Forge Junior High • Pittman Center Elementary* • Ridgeview Elementary • Rogersville Middle
- Ross N. Robinson Middle • Rush Strong Elementary • Sevierville Middle • Smoky Mountain Elementary • South Central
- Elementary • South Greene Middle • Sullivan Central Middle • Sullivan East Middle • Sullivan Gardens* • Sullivan Heights
- Middle • Sulphur Springs Elementary • Surgoinsville Middle • T. A. Dugger Junior High • Unaka Elementary • Unicoi County
- Middle • Tennessee Middle • West Pines Elementary* • West View Middle • West View School • White Pine Elementary

*Although 72 schools were recruited to participate, some schools closed, consolidated, or shifted to K-5 throughout the grant's lifetime.



POWER

MEETING
STUDENT
NEEDS

RURAL LIFE

EMPOWER

Meeting Student Needs: What We Learned

Personalized learning strategies encouraged academic, social, and emotional student growth in Rural LIFE schools.

Particular personalized learning strategies, such as flexible learning environments, learner profiles, and personal learning paths **empowered student learning and fostered autonomy, confidence, and a greater sense of belonging** in Rural LIFE schools. Being able to pick a seat, choose reading material based on personal interests, and discuss academic progress with teachers invited students to invest in their education. These practices encouraged students to learn more about themselves and how they learn best while also connecting them to their peers and the world around them.



LESSONS LEARNED

1

Student ownership of learning and student confidence increase when students are able to make choices aligned to their own interests and abilities.

2

Students learn to model positive reading and discussion behaviors when they are frequently and consistently exposed to them.

3

Student-teacher data conferences teach students how to set meaningful goals aligned to their own abilities and give teachers additional insight into students' thinking.

4

Schools support the personalization of students' learning when they use resources like staff, space, data, and time in flexible ways.

The confidence level in our kids has grown exponentially. Being able to choose what they get to do and then feeling pride when they finish that task has been such a big deal.

Arielle Abraham
Rural LIFE Teacher Leader
Ridgeview Elementary





TEACHER
CON

SUPPORTING TEACHER DEVELOPMENT

RURAL LIFE

Supporting Teacher Development: What We Learned

Teachers who actively participated in **collaborative cycles of professional learning** with their school leader and regularly met with their **Rural LIFE instructional coach** more successfully implemented personalized learning and literacy strategies in their classrooms.

PROFESSIONAL LEARNING

Personalized learning strategies were most effectively implemented and sustained in Rural LIFE schools when teachers and leaders engaged in a systemic **professional learning** process, including deep dives into what personalized learning looks like and sounds like in various contexts, what change management practices support and/or hinder the development of these practices, and what collaborative structures most effectively serve as levers for ongoing learning and sustaining change.

LESSONS LEARNED

- 1 A collaborative learning network of schools and districts can amplify the pace of implementation in rural areas.
- 2 Professional learning communities (PLCs) at the school level are an essential lever for change.
- 3 Effective professional learning about personalized learning must be designed with relevancy and flexibility in mind.



One of the biggest differences this grant has made...[is] just that connectedness, knowing that...you have a community.

Kristi Sanford
6-8 Grade Literacy Coach
Jefferson County Schools



INSTRUCTIONAL COACHING

Rural LIFE instructional coaches supported teachers by increasing their **confidence in the classroom**, facilitating **collaboration**, and guiding learning about **problems of practice**. Supporting teachers through modeling, lesson planning, learning and reflection cycles, and collaborative conversations improved teacher pedagogical practices. Under the guidance of instructional coaches, teachers collaborated more, used more structured PLC protocols, and were more comfortable using data to inform instruction.

LESSONS LEARNED

1

Instructional coaching following professional learning is an essential support to facilitate transfer to practice at myriad levels.

- Coaching that supports district-, school-, and classroom-level implementation following professional learning sessions provides personalized and scaffolded supports for changes in instruction.
- Implementation of HQIM is more successful when there is a coach in the school who follows up with teachers after attending professional learning.

