



## **Lesson Plans: Accomplishments, impact and areas for improvement**

### Introduction

With a new school year about to begin, one that would look unlike any school year in at least 100 years, there were ample concerns about how the pandemic and virtual learning would change the education of millions of children across the country. Building on a foundation of reporting on the state of rural America, the Institute for Nonprofit News partnered with a handful of its members to examine how rural America would respond to and be affected by the impact of COVID-19 on its schools.

From the Mexican border to the Upper Midwest, Oregon to Virginia and on Native American reservations across the West, rural areas are far less likely to have access to high-speed or even consistent internet — a crucial disadvantage in a time of extensive virtual schooling. But the challenges go far beyond that.

Led by INN, nine media organizations — Charlottesville Tomorrow, El Paso Matters, IowaWatch, The Nevada Independent, New Mexico in Depth, Underscore News/Pamplin Media Group and Wisconsin Watch/The Badger Project — worked together to tell the story of the unique struggles rural districts face as they educate students during the pandemic.

Thanks to generous support from the Walton Family Foundation, small newsrooms across the country were able to produce new, original reporting specifically focused on rural communities that may have gone overlooked. In addition, by working together the project partners were able to create a national story that significantly expanded awareness of the disparate impacts faced by rural school districts and rural learners across the country.

Stories from the project, "[Lesson Plans: Rural schools grapple with COVID-19](#)" were published as part of an ongoing series in three rounds throughout the fall academic semester, from August 2020 through January 2021.

Organically, text-based stories from Lesson Plans reached more than 55,800 unique visitors across seven states from the participating publications alone. These pieces were used as resources for educators and spurred discussions in conferences about digital equity and diversity. Multiple outlets heard from community members thanking them for these stories. Lesson Plans stories were also published by 97 outlets in 31 states and six national/niche

outlets. In addition, we found 233 instances of social promotion and/or other forms of sharing these stories by stakeholders, including external media, community news groups, blogs, advocacy groups and more.

How did we find this data?

For organic reach, we asked participants to provide engagement data from their sites and social accounts.

For content distribution, we searched [Meltwater](#), a media monitoring service, for mentions of “Lesson Plans: Rural schools grapple with COVID-19” and variations of the series attribution: “This piece is part of a collaborative reporting project called Lesson Plans: Rural schools grapple with COVID” and “includes the Institute for Nonprofit News.” We also searched for the headline and first sentence of each story.

For social distribution results, we searched Meltwater’s social feature using the same search terms as well as the headline and first sentence of each story. Additionally, we searched for social captures from each story through the CrowdTangle browser extension. We also asked participants to provide engagement data for their organization’s accounts.

For collaborators’ feedback, we sent out a survey and requested specific data from a participant at each organization.

Why did we do this collaboration?

We believe that collaboration can help lead to greater attention, reach and impact. And by bringing journalists together, we help create a bigger pot of resources to tell complex stories in a detailed and responsible way.

Rural communities, often underserved and complex ecosystems, are frequently undercovered by news outlets. Especially during the pandemic, we knew there would be challenges for educators, parents and students alike. We want nonprofit newsrooms to have as few barriers to entry as possible for editorial collaborations. For more, read our [blog post here](#).

How did we do this collaboration?

The phases of the project:

- Identify and reach out to potential members
- Schedule regular communications with partners
- Prepare, reach agreement and sign MOU outlining terms of partnership
- Reach consensus on title and logo
- Draft editorial calendar
- Create distribution plan
- Create social media and promotion plan
- Share content with distribution partners

- Publish

How was this collaboration funded?

The Lesson Plans project was funded by the Walton Family Foundation, INN's Amplify News Project and the project partners. Amplify — which provided support for project management and organization, as well as cash stipends for reporting and editing the national story — is funded with support from the Joyce Foundation in the Midwest and the Robert R. McCormick Foundation in Chicago.

