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Beyond Outreach: What Rural Communities Can Teach Us About Mutual Flourishing

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Engagement as the Key to Education Transformed

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Introduction: The Limits of Traditional Outreach

Schools measure family and community engagement by counting. We count heads at back-to-school night, responses to the spring survey, volunteer hours logged, backpacks distributed, and flyers sent home. Counting produces a number a superintendent can report to a board, and the number rises or falls in ways that feel like progress or failure.

Counting also hides the question worth asking: what did the school and the community build together, and who can name it? A district can raise attendance at every event on its calendar and still have little standing in the community it serves. Families arrive, receive what the school offers, and leave. The school delivers, the family consumes, and the transaction closes. Traditional outreach describes exactly that motion, and the term outreach gives away the direction of travel: someone inside reaches out to someone outside.

At a public rural elementary school in the Northeast where I consulted, staff built a program that delivered groceries from the local food shelf to families' homes. The program began as a way to make sure students had what they needed, and staff tracked it the way schools track most things: households served, deliveries completed, pounds distributed. The numbers rose steadily. The numbers described the food. They did not describe what the school was building alongside it.

The problem matters at scale. Nearly one in five public school students in the United States, close to 10 million children, attends a rural school (Showalter et al., 2025). The field has challenged that assumption for decades. Epstein's (2018) theory of overlapping spheres of influence describes home, school, and community as interdependent contexts rather than separate ones. Mapp and Kuttner (2013) argue that engagement initiatives falter when stakeholders on both sides lack the capacity to partner. Ishimaru (2020) describes equitable collaboration as a process that begins with families and communities, redistributes decision-making power, and builds reciprocity.

Mutual flourishing offers a working concept for these relationships. The phrase comes from Kimmerer (2024), who writes that all flourishing is mutual, and Stelmach (2026) has applied it to a rural school and its community in Alberta, Canada. Here it means that collaboration increases both the school's and the community's capacity to pursue goals they could not accomplish alone. Asset-based development identifies existing capacities, while reciprocity concerns the direction of exchange. Mutual flourishing asks whether the relationship leaves both parties more capable of acting. Benefits need not be equal or immediate, but neither party should consistently function only as provider or recipient.

Mutual flourishing depends on a shared local ecology: the web of relationships, institutions, histories, and obligations that already exists in a place. In a rural community, those connections are often unusually visible. The bus driver may coach softball. The school librarian may chair the volunteer fire department's fundraiser. The agriculture teacher's father may farm land the county is considering rezoning. Overlapping roles can create complications, and they can also function as civic infrastructure.

Rural communities did not invent reciprocity, nor are they uniquely good at it. What rural conditions do is make interdependence difficult to ignore. Distance, thin budgets, small staffs, and limited institutional redundancy often require schools and other local organizations to rely on one another. The resulting practices constitute knowledge about how institutions function when their futures are tied to the futures of the places around them, and that knowledge is about to become more valuable as artificial intelligence makes general information cheap and local knowledge comparatively scarce.



Rural Conditions and Local Relationships

Standard engagement strategies often assume conditions rural districts do not have. A conference schedule assumes a parent can reach the building in a reasonable amount of time. A family portal assumes a household has reliable broadband. A weeknight event assumes an adult is free between five and seven and has transportation for the trip.

The connectivity assumption fails especially often. In 2019, 76 percent of students in rural areas had fixed broadband internet at home, compared with 87 percent of students in suburban areas. Seven percent of rural students, roughly 663,000 children, had no home internet access or dial-up only (National Center for Education Statistics, 2023b).

Distance compounds the problem. A district I have consulted with in the Southwest serves fewer than 400 students in a high school covering more than 600 square miles. Some students travel well over an hour each way, and some parents cannot cover the gas required to attend school activities. Without an after-school bus, most students leave when the final bell rings. Low attendance at a weeknight event in that district could not reasonably be read as indifference.

Districts respond by buying hotspots, running late buses, and adjusting schedules. Removing barriers does not by itself make the relationship reciprocal.

The more consequential shift is to ask what the community already contains. Small places may lack density of population while possessing considerable density of relationship. Institutions overlap. The fire department, library, clinic, local employers, faith communities, extension office, county government, and school may depend on many of the same people. Information often travels through relationships before it travels through formal systems.

Kretzmann and McKnight's (1993) asset-based community development framework offers a useful distinction. Institutions that begin by cataloging deficiencies tend to organize around needs to be filled, while institutions that identify capacities are better positioned to organize around what people and organizations can contribute. Research on rural community schools points the same direction. Knox et al. (2025) found that successful implementation depended in part on recognizing and using community relationships already in place.