2

Instructional coaches who foster collaboration across grade level and school boundaries facilitate processes for instructional practices to spread and flourish.

3

Effective instructional coaches are non-evaluative and facilitate cycles of improvement based on school-based goals and personalized pathways.

4

An instructional coach helps the implementation team focus on progress indicators and data-informed iteration while allowing multiple voices to guide any necessary changes to implementation.

[Our coach] was really wonderful about giving us opportunities to step back and look at our bigger picture.

Ellie Thompson
ELA Teacher
Church Hill Middle School





GROWN

CREATING A
SUSTAINABLE
VISION

RURAL LIFE



Creating a Sustainable Vision: What We Learned

Creating a **personalized, intentional implementation plan**, building **collective knowledge**, and focusing on **data** were critical to the successful implementation and sustainability of the Rural LIFE project.

IMPLEMENTATION PLAN

Throughout the Rural LIFE project, we found that personalization could not thrive at the student level without existing at the school level. In fact, creating a **tailored implementation plan** was a key component of making personalized learning “work” for Rural LIFE classrooms, schools, and districts.

LESSONS LEARNED

- 1 A team of school leaders, classroom teachers, and instructional coaches should collaboratively build a structured, intentional plan that considers goal alignment on all levels (classroom, school, district, and/or project), school team dynamics, and sustainable practices.
- 2 Schools need support from leaders in their district, an implementation coach, and/or an external partner to craft, implement, and sustain progress on their plans.



Team Spotlight

RIDGEVIEW ELEMENTARY

Gray, TN | Grades K-8 | 740 Students

Principal Leslie Lyons knew she wanted to elevate student voice and choice at Ridgeview, so she worked with Rural LIFE coach Brandi Wilson to do just that. After bringing on board two teacher leaders—Ashley Delavega Haren and Arielle Abraham—a plan to use choice boards during RTI time started to take shape. This practice started to spread other grade levels in their school and eventually to other schools in their district. The Ridgeview team has since presented their innovative RTI plan at conferences like AMLE and has met with several schools outside their district to teach others how to make RTI choice boards work for their students. Lyons sees only growth moving forward, "This program is going to continue to grow because we have that mindset of 'what can we do next?'"