## Content Reach & Distribution

Content reach — Original audiences

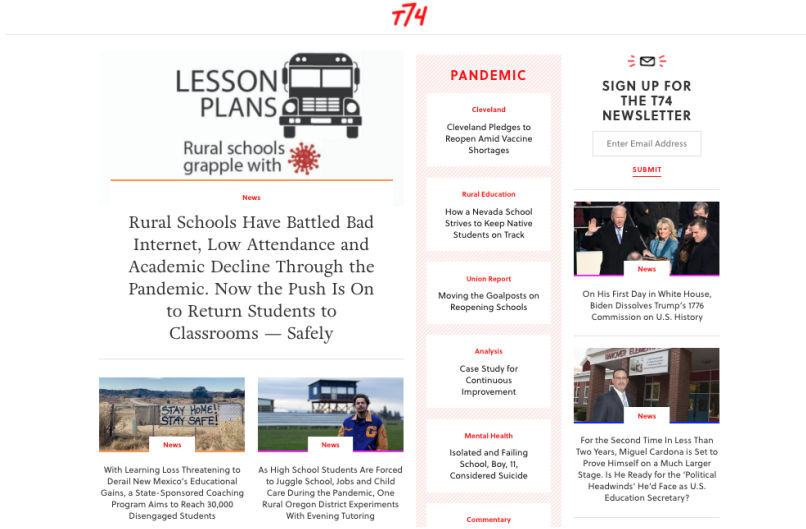
INN members Charlottesville Tomorrow, El Paso Matters, IowaWatch, The Nevada Independent, New Mexico in Depth, Underscore News and Wisconsin Watch were part of this project. Underscore News worked with Pamplin Media Group, and Wisconsin Watch worked with The Badger Project, which is also an INN member.

Estimated organic digital reach for each outlet is below; the national story is not included in these metrics:

<b>Outlet</b>	<b># of stories in collab</b>	<b>Cumulative unique page views</b>	<b>Average active/engaged time on the story page</b>	<b>Cumulative Facebook shares</b>	<b>Cumulative Facebook comments</b>	<b>Cumulative Twitter impressions</b>
Charlottesville Tomorrow	3	2,719	2:43	10	7	4,899
El Paso Matters	3	2,072	4:11	96	118	7,614
Iowa Watch	4	921	3:36	49	20	17,883
The Nevada Independent	3	5,747	14:38	245	256	8,558
New Mexico In Depth	3	2,597	0:31	149	80	3,296

Underscore News/Pamplin Media	5	39,935	2:33	8	0	Unable to provide
Wisconsin Watch/The Badger Project	3	2,014	1:23	114	88	1,569

Additional Reach & Engagement



For the first time, we sought a partner to co-publish reporting from a collaborative series on the day of launch rather than after publication. We worked with The 74, an INN member focused on education, to [co-publish the national overview](#). In addition, the outlet republished four stories that had been published earlier and [created a Lesson Plans package](#), featured on its homepage. Lesson Plans was

also the key package in its Jan. 21 edition of the daily [T74 newsletter](#). We also worked with our long-time partners at the Associated Press to distribute the national story.

On Jan. 22, The New York Times mentioned and linked to the Lesson Plans series in its [Schools During Coronavirus coverage newsletter](#) and linked to it on their website as part of their national project on COVID and education.

This series was [featured](#) as a resource for teachers and educators on [Rural Community Resource Hub](#), a free community resource run by staff at the Harvard Education Redesign Lab.

Charlottesville Tomorrow reporting was [referenced](#) in Digital Inclusion Week's [Community Event](#), addressing the digital divide and exploring solutions to further digital equity. Additionally, [New Mexico Humanities Council](#) invited Shaun Griswold of New Mexico In Depth to speak at the third installment of its [Starting Conversations series on Journalism and Democracy](#), in which facilitator Megan Kamerick invited journalists and broadcasters from New Mexico and the broader Southwest to discuss the role diversity plays in journalistic coverage.

The Chronicle of Higher Education reached out to some of the people New Mexico In Depth sourced in its second story about the difficulties posed by COVID-19 for high-achieving indigenous students for its own story. [The story](#), “COVID complicates college prep for Native students,” wound up on a listserv of people and organizations whose mission is to help high-achieving Indigenous students make it to well-known universities and colleges. New Mexico In Depth’s story, [“A historic year. learning loss threatens recent educational gains,”](#) was named the [best education story of the week](#) by The Grade newsletter, a weekly newsletter that aggregates education news from around the country.

The reach was powerful on the local level, too. One of the localities featured in Charlottesville Tomorrow reporting used the story as a reference in its pandemic FAQ. At Pamplin Media, the pageviews in the Madras location equal the population of that Central Oregon town — and pageviews for the stories about Banks and Estacada are twice the population of those rural communities.

Nevada Independent received a number of emails — including one from the school principal featured in the story [“In a small rural school reside big hopes for Nevada’s Native students,”](#) who said he heard from numerous state officials and nonprofit groups after they read it, asking questions and offering help — thanking the outlet for doing the story.