Relationship density should not be romanticized. Conflict in a small community can travel far beyond the original interaction. Families outside established social networks, including newcomers, migrant families, and families with a history of conflict with the school, may find a dense network harder to enter than a loose one. Informal relationships distribute information quickly while concentrating influence among people who already know one another.

A school interested in mutual flourishing therefore needs an accurate picture of its social geography: who is connected, who is not, whose knowledge carries authority, and whose does not. Asking whether the community has assets is only the first question. The harder question is whether those assets are visible and accessible across the whole community.

Building Capacity Beyond a Single District

Reciprocity requires capacity. A district with three hundred students, one counselor, and no grant writer may value partnership deeply and still have little institutional bandwidth to sustain it. The average rural school enrolled 368 students in fall 2019, compared with 654 in suburban areas, and the average remote rural school enrolled only 165 (National Center for Education Statistics, 2023a).

Regional collaboration changes that arithmetic. Districts and community partners can pool specialists, data capacity, purchasing power, professional expertise, facilities, and relationships across sectors that already serve many of the same families. New York's Boards of Cooperative Educational Services, created in 1948, provide one longstanding model for sharing services that small districts could not efficiently provide alone (BOCES of New York State, 2023). More broadly, rural districts have used regional cooperatives to share staff, specialized classes, purchasing, insurance, distance education, and other services (Broton et al., 2009).

Regional capacity gives a small district more to contribute. A district that can offer a community partner meeting space, data analysis, access to a shared specialist, a communications channel to families, or participation in a regional initiative enters the relationship differently from a district that can only ask for help.

Reciprocity means building enough collective capacity for schools and community organizations to act on problems neither could address alone.

There are reasons for caution. Howley et al. (2012) found that a long-running four-district collaborative used shared services to preserve local autonomy, though some strategies had limited sustainability, and administrators, parents, teachers, and students differed in how they judged its success. Wang et al. (2023) found that districts were more likely to share administrative services than community-facing ones. Formal structures for cooperation therefore do not automatically produce stronger community partnership.

Regionalization is useful only when it expands local capacity without stripping local institutions of voice or control. Governance matters, and so does the question of who gets to define the purpose of collaboration.

Two rural districts, a community college, and a regional hospital in the Midwest pooled funding for a health-sciences instructor, a mobile simulation lab, and transportation between campuses. No single district had enough students or staff to sustain the program alone. Within a year, high school students were earning college credit and entry-level health credentials while completing clinical placements at the hospital. One district now houses the simulation equipment and opens its training space in the evenings for volunteer emergency medical responders. The arrangement expands student opportunity while giving the hospital and local emergency services access to facilities and a future workforce.

Students as Civic Contributors

Place-based learning asks students to investigate and act on issues that matter where they live. Smith (2002) identified recurring forms that include cultural studies, nature studies, real-world problem solving, internships and entrepreneurial opportunities, and induction into community processes. Gruenewald (2003) connected place-conscious education with the idea of reinhabitation: learning how to live well in a place while examining the forces that shape it.

Research suggests that such work affects how students understand both community and themselves. Gallay et al. (2016), studying a place-based stewardship program in Northeast Michigan, found increases in students' community attachment and confidence in their capacity for civic action. Mercier et al. (2025) documented rural students working on a local wildlife-vehicle collision problem and found shifts in how students described themselves as advocates, problem-solvers, and community members.

A student whose work enters community life occupies a different position from a student who only receives services. The student has contributed something. Adults outside the school know what the student made or discovered, and the student encounters adults as collaborators, clients, experts, or users rather than only as authority figures.

A documented history of contribution matters in rural places where educational success is sometimes narrated primarily as departure. Carr and Kefalas (2009) described adults in an Iowa community encouraging high-achieving young people to leave, and Tieken (2025) documents the costs rural first-generation students can experience as they enter elite colleges. Place-based learning will not solve rural outmigration, and it should not be asked to. It can give young people a history of meaningful contribution to the places where they grew up.

Place-based education also requires a critical lens. Azano (2011) cautions that teaching through place without examining the structures that shape a community can leave students with an incomplete understanding of the problems they encounter. A water-quality project that never asks why the water is contaminated teaches science while avoiding the civic question.

I propose three conditions that distinguish civic contribution from a classroom exercise dressed in community language. First, the problem should come from the community rather than being invented for instructional purposes. Second, the work should produce something with a life outside the classroom. Third, someone outside the school should evaluate the work according to the standard the actual user needs.

Research supports the first condition. Sinclair (2019), examining a food justice project, found limited civic gains overall, with one exception. Students who investigated neighborhood-based problems showed stronger justice-oriented civic engagement than students who worked on school-based problems. Where the problem originates appears to affect what students understand themselves to be doing.