COLLECTIVE KNOWLEDGE

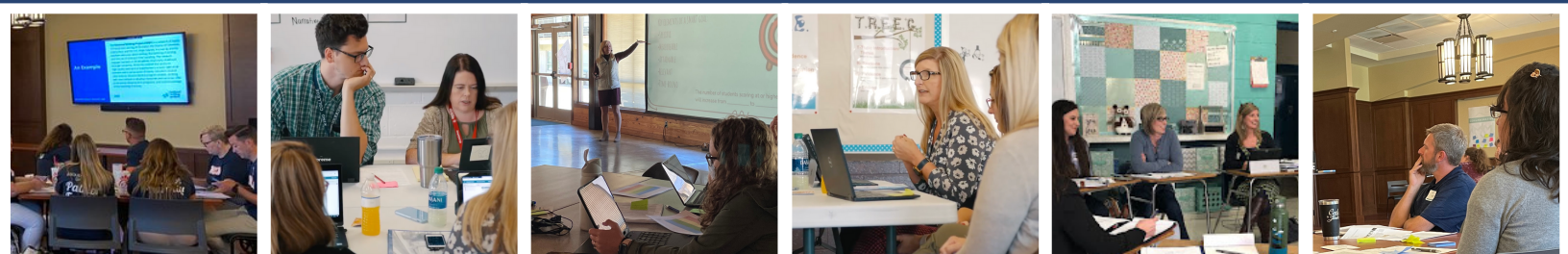
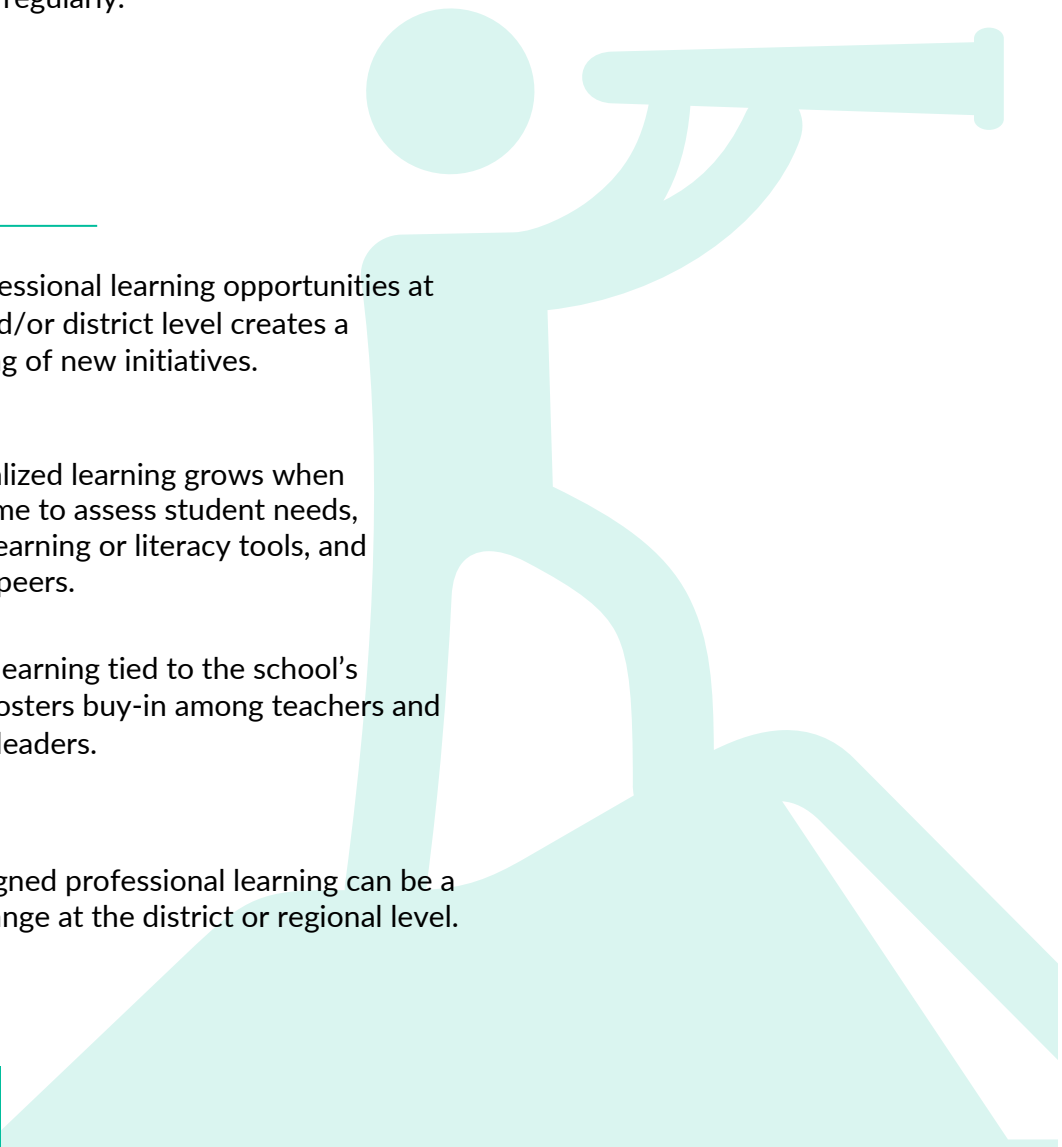
To implement Rural LIFE's personalized learning strategies effectively and increase their chances of sustainability, teachers and school/district leaders had to build a collective knowledge about those strategies and practice them regularly.

