

Designing Rural Learning Through University–Preservice Teacher–School District Partnerships

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This practice-based article examines a university-school-district partnership designed to strengthen rural teacher preparation through student-driven inquiry and place-based education. Grounded in an asset-oriented perspective of rural communities, the work centers on a collaboration between a rural-serving university and a local school district seeking to expand meaningful, place-based outdoor learning opportunities for both preservice and inservice teachers. Drawing on theories of rural cultural wealth and asset-based approaches, the initiative positions preservice teachers not as passive recipients of coursework but as active co-designers of learning experiences rooted in local contexts. Through a structured inquiry process, preservice teachers collaborated with faculty, district leaders, and community partners to design a sequence of courses focused on outdoor and place-based learning. This work was intentionally responsive to district-identified needs and emphasized the strengths, knowledge, and resources embedded within rural communities. The article describes how preservice teachers engaged in experiential learning and curriculum design while working alongside practicing educators and community members. These experiences supported the development of professional identity, strengthened understanding of rural schooling, and fostered a deeper appreciation for the role of place in teaching and learning. By documenting this collaborative process, the article illustrates how student-driven inquiry can function as a powerful tool for aligning teacher preparation with local priorities. The findings highlight the value of centering rural voices and leveraging community assets as a way to create reciprocal partnerships between universities and school districts. Ultimately, this work contributes a practice-based model for designing teacher education that is responsive, place-conscious, and grounded in the lived realities of rural communities.

Keywords: rural education, outdoor learning, place-based education, teacher preparation, university-school-district partnerships; student-driven inquiry

University teacher education programs are often developed independently of the communities they aim to serve, resulting in courses that do not always meet the needs or interests of local stakeholders

(Ferguson et al., 2024). This disconnect can create a gap between theory and practice, leaving students entering the teaching profession without the experiences or tools necessary for success (Yin, 2019). This challenge is particularly pronounced in rural communities, where there is a pressing need to rethink how universities engage with local school districts and preservice teachers (Adams & Farnsworth, 2020; Hudson et al., 2018). Too often, the literature in educator preparation identifies only the deficits of rural schools and associated rural communities (Blanks et al., 2013; Grant et al., 2025). We come to this work with a belief in the wealth and richness of rural communities and a commitment to teaching that is culturally responsive (Crumb et al., 2023; Grant et al., 2025; Ladson-Billings, 1994; McHenry-Sorber et al., 2023). While we understand the challenges within our rural communities, we also embrace the many strengths of the people and places in these communities and utilize those strengths through the promise and possibility of student-driven inquiry.

One timely approach that aligns with this asset-based, culturally responsive commitment is creating opportunities for preservice teacher autonomy. Through student-driven inquiry, preservice teachers take an active role in shaping questions and learning experiences. This approach can provide a collaborative, asset-centered pathway for designing engaging place-based courses that empower emerging educators to thrive in rural school settings and develop the skills necessary to become effective educational professionals. This article describes one such initiative implemented at Clemson University, led by a professor (Steph Dean, Author 1), who convened multiple stakeholders within a rural educational community to foster a collaborative community of learners. The goal was to co-design a series of place-based education courses that meet the needs of local districts while remaining relevant to preservice educators.

We begin by describing the context of a rural partnership among a university, schools, and communities as grounded in the literature, including a case example from the School District of Pickens County focused on place-based outdoor learning. Next, we describe how student-driven inquiry with undergraduate preservice teachers became an avenue for supporting their engagement with local rural environments. Here, we detail the course development process and illustrate how preservice teachers were empowered as agents of change. Finally, we discuss the current progress of these courses at both the undergraduate and graduate levels, offering considerations for other rural-serving teacher education programs and communities interested in adapting similar partnership approaches.