A county emergency manager approached a high school environmental science class after repeated spring flooding closed several rural roads. Students interviewed residents, examined rainfall and road-closure records, photographed drainage sites, and mapped culverts and recurring flood locations. They produced a digital hazard map and a short report identifying areas that warranted further engineering review. The emergency manager and the county road supervisor evaluated the work for geographic accuracy, usable formatting, and consistency with county records, then asked students to revise two locations. The completed map became part of the county's emergency-planning materials and remained in use after the course ended.



From Reflection to Evidence

If mutual flourishing is useful as a concept, leaders need some way to recognize whether it is happening. Reflective questions alone are insufficient, because a leader can answer almost any broad question about partnership affirmatively. I offer seven diagnostic questions below, each paired with observable evidence: something that should appear in a document, calendar, budget, meeting record, or project.

1. Who set the agenda? Who developed the agendas for the last five meetings between the district and community partners? Observable evidence: the agendas, including who requested each meeting and who identified the issues. If district staff set every agenda, the relationship is still functioning as outreach.

2. What has the community asked the school to do? What has a community organization, family group, local government, or employer asked of the district during the past year? Observable evidence: an email, written request, meeting minutes, memorandum of understanding, or project record. A district that rarely receives requests should ask why it is not perceived as a resource.

3. What capacity does the district make available? What school resources are regularly used for purposes that originate outside the school? Observable evidence: facility-use records, equipment loans, staff participation in community initiatives, shared data or expertise, or transportation agreements.

4. Who remains outside the relationship? Which households or groups have had little substantive contact with the school beyond required notifications? Observable evidence: contact records, meeting participation, or advisory-group membership examined for patterns of absence. The purpose is to identify whose knowledge and participation are missing.

5. How much student work matters outside the school? What share of major projects, capstones, exhibitions, or work-based learning products in the past year had an external client, reviewer, audience, or user? Observable evidence: a count of those products evaluated or used beyond the classroom.

6. What would the community lose if the school disappeared? Beyond instruction, what functions does the school perform in local civic life? Observable evidence: an inventory that might include meeting space, emergency shelter, food distribution, recreation, public internet, cultural events, health services, or polling.

7. Can people outside established networks influence a decision? What reliable routes exist for a community member without a personal relationship to the superintendent, principal, or board to raise an issue and affect what happens next? Observable evidence: documented decision processes, advisory structures, changes made following community input, or requests originating with people outside the district's usual circle. Access and influence are separate things.

These questions constitute a diagnostic framework rather than a validated measurement instrument. Leaders could return to them annually and record the answers. Change across years reveals more than a satisfaction survey. If community-originated requests increase, more student work enters public use, or people previously absent from decision-making begin affecting outcomes, the district's position in the community has changed.

Consider a district I worked with that enrolled 450 students. Its leaders described community engagement as a strength, because school events drew good attendance and board members knew many families personally. During a three-hour audit built on these questions, the team reviewed the previous year's meeting agendas, partnership records, and advisory-group membership. The same fourteen residents appeared repeatedly, district staff had set every agenda, and the team could not identify one documented request that originated with a community organization. The district responded by establishing a public process for submitting proposals, reserving one quarterly partnership meeting for community-set priorities, and tracking whose requests lead to decisions.

The Future of Place-Based Knowledge

Artificial intelligence is rapidly making general information easier and cheaper to produce and retrieve. In 2025, RAND reported that 54 percent of students and 53 percent of English language arts, mathematics, and science teachers used AI for school, while district guidance and training lagged behind (Doss et al., 2025).

Some of the knowledge that matters most to a community is not generic, stable, or fully documented. Communities know which road floods every April, which employer will take a chance on a 16-year-old and train that student well, which family lost a barn in the March storm, which organization tried a program five years ago and why residents still distrust it, and who needs to be in the room before a public decision is made.

Local knowledge of that kind is relational, historical, and often tacit. People acquire it through participation in a place.

Rural communities have particular experience operating under conditions in which institutions cannot function entirely on their own. Harmon and Schafft (2009) argue that academic improvement and community improvement can function as mutually reinforcing rather than competing priorities.

Outreach is the wrong frame. A school is already part of a community's civic ecology, and the question is what kind of participant it will be. Does it mainly invite people into school-defined activities, or does it help create capacity that moves in both directions? Do students merely prepare for some future contribution, or do they contribute now? Do partnerships produce meetings and attendance counts, or do they produce things the community can name and use?

Return to the grocery deliveries. The food shelf eventually looked at the delivery system the school had developed and considered building a broader basic-needs pilot on top of it. A school that set out to feed its students had produced infrastructure another community institution could use. Counting deliveries would never have surfaced that result.

Ask a different question about engagement.

Ask what the school and the community built together this year, and ask who in town can name it.



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