LESSONS LEARNED

- 1 Providing routine professional learning opportunities at the project, school, and/or district level creates a common understanding of new initiatives.
- 2 Knowledge of personalized learning grows when educators are given time to assess student needs, explore personalized learning or literacy tools, and collaborate with their peers.
- 3 Ongoing professional learning tied to the school's implementation plan fosters buy-in among teachers and school and/or district leaders.
- 4 Layers of vertically-aligned professional learning can be a catalyst for scaling change at the district or regional level.

A Shared Vision

Rural LIFE professional learning was intentionally designed and delivered as a blend of role-alike and heterogenous role learning. Whereas role-alike learning built capacity specific to individual roles, heterogenous role learning supported the creation of a shared vision for change within and across schools in the region. Participants reported feeling supported at the school and district level, noting that the dedication of team members at varying levels working to shift to a unified vision of high-quality, personalized literacy instruction helped to reduce barriers to implementation at the school and district level.



DATA-INFORMED PRACTICES

Using data to inform personalized learning was a key Rural LIFE practice. Educators needed time to examine data and a culture that supported data conversations. Beyond teachers using data to inform their instruction, students needed to understand their data as part of their learning process. Data notebooks and data conversations with students helped teachers guide students in setting their own goals and empowered students to be agents of their own learning.

LESSONS LEARNED

1

To help students set specific goals aligned to their own needs and then reflect on those goals in a meaningful way, teachers need support such as targeted professional development, PLCs, modeling, and 1:1 coaching.

2

Leaders, teachers, and students can get lost in or overwhelmed by the volume of data they encounter daily. Instructional coaches can help teachers weed through data, pinpointing more manageable data sets to inform their instructional decisions along the way.

3

When students are given the proper tools and support to accurately self-assess, they are more likely to articulate an authentic goal and understand how it relates to standards mastery.

4

Keep teachers and students on track for effective data conversations by setting meeting expectations and determining an appropriate meeting frequency and length.

Teachers have been empowered to really dive deep into looking at student data.

Justin Barton
Instructional Coach
Hawkins County Schools



processes
in
ACTION

Using Data to Set Student Goals

Goals should be informed by a variety of student data points. Considerations in advance of instruction to identify the “right” sources, including leading & lagging indicators and complementary data sets like student work paired with an assessment score, improves instructional design and support reflective practice.

LEADING INDICATORS

- Student work analysis of recent assignment
- Curriculum-embedded progress monitoring tools

LAGGING INDICATORS

- Standardized tests
- District/school benchmarks
- Unit assessments

personalized learning in ACTION



HANCOCK MIDDLE/HIGH SCHOOL
SNEEDVILLE, TN | GRADES 6-12 | 500 STUDENTS

An original Rural LIFE treatment school and later a sustainability grant recipient, Hancock Middle/High School focused their school plan on a sustainable vision: building a culture of literacy by embedding literacy-focused personalized learning practices into the school day.

School leaders imagined a building full of readers and writers where the library was the hub, or center, of the school, and students were more avid and proficient readers. They wanted students to be exposed to diverse, high-interest literature and to get excited about checking out books from the school library. Building a stronger culture of literacy, they hoped, would foster a lifelong love of reading as well as improve literacy test scores.

Initially, school leadership purchased a digital library subscription to provide students on-demand access to texts and discussed changing the school's schedule to give students time to explore the middle school library. But the library's outdated books and furniture indicated that the school would need more than a schedule change and a digital library subscription to bring a culture of literacy to life. It would need a complete transformation led by school leaders, teachers, and most importantly, students.

Students now enjoy a vibrant, welcoming media center lined with modern high-interest novels and filled with colorful flexible seating. This student-friendly environment provides space for collaborative work, sustained silent reading sessions, meetings with teachers, and reading-based activities.



I did not like reading before the library because I didn't have many book options and I wasn't encouraged...[now] I get to read more and...use the seats to be comfortable while I learn.



