

Designing Educational Opportunities that Inspire Youth Aspirations and Strengthen Rural Community Vitality

by Korah Soll, Val Peacock, Sara King, and Dawna Blackstone

Maine's Rural Aspirations Project (RAP) was founded by rural public school educators with collective experience in traditional classrooms, alternative programs, and the design of innovative school- and community-based programming across Maine. Over the past 12 years, RAP's work has emerged and evolved in response to a deepening understanding of the rural education landscape and state-wide efforts to ensure a vibrant future for Maine. We believe that to sustain vital rural communities, we must engage and support youth as leaders and stewards—individuals who honor their connection to place and develop the skills necessary for an innovative, adaptive, and resilient future amid social, economic, and environmental change.

Rural Aspirations' first contract was with Deer Isle-Stonington High School in 2014 to develop the Marine Studies Pathway. We collaborated with school staff and community partners to cocreate learning outcomes and place-based learning experiences for students interested in working within one of Maine's most productive fishing communities. That first summer, a young fisherman who attended a summer program told us, "Usually kids drop out of school to become fishermen. This summer, I dropped out of fishing to come to school." This formative moment solidified our mission, and set RAP on a path that has since included work with over 40 districts across Maine and the development of our current theory of change

Through our work across Maine designing community-connected curriculum and programming, key insights have emerged about the ecosystem of rural education. This learning informs all that we do:

- **Maine schools are increasingly asked to navigate and mitigate broad societal challenges**—Schools need to address poverty, trauma, substance abuse, food insecurity, and mental health while also getting all students to academic, social-emotional, and physical proficiency. Although this isn't new, schools are being asked to do more than ever.
- **Teachers' health and well-being need to be prioritized**—Exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic, teachers are carrying the burden of growing expectations. Even Maine's most innovative educators are struggling to meet an overwhelming and often contradictory set of demands.
- **Maine's youth are struggling**—Siloed school and community systems leave youth disconnected from their education, communities, and one another.
- **Systemic constraints are real**—Laws, policies, staffing shortages, capacity, geography, funding, trust, and historical dynamics all make partnerships difficult to initiate or sustain—often adding further strain on schools.
- **Schools and rural vitality are intertwined**—Yet youth and educators are often absent from the tables

where economic and community development decisions are made. While workforce development is a major topic, many organizations lack the capacity or understanding to engage effectively with schools and youth.

- **Change is happening, but often in isolation**—The work to improve educational opportunities is spread across many fronts with limited coordination or shared vision. Sustained change requires consistency, time, and attention to the social-emotional needs of students, families, educators, and communities.
- **Small schools can be agile and innovate in ways that larger systems cannot**—With fewer students and more flexibility in staff assignments, smaller schools can have more flexibility to respond to changes in the community. Teachers and community leaders are more likely to understand the role schools play in the current and future vitality of their communities
- **Rural places are special**—People are deeply connected to place through histories of natural resource-based work (fishing, forestry, farming) and tightly woven social networks. Rural schools are both over- and under-resourced and play vital roles in their communities' social identity and economic stability.

At RAP, we take a responsive approach—refining our theory of change, mission, and values as our

understanding evolves. We begin with empathy to build relationships and trust. We look for strengths and honor the culture, history, and existing work. At the same time, we hold a vision of deep interconnection between youth, schools, and communities that is different from the status quo. As we work with folks at the table, we carefully design toward a culture of connection that supports identity, belonging, and purpose.

Our theory of change is rooted in the belief that if we work in the in-between spaces—centering youth, educators, and community toward a culture of connection—and if we create programs, curriculum, and systems that help participants build a sense of self, place, and belonging, then youth will develop healthy aspirations to shape their futures.

RAP's work shows up in schools and communities in three ways:

1. Responsive professional development for administrators, teachers, and community partners—filling a gap in high-quality, place-centric, action-oriented professional development for rural education leaders.
2. Collaborative projects such as the Eastern Maine Skippers Program, the Maine Forest Collaborative, and the Washington County Youth Leadership Challenge. These initiatives empower students to contribute meaningfully to their communities while building essential leadership skills.
3. Networks and partnerships that connect school-based work with broader community and economic development efforts.

We know that systems change is slow, steady, and generational. Our stability-based model is designed for long-term support. We work with partners

to dismantle systemic barriers and silos and to design and build the connective infrastructure that is often missing. A shared long-term commitment is essential, and the accomplishments of our collective work must outlast leadership and staffing transitions. This is messy work, and Rural Aspirations has a proven track record of translating that mess into realistic, actionable steps that build and realign capacity.

Our work shifts narratives about rural schools and youth—highlighting their essential role in community vitality. We create natural networks that cross traditional boundaries between education and community/economic development, strengthening collective understanding and investment. Our work is relationship-driven. We work with people. How we work is part of the change. We believe sustained change happens from the inside out. Projects that last are owned and designed by and for communities.