Rural Partnership Context and Relevant Literature

In our state, rural schools face a variety of challenges including persistent high poverty, significant achievement gaps, low funding levels, and logistical challenges due to small populations and remote locations. In this work, we lean into the definition of rurality linked to the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) locale codes (Geverdt, 2019) as it is most commonly used (Thier, 2021). However, there is no single definition and more recently, rural scholars have introduced a framework called Rural Definition

Triangulation (RDT) to denote a more nuanced categorization of rurality in educational research (Grant et al., 2024). Grant et al. (2024) encourages scholars to authenticate definitions of rurality along a continuum of site-centric to participant-centric definitions. With this positionality in mind, the author team includes rural teachers involved in this work, sharing their descriptions of their rural contexts and experiences.

In 2023, the state had the nation's third-largest achievement gap between economically disadvantaged and non-economically disadvantaged rural students on the eighth-grade NAEP mathematics assessment (Showalter et al., 2023). Recent findings from Showalter et al. (2025) indicate that the state continues to be ranked eighth among states most in need of critical support for rural education. Four out of every ten schools are located in rural areas, and the state's rural schools and districts are larger than those in nearly all other states. Our rural communities are the third most economically disadvantaged in the United States. Students in rural households move frequently; only four states report higher household mobility rates. The state is ranked fourteenth in rural children who are unhoused. Instructional spending and adjusted teacher salaries remain well below U.S. averages, and academic outcomes in rural schools were within the lowest 20% nationally (Showalter et al., 2023). Given the needs present in rural, economically disadvantaged communities and the resources available at local universities, researchers have suggested that establishing school-university-community collaborations is a key strategy for building student resilience and addressing the long-term impacts of under-resourcing (Reardon & Leonard, 2018). These initiatives can enhance students' ability to learn, improve attendance, and bolster resiliency.

Clemson University's College of Education maintains a long-standing partnership with the School District of Pickens County (SDPC), which serves a mix of rural and small-town communities surrounding the university. Rooted in Clemson's land-grant mission, this collaboration supports and strengthens K-12 education across the state, with particular attention to rural schools. Over the years, the shape of the partnership has shifted, reflecting the interests of university faculty as well as the evolving needs of the district. In recent years, our college has leveraged resources to amplify rural voices and strengthen rural research-practice partnerships. Faculty in the college see the rural school as a hub for community-engaged support of students and families (Mann & Novey, 2021) and believe it is important for rural education leaders to identify, leverage, and allocate supports and resources, including those within their immediate communities, to meet the needs of their staff and students (Henry, 2019). The college's rural work has evolved from the early influences of school-community-university collaboration intended to nurture partnerships that enhance educational opportunities and professional development in support of rural educators. Catelli (2006) found that effective school-community-university partnerships occur when there is a developmental collaboration process in place, shared outcomes exist, and the perspectives of all parties involved are examined.

Within this collaborative partnership, the local district (SDPC) has recently prioritized innovative, experiential learning opportunities, with outdoor learning emerging as a districtwide focus. District leaders have sought to ensure that teachers are confident and prepared to take students outside during the school day in ways that align with state standards. This emphasis aligned closely with the expertise and passion

of one Clemson faculty member (Steph), creating a natural opportunity to deepen collaboration between the university and the district. In response, Clemson faculty engaged in grant writing, professional development, teacher mentoring, and advisory roles with district educators. Ongoing conversations with SDPC stakeholders underscored the importance of collaborating with teachers to design place-based learning opportunities that draw on both the region's natural environment and the strengths of its rural communities.

Hartman et al. (2017) studied collaboration and partnerships among community entities and local rural schools. From their analysis, they recommended the following in working to provide positive outcomes for young children: frequent dialogue between partners, utilizing relevant literature to assist discussions of difficult topics, thinking critically about how to involve key stakeholders in meetings, establishing an environment of collaborative educator training, and conducting ongoing evaluations of programming and partnerships. Additionally, Hartman and colleagues (2017) encouraged educational stakeholders to utilize place-based professional development partnerships and leverage close community ties to extend partnerships that are supportive for children. Other scholars have found that school-university-community partnerships help with teacher recruitment, create programs tailored to specific, local need, provide more accessible modes of course delivery, and cultivate interest in teaching in rural settings (Maheady et al., 2016). School and community collaborators in rural areas should leverage the closeness of rural communities as an asset for facilitating supportive partnerships founded on mutual trust and care for children and the community (Hartman et al., 2017).