Sarah Willis
Student

personalized learning in ACTION



NORTHVIEW JUNIOR ACADEMY

KODAK, TN | GRADES 6-8 | 440 STUDENTS

Northview Junior Academy (NJA) implemented a One Book, One School book study to improve the school's culture of literacy and to encourage students to read.



When choosing a book for its study, NJA purposefully started with Jason Reynold's *Ghost*, a high-interest novel with teenage characters. *Ghost* is also the first of four books in the *Track Series*, providing an opportunity for students to continue reading on their own or as part of another school-wide study.

NJA's implementation team chose two days each week to focus on school-wide reading, collaborative activities, supplemental videos, and discussion of each chapter. They planned the activities to end before state testing began and incorporated room for make-up days.

Mindful of the age of their middle school students, NJA also included student choice to encourage ownership of their learning. During several activities, students were able to choose how they expressed their reactions to the text. Additionally, students received reading rewards related to the book, such as sunflower seeds and Guinness World Records books. The book study continued into a second year and a second book, *Patina*. Strawberry cupcakes and gift cards served as student reading rewards.



I have noticed a shift in the mindsets of students when it comes to our *Patina* days. At first, they were not thrilled about losing their RTI time. However, as we read further into the life of *Patina*, I noticed more of an acceptance of our reading time [and] an eagerness toward learning more about *Patina*'s life! It has been a gradual change over the course of several weeks, but change did happen and I feel the "reward" of reading was well worth the effort!

NJA Teacher





Key Action Steps for Coaches

Instructional coaches occupy a liminal space in education. They float between classrooms and conference rooms, interacting with students, teachers, school leaders, and district leaders along the way. An instructional coach's versatility and objectivity make them an invaluable part of a change initiative. The steps below detail the actions an instructional coach can take while affecting change in their school or system.

Listen, understand, and advocate.

As an instructional coach, you are uniquely positioned to hear, understand, and share the perspectives from many voices across a change initiative, including those of district leadership, school leaders, teachers, and students. Listen to school and district leadership to develop an understanding of their goals, vision, and direction while also advocating for the educators and students you serve.

Develop an ongoing learning plan.

Work with leaders to map out a multi-year learning process that aligns with the core improvement work of the school and/or district. At the classroom level, learn how to identify shifts that would make the most difference and personalize your coaching accordingly. Adult learners require various types and levels of support; personalize teachers' learning by asking them what they need and finding out what type of learner they are.

Establish and align goals and expectations for improvement.

Goals and expectations about improvement cycles should be set with individual teachers, PLCs, schools, and/or districts. Prior to doing any work, establish a specific plan for measuring improvement, embed that measurement plan into daily practice, and adapt the plan as needed over the course of the improvement work.

Define your role.

Collaborate with school leadership to define your role as non-evaluative, establishing mutually-accepted boundaries for what information about teachers' performances will and will not be shared. Communicating these boundaries establishes trust, sets norms for how you will approach a potential breach of trust, and promotes an environment conducive to professional growth.

Collaborate with other coaches.

Coaches cannot have answers to every challenge they encounter or question they are asked. An expansive coaching circle alleviates this pressure to always know. Collaborating with other coaches within or outside of your district gives you ongoing direct access to extensive knowledge, varied perspectives, and a library of resources like learning materials, exemplars, and protocols.

Be a learner.

Make time for your own learning and development alongside the teacher and leader learning you support. Think about this as "your time" to reflect on your own practice and growth.



Key Action Steps for Leaders

Effective school and district leadership drives effective, sustainable change. Leaders set the vision, develop strategic plans, allocate resources, communicate with stakeholders, and model the behaviors and attitudes necessary for change to occur. Leaders should demonstrate a commitment to the change process by opening themselves to new ideas, taking risks, and being willing to learn from mistakes. The steps below detail the actions an instructional coach can take while affecting change in their school or system.

Develop a shared vision.

