

Video Transcript

REL Tools for Rural Practitioners

DOUGLAS GAGNON: Rural schools educate roughly a quarter of all children in the country. Our rural places are incredibly diverse in terms of their geography, community resources, and student populations. But there are also similarities. By definition, rural places are more isolated and less densely populated than urban locales. And, on average, rural districts are smaller and have less resources than the rest of the country. So while rural places are by no means homogeneous, we also recognize that rural schools of common challenges.

For instance, rural educators often wear many hats. Teachers are more likely to teach multiple subjects, and district administrators to perform multiple roles, resulting in limited capacity to develop evidence-based processes. Additionally, the unique contexts of rural schools means that it is especially difficult for many rural educators to find research and tools that translate to their settings. Therefore, it is important to find ways to support rural educators with tools that are practical and appropriate.

Regional Educational Laboratories, or RELs, work in partnership with state and district agencies to conduct applied research and provide technical support in order to build capacity of educators to use more evidence-based practices to support school improvement and student outcomes. In addition, RELs work collaboratively with education practitioners and policymakers to develop resources and tools to support classroom and school improvement processes in rural schools.

In this video, we will introduce three of these tools, discussing how they are developed to address educational needs, what they look like in action, and how their use aims to improve the outcome of students. First, we will discuss the Instructional Improvement Cycle Toolkit, which was developed by REL Central in partnership with York Public Schools in Nebraska.

DAVID YANOSKI: The goals of the Instructional Improvement Cycle Toolkit are to promote systematic data collection and reflection in the classroom, and to allow teachers to understand the effectiveness of their teaching strategies.

The instructional improvement cycle involves recurring steps first selecting an instructional strategy, then implementing the strategy, collecting data on the implementation of that strategy, then analyzing the data and reflecting on the results. The toolkit includes a planning button, an excel analysis tool, and a reflection guide to support individual teachers or groups of teachers in using the cycle. Teachers implement the instructional improvement cycle to test a strategy and reflect on their practice

The tools provide teachers with guidance on how to study one classroom strategy at a time and how to document and compare results to consider the strategies effects on student learning. Thus, the toolkit is designed to help educators conduct action research while also supporting the systematic data collection and structured reflection on classroom practice. This is especially important in unique rural contexts,

where it can be difficult to find existing research that translates. And for rural teachers without brick-and-mortar peers, the toolkit can help to facilitate cross district professional learning communities.

DOUGLAS GAGNON: Next, we turn to Vermont, where REL Northeast & Islands is supporting schools in the state through the development of tools for using data to assess and improve district, school, and student progress.

PAM BUFFINGTON: The Vermont Agency of Education is developing an online data dashboard that will provide district teams with data on topics such as academic proficiency, personalization, safety, and health.

REL Northeast and Islands has provided districts with guidance in making data-based decisions on district and school improvement. This guidance includes protocols and facilitation techniques to support data-based decision-making using an inquiry cycle relevant to the rural context of Vermont.

The data inquiry cycle is a five-step process: seeking information, gathering data, interpreting data, acting on the data, and monitoring progress. Using the resources provided in this tool, districts are guided through this process with easy-to-understand documentation.

For example, a school might use the tool to identify high suspension rates among vulnerable student populations as an area for improvement. From this, they will seek out evidence-based strategies to address the problem. Using the dashboard, the school can track suspension rates for this population to assess progress.

DOUGLAS GAGNON: Finally, we turn to Iowa, where investments have been made in educational technology in order to enhance learning in rural schools, REL Midwest is supporting the development of tools for a Networked Improvement Community, or NIC.

MARSHAL CONLEY: The challenge that our partners face is knowing how best to support teacher use of educational technology, particularly within the rural context. We have collaboratively developed tools for the Iowa Learning and Technology NIC that allow individuals or organization to use systematic inquiry to improve practice.

The toolkit then engages practitioners in a plan-do-study-act cycle to examine how interventions relate to outcomes of interest, and to guide users toward making informed decisions.

For instance, one of our partners devised an intervention to increase the understanding of the Substitution-Augmentation-Modification-Redefinition, or SAMR, framework of classroom technology integration to promote deep learning. They used the toolkit to study an effort to adapt a teacher-coaching model to include identification and reflection of lessons using the SAMR framework. As a result, the coaching protocol was adapted to include new baseline data as well as learning targets.



This tool provides a step-by-step process for other districts that wish to better integrate technology into classroom instruction with a focus on systematically improving practice.

DOUGLAS GAGNON: We have shared three tools, collaboratively developed by REL researchers and rural education partners across the nation, in an effort to support educators and promote evidence-based practices. For more information on the resources presented in this video, please visit the following sites, or contact these individuals.

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