The aforementioned literature, along with related scholarship, consistently demonstrates that rural educational systems have distinct needs rooted in their local contexts and geographic distance from universities. These needs can be better addressed through research-practice partnerships that support collaboration grounded in local contexts. As the National Rural Education Association (2022) notes, partnership-based research plays an important role in addressing inequities and building on the strengths of rural communities. While this project does not currently represent a formal research-practice partnership, it reflects many of the principles described by Coburn et al. (2013), including long-term collaboration, shared learning, and attention to problems of practice identified by educators themselves. In this way, the work represents an early step toward more sustained, mutually beneficial relationships in which teacher education is responsive to the lived realities, priorities, and assets of the schools and communities it serves.

In light of the literature on effective rural partnerships, we contend that rural education work should be grounded in and responsive to local contexts while also drawing on frameworks, interdisciplinary methods, and approaches that can be adapted to diverse rural communities. Moreover, rural education research has often been viewed through a deficit lens, portraying rural areas as troubled or lacking, which obscures the recognition of the strengths and opportunities present in these communities. It is crucial to foster and support research that highlights the assets of diverse rural populations (Crumb et al., 2023) and incorporates the viewpoints of rural students, families, community partners, and interdisciplinary professionals. In nurturing partnerships, we draw on the idea of rural cultural wealth, a place-based

conceptual framework rooted in the lived experiences of rural residents (Crumb et al., 2023). This framework acknowledges the multiple strengths and assets of rural people in four primary areas: rural resourcefulness, rural ingenuity, rural familism, and rural community unity. Rural resourcefulness refers to the capacity of rural residents to overcome socio-contextual adversities that threaten their livelihood and wellbeing through taking actions to mitigate limitations. Rural ingenuity refers to the inventiveness and adaptive ability of rural residents. Rural familism is characterized by a feeling of belonging among family members and the integration of individual activities and achievements towards attaining a collective goal. Finally, rural community unity is the outcome of rural residents' understanding of, appreciation for, and social networking around their resources, resulting in unifying and organizing behaviors.

Another key aspect associated with rural education is place-based education. We define place-based education as a model of practice in which teaching and learning are explicitly attentive to the community served by the school. Curriculum is informed by a sense of place (Gruenewald & Smith, 2007; Smith & Sobel, 2010), and instruction and assessment include opportunities for authentic engagement of students within the community (Driscoll & McCusker, 2022; Gott et al., 2023). Place-based education uses hands-on, real-world experiences in the local community and environment as a starting point for instruction in subjects across the curriculum (Guajardo et al., 2016; Sobel, 2005) and community-based engagement positions students to apply what they know and can do in real world settings. This approach engages rural students with meaningful problems, empowering them as learners and contributing members of their communities as they make improvements in their local context (White & Downey, 2021). Higher levels of engagement among K-12 students have been associated with desirable academic and social outcomes generally (Appleton et al., 2008; Shernoff & Schmidt, 2008) and in rural students (Ludden, 2011).

Within teacher education, research demonstrates that place-based approaches embedded within preparation programs can be effective for both in-service educators (Owens, 2015; White & Reid, 2008) and preservice educators (Lux et al., 2022; Schulte, 2018). Such approaches support the development of a sense of place, deepen educators' understanding of how place shapes rural classrooms, and encourage the design of instruction that is responsive to local contexts. Building on this work, we suggest that educator preparation is most effective when it is intentionally grounded in the specific social, cultural, and geographic contexts in which teaching and learning occur (Hudson & Hudson, 2008). Hollins (2011) emphasizes the contextual nature of learning to teach, arguing that the process must be "situated in the cultural and social history of school practices located in particular communities" (p. 3). Along with others, we assert that teachers in rural schools face unique needs and challenges, a claim that has been well documented in the literature and continues to be evident in contemporary scholarship (Gallo & Beckman, 2016; Meier & Edington, 1983; Monk, 2007). As Barley & Brigham (2008) note, "Rural educators have long been calling for special preparation for new teachers to teach in rural schools" (p. 3). Taken together, these perspectives point to the importance of teacher education approaches that move beyond generic preparation to intentionally engage preservice teachers in rural places and practices.