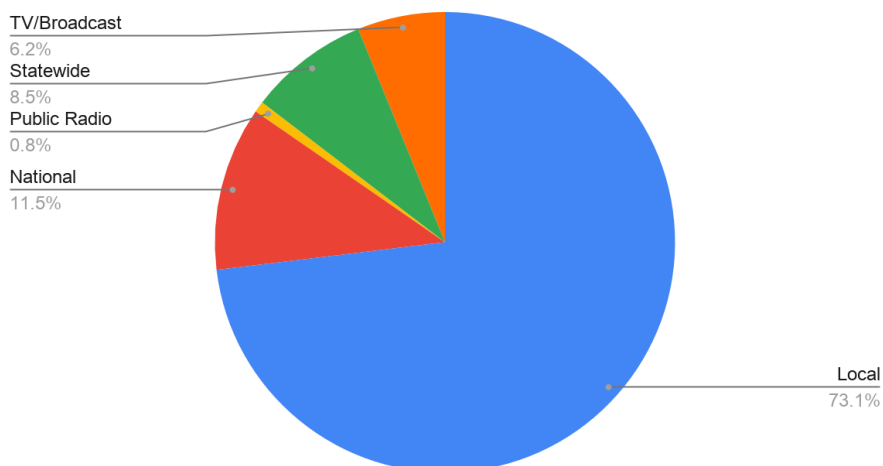
Similarly, the Underscore/Pamplin story “Working through challenges in rural Oregon” received compliments from local parents and educators who said they were glad to see this story being told.

#### Content distribution — Republication

For the 25 stories published as part of this collaboration, we found that 97 outlets in 31 states and six national/niche outlets republished at least one story from Lesson Plans. National educational outlet The 74, an INN member, was a co-publishing partner for the national story concluding the series. We also distributed the national story via the Associated Press, dramatically increasing our reach.

This collaboration served primarily local outlets across the U.S., followed by a large national presence. We saw a large presence across Patch sites, with stories appearing on the statewide sites for Iowa, Nevada, New Mexico and Oregon. Notable local outlets publishing one or more of the stories include the Houston Chronicle, The Washington Times, San Francisco Chronicle, The Des Moines Register, New Haven Register and more.

Type of outlet that republished a Lesson Plans story



National sites that primarily do aggregation also featured the story: Yahoo News, Patch’s Across America vertical, the Associated Press, India Today and US News & World Report all picked up at least one story. As mentioned, The 74, also republished four stories.

Using Meltwater, we can estimate the number of unique visitors to a website per month. The sites that recirculated content from the partnership have a total monthly audience of more than 377 million unique visitors. While it’s certain that nowhere near that many people saw these stories, even 1% of that audience would mean 3.7 million people outside of our members’ own audience could have seen these stories.

An overview of where the stories were distributed is below. Full distribution findings [can be found here](#).

Story	Outlet	# of unique outlets that recirculated	# of unique states where the story was recirculated
<a href="#">Rural border schools face unique challenges during the pandemic</a>	El Paso Matters	1	1
<a href="#">Using tech and circuit riding to beat the pandemic</a>	New Mexico In Depth	3	3

<a href="#">Wisconsin's rural students face a digital divide as some return to screens instead of school</a>	Wisconsin Watch	4	1
<a href="#">In rural Nevada, bridging the education 'digital divide' largely means improving internet access</a>	Nevada Independent	2	2
<a href="#">Iowa schools near meatpacking plants lack extra guidance on virus</a>	Iowa Watch	7	3
<a href="#">Battling a COVID backslide in Central Oregon schools</a>	Underscore News / Pamplin Media	1	1
<a href="#">Closing the graduation gap in Jefferson County's schools</a>	Underscore News / Pamplin Media	2	2
<a href="#">Working Through Challenges in Rural Oregon</a>	Underscore News / Pamplin Media	2	1
<a href="#">COVID has made rural schools suddenly responsible for getting internet to kids in remote, unserved areas</a>	Charlottesville Tomorrow	0	0
<a href="#">COVID-19 pressures Orange schools to increase routes</a>	Charlottesville Tomorrow	0	0
<a href="#">Wisconsin schools 'whipsawing' as COVID-19 hits rural districts</a>	Wisconsin Watch	47	24