In collaboration with all stakeholder groups, continuously work on developing, refining, and revisiting a shared vision. To prevent the busyness of the school year and accumulation of tasks from clouding this shared vision, schedule routine progress check-ins with stakeholders to realign and recalibrate the team's work to the guiding vision.

Support professional learning.

To achieve your shared vision, provide leaders, teachers, and other stakeholders with professional learning opportunities and/or resources. Consider dedicating time for ongoing and collaborative learning or by designating additional funding for conference travel. Support the personalization of your teachers' learning by providing opportunities for them to tailor their professional learning to their individual needs.

Be a learner.

Protect time for you to participate in learning opportunities, especially those that allow you to collaborate with and learn from other organizations/schools/teams who are doing similar work. Thinking broadly about learning opportunities, making space for a range of activities, some as small as a 1:1 meeting/coffee break to much larger events like conferences can help you to "find the time" to engage as a learner.

Provide follow-up support.

Align professional learning with follow-up support from a non-evaluative colleague. An instructional coach can fill this role in most cases; however, many other capable professionals can also provide this type of support. Some other professional roles to consider are teacher leaders, digital or blended learning specialists, department chairs, or other leaders in your context.

Embed data-informed practices into your change process.

Data-informed reflection and iteration are essential components of continuous improvement. Develop metrics and collect aligned data to inform your implementation. Include leading and lagging indicators to allow for iteration, if needed, at planned intervals across implementation.

Keep coaching time sacred.

Protect the time coaches spend with teachers, especially those teachers who need the most support. Whenever a school need arises, you may feel inclined to ask the instructional coach to cover it; over time, this reliance on the coach to fill a range of needs detracts from much-needed coaching support. Prioritize and protect coaching time when this occurs by shifting others around as needed.



Key Action Steps for Teachers

When it comes to implementing a school-wide change initiative, teachers are on the front lines. In addition to being responsible for implementation of a change initiative at the classroom level, teachers can provide valuable feedback to school leaders and instructional coaches about the effectiveness of the change process, including insight into what is working well and what may need an adjustment.

Start small and iterate.

Starting small—breaking down a larger change into step-by-step chunks—builds more momentum for the work, provides more learning opportunities along the way, and ultimately leads to better, more sustainable, more deeply understood outcomes. Likewise, ask for feedback in only one specific area of instruction. Pick an area in which you want to grow and ask your coach to focus feedback on that area.

Define success criteria.

Articulate up-front how you will know you are seeing an improvement in your classroom. Prior to doing any work, establish a specific plan for measuring improvement, embed that measurement plan into daily practice, and adapt the plan as needed over the course of the improvement work. Measures should include both process-oriented checks for improvement regarding teacher practices as well as measures that assess the impact of teacher practices on student behaviors and/or learning.

Collaborate with other educators.

Proactively collaborate, share, and network with other educators within your school, district, and region. Collaborating with other educators within or outside of your district gives you ongoing and direct access to successful teaching strategies, effective resources, and approaches to implementing change.

Be a learner.

Think of yourself as a learner as well as a teacher. Stay curious, ask questions, and share your successes and challenges. Make time for your own learning and development alongside any change-related learning in your school or district.

Be open to working with a coach.

Instructional coaches are for everyone, not just struggling teachers. The most effective educators continually reflect, refine, and reimagine their practices. As supportive thought partners, coaches can help you work through challenging times and celebrate your successes. Reframe your mindset around coaching sessions, thinking of it as “your time” to reflect on your practice and grow.



Additional Resources

Additional Rural LIFE resources, including more detailed personalized learning and literacy guidance, reflective and instructional videos, templates, exemplars, vignettes, and more can be found by scanning the QR code or by visiting the website below:



sites.google.com/niswongerfoundation.org/nfrurallife/5-years-of-rural-life

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**LITERACY DRIVES
EVERYTHING ELSE.**

—
DR. NANCY DISHNER
PRESIDENT & CEO
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