Using Student-Driven Inquiry as a Vehicle for Engaging Preservice Teachers in Rural Spaces

At Clemson University, undergraduate students have the opportunity to engage in student-driven inquiry alongside faculty who design projects rooted in their own research interests. Within the College of Education, Steph created an inquiry focused on place-based outdoor learning. The goal was to give preservice teachers a chance to explore this pedagogy and strengthen the partnership with SDPC, which had expressed a need for educators well-prepared to implement outdoor learning. Thus, the undergraduate preservice teachers were invited into a local school district-university partnership as co-learners and collaborators in advancing place-based outdoor learning. Clemson students were eager to deepen their understanding of outdoor education and to explore ways it could be expanded in the region.

Given SDPC's recent prioritization of innovative instructional approaches such as outdoor learning, the district expressed particular interest in enrolling a cohort of teachers in a graduate-level course on outdoor and place-based pedagogies. The plan was for the course to adopt an asset-based approach, drawing on the area's plentiful outdoor spaces and the people who sustain its rural communities. Thus, the aforementioned undergraduate student-led inquiry was intentionally shaped by the priorities and needs of the local rural school district partner, SDPC.

Within this partnership context, preservice teachers worked alongside Steph to outline goals for their inquiry: experience outdoor learning as it might look in rural K-12 classrooms, broaden their repertoire of rural place-based practices, and design a potential course bundle to prepare both preservice and in-service teachers for outdoor instruction. Students also kept reflective journals to document their learning and transformative moments throughout the year.

To build this foundation, Steph designed and coordinated place-based lessons that immersed the preservice students in outdoor learning environments. Drawing on rural expertise, community partners such as nature center staff, forestry professionals, and SDPC teachers modeled effective practices in bringing learning outdoors. Some lessons also took place on Clemson's own campus, where Steph demonstrated how to integrate the surrounding environment into lessons across science, history, math, and other disciplinary areas. After each experience, students debriefed together, reflecting on their role as learners while analyzing the pedagogical strategies they observed. These reflections were critical, as research shows that preservice teachers who have meaningful outdoor learning experiences during their preparation programs are more likely to implement such practices in their future classrooms (Blatt & Patrick, 2014). Students also identified common place-based practices across the experiences and supplemented their learning with readings that provided theoretical grounding.

A highlight of the inquiry came when students volunteered at an SDPC outdoor learning event for elementary students. Held in a rural setting with minimal amenities but abundant space, the event allowed Clemson students to work directly with district leaders, engage with elementary students from multiple schools, and see firsthand what place-based rural education looks like in practice. SDPC leaders noted the

enthusiasm and passion these preservice teachers brought, affirming the value of their involvement. This event demonstrated the power of bringing together all three stakeholders—undergraduate preservice students, faculty, and the district—in a shared outdoor learning environment.

Once preservice students had built sufficient theoretical and practical knowledge, they began co-designing a four-course bundle for the Clemson College of Education. These courses were intended to prepare both undergraduates and graduate students to teach outdoors in ways that honor the unique cultural and ecological assets of the region's rural communities (see Crumb et al., 2023). Steph provided tentative course titles and descriptions for departmental approval, while students contributed ideas for sequencing, key concepts, and meaningful assignments. They evaluated potential texts for the bundle and discussed course structures, all while taking into account SDPC's specific needs to shape practical applications. Over the course of a month, the group reviewed drafts and refined materials together. Steph then submitted the final bundle through the university's approval process.