Maine's rural communities span mountains, farmlands, and coastline. Just as our landscape varies, so do the projects and programs that authentically connect students to their communities. Examples include

- **Maine Forest Collaborative:** Launched by RAP in 2017, the collaborative began with a question posed by teachers, administrators, and natural resource professionals: Is there a link between natural resource-based educational opportunities in rural schools and the success of a diverse forest economy? The answer: absolutely. Maine's forest economy needs engaged students who can communicate effectively, persevere, and adapt.

Students in the program explore the question, How can we use natural resources to make a positive impact on our commu-

nity? Using the design thinking process, students from rural schools propose solutions to local challenges curated in partnership with industry representatives. Past projects include

- designing experiments to measure optimal growing conditions for saltmarsh grass;
- creating forest management plans for a school's 40-acre woodlot;
- planting native trees to stabilize riverbanks and anadromous fish habitat;
- designing websites and campaigns to raise community awareness; and
- testifying to advocate for legislative change such as Sunday hunting access.
- **Northern Maine Outdoor Education Cohort:** This project brings educators into a community of practice. Outdoor education includes everything from participating in a community science project, studying and observing nature, nature journaling, using natural resources, engaging in outdoor activities and games connected to content, and simply learning about content by experiencing it (forests, marshes, farms, water bodies, plants, animals, insects, etc). This group collaborates to refine how hands-on physical experiences engage students with their place in a way that is stimulating, authentic, and experiential.
- **Extended learning opportunities:** RAP has successfully designed and collaboratively funded regional extended learning opportunities systems in western Maine, the Katahdin-Moosehead Lake Region, and Washington County. These efforts work to

create the systems and structures to coordinate and credential extended learning opportunities such as job shadows, work place-ments, and independent learning opportunities.

Furthermore, regional education design specialists, like our staff member in Piscataquis County, build on deep local ties to align regional efforts. By coordinating with shared school systems and existing collaborative networks (e.g., the Piscataquis Environmental Education Collaborative), we foster shared capacity to support youth and to find and build shared capacity to create opportunities for youth.

A recent evaluation of Rural Aspirations' work stated:

The Rural Aspirations Project is unusual in the way in which its work proactively neutralizes many of the endemic threats to organizational change efforts, including the emotional barriers, such as resistance to change and managing the buy-in of participants, the political barriers, such as the unequal power that teachers typically have to effect change within schools, and the managerial barriers such as the developmental needs of school leaders as they work to become effective shepherds of this work within their organizations. School partners report that the collaborative partnership between RAP and educators, embodied in the empathy-based design process, coupled with the way in which the RAP facilitators work with faculty and leadership formally and informally across multiple venues and levels, creates a powerful synergy and momentum for high-quality change efforts.

By centering rural schools within the community and economic development landscape, we invite youth to become part of designing a brighter future. Maine is known for its raw ingenuity, and for rugged rural collaboration. We

are resourceful, resilient and we honor our deep connection to the land. Our most unique rural places have experienced economic transition resulting in decades of societal and environmental challenges. Now is the time to engage youth to imagine ways to innovate out of those challenges.

Innovative and sustainable changes emerge when we trust, build a shared vision, and create authentic partnerships. The path forward is one of connection, supporting each other to find a new future, one where students see themselves as leaders. As our landscape shifts, economically, socially, and ecologically, so must the systems that raise our youth. Lasting change emerges from within, from its people, their shared histories, and the relationships that bind us as part of our rural communities.

Maine youth are our future, the drivers of rural vitality, and navigators of change. As we forge partnerships, we preserve the values and strengths that make Maine unique, fostering connection, resilience and hope so youth see themselves as part of shaping the future of their communities, so they aspire to stay.

Maine's future depends on our collective commitment to our shared future. Our work invites all Mainers—educators, parents and guardians, policymakers, businesses, agencies, and organizations—to see rural schools as catalysts of possibility. Help us shift the narrative from one of rural challenges to one of rural strength and innovation. Invest in partnerships. Listen carefully. Trust in rural voices. Work to create connections between youth and community. Let's work together to build that future.

Korah Soll is the cofounder and executive director at Rural Aspirations Project. She is a small-town Maine girl who landed serendipitously in a rural alternative classroom as an educational technician almost 30 years ago. From there, she taught and directed in programs across Maine for 16 years prior to starting Rural Aspirations. She has an immense love for the state of Maine and is honored to have the opportunity to work with amazing education and community leaders every day.

Val Peacock is the cofounder and director of programs and strategy at Rural Aspirations Project. Her career has included environmental education, high school science teaching, and the development of innovative programming for schools throughout Maine. She lives in Bar Harbor with her husband and son where she is also the chair of the town council.

Sara King is the program coordinator for the Maine Forest Collaborative. She comes from a background of formal, informal, and outdoor education as a former Nature's Classroom trip leader, rural elementary school teacher, and 4-H educator. King also worked as a Maine Guide and yoga instructor during the summers.

Dawna Blackstone is a regional design specialist with Rural Aspirations, focusing her work in Piscataquis County. Growing up in a small Maine town, she spent much of her time outdoors, developing a deep love of nature, which has guided her professional work for more than 20 years. Blackstone has been involved with Rural Aspirations since 2018, contributing her experience and passion to support rural education.