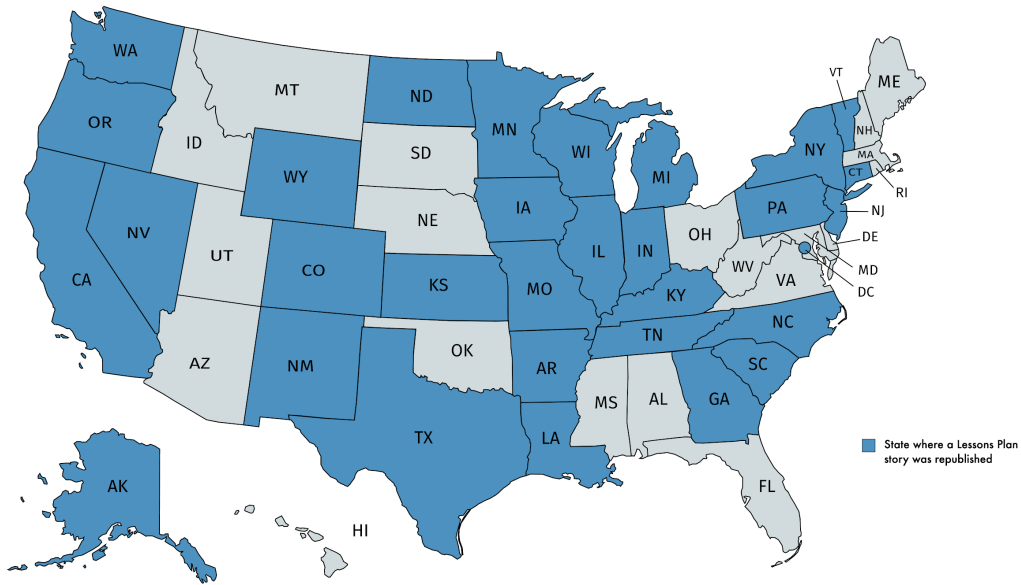
<a href="#">Amid technical and logistical challenges, Warm Springs parents struggle to connect</a>	Underscore News / Pamplin Media	2	1
<a href="#">El Paso COVID-19 surge could disrupt rural border education efforts</a>	El Paso Matters	0	0
<a href="#">COVID complicates college prep for Native students</a>	New Mexico In Depth	0	0
<a href="#">‘Generational shifting’: How a rural Iowa school district changed busing for costs, staffing, and students’ safety</a>	Iowa Watch	3	1
<a href="#">A rural district’s solution for reopening schools? Six-week courses for older students</a>	Nevada Independent	1	1
<a href="#">South Hamilton, like other rural Iowa schools, takes on what-ifs of learning in COVID</a>	Iowa Watch	1	1
<a href="#">The people behind a rural Iowa school district enduring the coronavirus</a>	Iowa Watch	2	1
<a href="#">A historic year, learning loss threatens recent educational gains</a>	New Mexico In Depth	2	2
<a href="#">Nine months into the pandemic, learning impact on rural</a>	El Paso Matters	0	0



<a href="#">border schools remains unclear</a>			
<a href="#">As semester ends in Wisconsin, COVID-19 fears shrink — while concerns of academic slide grow</a>	Wisconsin Watch	3	1
<a href="#">Orange County middle school declines to release attendance during pandemic, compare to 2019</a>	Charlottesville Tomorrow	0	0
<a href="#">Working Through Challenges in Rural Oregon</a>	Underscore News / Pamplin Media	2	1
<a href="#">In a small rural school reside big hopes for Nevada's Native students</a>	Nevada Independent	2	1
<a href="#">Rural schools battled bad internet, low attendance in the pandemic. Will spring semester be better? (National overview)</a>	Written by Peter Cameron for Wisconsin Watch; published by The Badger Project, Iowa Watch, New Mexico In Depth and co-published with The 74	43	15

Nineteen out of 25 stories in this series were republished by an external outlet. As expected, no collaboration partner republished a local story from another partner in the collaboration. Most of the recirculations were from non-INN members. Only one INN member not involved in the collaboration picked up at least one story: Wausau Pilot & Review.

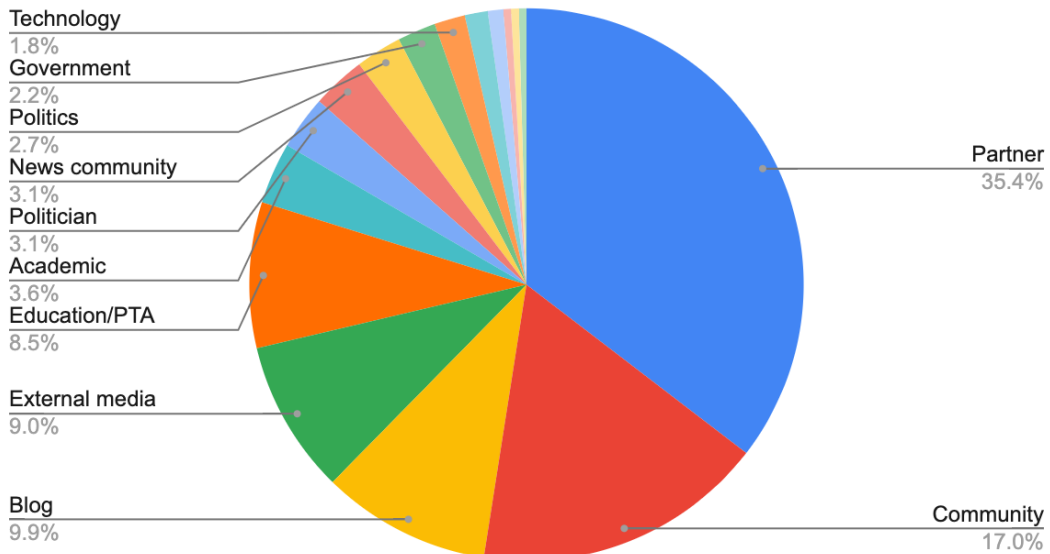
Because this collaboration focused on a topic that affects the entire country, there was a large national distribution for this series: 17 outlets that republished a Lesson Plans story serve the Midwest; six serve the Southwest; five serve the Northwest.