The outcomes of this student-led inquiry were multifaceted. Preservice teachers built meaningful memories in outdoor environments and expanded their repertoire of place-based practices. They deepened their engagement with SDPC beyond traditional placements, building relationships with district leadership and community partners. Most importantly, they co-created a rural, asset-centered course bundle designed by students for students that will prepare future preservice teachers at Clemson and in-service teachers within SDPC to engage K-12 learners in education rooted in place and community.

One of the undergraduate preservice teachers who participated in the student-led inquiry (Reagan Nohrenberg, Author 3) shares about this experience in her own words:

Helping to create these classes was both fun and engaging for several reasons. As a student, it was eye-opening to see everything that goes into designing the classes I take each semester. From deciding on assignments to selecting textbooks, collaborating on these decisions was an exciting and meaningful experience. I especially valued the opportunity to talk with other students my age about what we wanted to learn and how we wanted it to be taught. It felt like our voices were genuinely heard and that our ideas would help shape learning experiences centered on what we found important and interesting.

Another reason I really enjoyed this inquiry was the chance to experience the process from the perspective of a future teacher. As an education major, I approached this work with the intention of applying it to my own classroom one day. I was able to take what I was learning about place-based outdoor education and help communicate how it could be implemented by other teachers. This experience showed me that teaching can be fun and engaging without relying on computers or screens.

Overall, this inquiry demonstrated the amount of thought and effort required to make meaningful learning happen at all levels. It reinforced the idea that teachers can deeply engage students through hands-on, place-based experiences that connect learning to the real world around them. As a future teacher, I plan to carry these ideas with me and intentionally use them in my own

classroom. One of the greatest rewards of being part of this experience was the opportunity to connect with others taking these classes. Hearing from a diverse group of participants who were eager to learn about and apply place-based outdoor education within their own fields was incredibly rewarding. This experience has meant a great deal to me, and I am very grateful to have been a part of it.

Reagan's reflection illustrates how student-driven inquiry can reposition preservice teachers as active contributors to the design of their own learning rather than passive recipients of coursework. Her narrative reiterates earlier discussions in this article about the value of centering preservice teachers' voices and expertise within university-school-community partnerships. In this way, Reagan's experience demonstrates how inquiry grounded in place and collaboration can meaningfully shape emerging teachers' professional identities.

Program Progress and Early Outcomes

One of the co-designed courses in the place-based outdoor learning bundle launched in Fall 2025 with both undergraduate and graduate sections. The course focuses on the pedagogical practices of outdoor learning, including lesson planning that aligns with standards, communicating with families about safety and weather considerations, and ensuring accessibility for all students. An important emphasis is helping participants understand their local outdoor spaces and explore ways to incorporate the rural environment into teaching.

In the undergraduate section, preservice teachers at Clemson University have been able to connect with SDPC leadership and community members. Guest speakers have included principals, one of whom serves a remote rural community, a district leader focused on community relations, a rural classroom teacher from SDPC, and a cooperative extension program leader. These visits give preservice teachers the opportunity to learn directly from the people who know their communities best. At the same time, community and district leaders are meeting future educators and contributing to their preparation by investing time and expertise in the course.

In the graduate section, Steph has drawn on preservice teacher work, photographs, and other examples as inspiration. The course is delivered in a hybrid format: part of the class meets virtually through Zoom, while the remaining sessions are held at school sites. This design makes the learning genuinely place-based, as in-service teachers apply concepts directly in their own schoolyards. School-site sessions also strengthen rural cultural wealth by giving teachers opportunities to build relationships, connect with administrators, and become more familiar with the land and the surrounding communities. Assignments, as envisioned in the original student-led inquiry, are intentionally flexible so that each in-service teacher can enact place-based practices in ways that are meaningful within their specific context.

Preliminary feedback has been positive, with both preservice and in-service teachers reporting that the course significantly shaped their conceptualizations of outdoor learning. Participants described through

writing and in discussion how the course informed their current pedagogical practices (for in-service teachers) and their anticipated future practices (for preservice teachers). They identified course readings—particularly case studies offering rich descriptions of outdoor learning in practice—as especially impactful. Course assignments were described as practical and focused on the development of place-based outdoor learning lessons, with explicit attention to learners’ cultural and environmental contexts. Finally, participants in both cohorts expressed appreciation for the breadth of course topics related to outdoor learning, especially those addressing alignment with standards, accessibility for all learners, and practical considerations such as safety and weather.