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## Social media distribution

### Social stakeholders for Lesson Plans stories



Promotion came from all partners, including INN. INN promoted the series through multiple tweets throughout the series, which reached over 22,825 users cumulatively, according to

Twitter analytics. We posted on Facebook and LinkedIn as well, where we have smaller audiences: we reached 377 users and 182 users, respectively.

For this collaboration, partner stakeholders generated the most attention, contributing more than a third of the social promotion. IowaWatch promoted stories and the series about 16 times on Facebook and Twitter; Nevada Independent promoted about 10 times; Wisconsin Watch and Charlottesville Tomorrow both promoted six times.

As this topic affects so many individuals across the country, the “News community” group — individual readers or stakeholders outside of the education, media or technology realms — was one of the most enthusiastic in terms of social promotion.

External media — media outlets or reporters outside of the INN network — also recirculated stories from this collaboration, such as The Star, Racine County Eye, New Mexico News Share and WISCTV News. The external media outlets have a combined audience of more than 169,000 followers, putting these stories in front of audiences that wouldn’t have otherwise seen this reporting.

In the education sector, Nevada PTA, Mid-Atlantic Equity Consortium, Inc., Iowa Educators for a Safe Return to School and Texas Rural Education Association are just a few of the 17 education stakeholders that shared a story from this series.

For a full look into the social distribution we found, [dive in here](#).

## Collaboration feedback

When the collaboration concluded we asked the partners to rank their experiences from 1 (poor) to 5 (excellent) on different aspects of the project management, from quality of journalism produced to the editing process to likelihood of participating in an INN collaboration in the future. A breakdown of what we found:

**Overall success of this collaboration for your newsroom: 4.11**

**Quality of journalism overall: 4**

**Quality of journalism produced by your newsroom: 4**

**Communication process (Zoom calls, emails, one-on-one calls, etc.): 4.38**

**Ability to get questions answered: 4.4**

**Ability to get concerns resolved: 4.5**

**Distribution process: 4.11**

**Pickup by news organizations outside the collaboration: 3.4**

**Likelihood that you will follow up on this story: 3.9**

**Likelihood of participating in another INN collaboration in the future: 4.77**

Below is some verbatim feedback from our participants:

*“Lesson Plans forced us to focus more specifically on rural K-12 education rather than taking a more general approach. In that way, it really helped us drill down into a population that might not have gotten the attention it deserved.”*

*“This collaboration has helped us identify areas for improvement in our publishing process, such as how to best set up files to share with partner organizations and how to best deal with miscommunication between involved parties. We have also learned the power of collaborative journalism. Pooling resources and sharing promotional efforts is a more effective way of getting information in the hands of those that need it.”*

*“From an internal perspective, (our outlet) formed many new relationships with future sources and our reporters' knowledge base on the topics was increased.”*

*“Really appreciate Sharon's encouragement and project management. It's phenomenal to be part of a national collaboration.”*

*“We were the only news outlet I'm aware of that was looking at this issue from a statewide instead of local perspective. In that way I'm sure it was very instructive to parents and policy makers trying to decide how to manage schooling during the pandemic going forward.”*

*“We would argue that because we focused on indigenous communities, and used mostly Native sources, we promoted voices and communities typically left out of the discussion in New Mexico and in the nation around education despite the disproportionate effects that COVID has had on those populations.”*

## Challenges & Observations for the Future

Overall, we're pleased with the outcome of this collaboration. The reporting was top notch and covered stories that were underrepresented in the landscape of pandemic coverage. The reach from this collaboration represents the interest in these stories. We're excited to see the future of this reporting.