Author 4, Michelle Conley, was one of the in-service teachers who completed the course in Fall 2025 and describes several key takeaways from her experience:

As a teacher in the graduate program, I especially benefited from the portions of the course during which we conducted onsite visits to four elementary schools with outdoor classrooms. These visits allowed me to see opportunities for place-based outdoor education in its various forms and helped me imagine how similar approaches could work in my own context.

I teach at a rural school in the middle of the mountains, where students arrive by bus or car because there are no surrounding neighborhoods or sidewalks. Due to our school’s remote location, our students are more familiar with and connected to the outdoors than many of their urban peers. However, intentional outdoor learning time engages them with the environment in ways that differ from outdoor play at home, helping them interact with nature more purposefully.

Several key aspects of this graduate class stood out to me. One was learning how to conduct an onsite risk assessment. Completing a risk assessment at my school encouraged me to view everyday spaces with new eyes and identify new teaching opportunities. For example, I was surprised to discover that our school had installed an electronic wire fence around the dumpster to keep bears away. This process helped me think more intentionally about safety while also expanding my vision for outdoor instruction.

As a result, I expanded my capacity to use the outdoor learning classroom at my school. This space includes a pond with a waterfall, where I had my students notice interactions among Earth’s four spheres, observe wildlife life cycles, reflect on seasonal changes in their “sit spots,” and identify the purposes of variation in plant materials. I firmly believe that time in nature to practice observational skills is a much-needed experience in today’s technological age.

I also incorporated outdoor learning into other spaces on campus. In my school’s inner courtyard, students searched for natural examples of erosion and created models of mountains with and without trees and rocks to demonstrate how erosion can be minimized. They built homes from natural materials designed to withstand various natural hazards, and I had fun using a leaf blower to test their structural modifications against tornado-like winds.

Beyond individual lessons, the graduate course fostered collaboration with like-minded teachers across the rural-serving district, which fueled creativity and confidence in trying new

approaches. Learning about the benefits of outdoor learning helped me persevere as an educator as we extended our classroom beyond four concrete walls. By planning and implementing outdoor lessons, we created positive, lifelong memories for students who became more connected to nature, each other, and the world around them.

Michelle's narrative highlights how place-based outdoor learning can deepen instructional practice while drawing on the existing strengths of rural contexts. Her reflections illustrate how intentional engagement with local environments supports teacher learning that is both practical and responsive to community assets. Michelle's experience reinforces the value of university-school district partnerships that honor rural places as powerful sites for professional growth and student learning.

Considerations and Implications

There are several key considerations and implications from utilizing the student-driven inquiry project as a vehicle for engaging preservice teachers in rural spaces, including stakeholder collaboration, relevant curriculum, and professional development. As we saw, actively leveraging local partnerships ensured responsiveness to community needs while simultaneously fostering relationships grounded in trust and mutual respect. Collaboration between local educators, school leaders, community members, and preservice teachers also enriched the overall educational experiences and made funding and resource support seamless. By aligning teacher education with the needs of rural schools, initiatives like this can better prepare preservice teachers and strengthen the relationships between universities and rural communities. We also see a sense of shared responsibility for the education of students when multiple partners are brought together to collaborate on rural educational initiatives. This project leveraged the closeness of rural communities as an asset for extending supportive partnerships, leading towards more innovative and impactful educational practices (see Hartman et al., 2017).

In the student-driven inquiry project, the curriculum became central and deeply relevant. Too often, teacher education programs are designed in isolation from the communities they intend to serve, resulting in coursework that may not fully reflect the needs or priorities of local stakeholders (Ferguson et al., 2024). In response, the courses were intentionally designed to reflect the rural community context by integrating local resources and place-based knowledge, thereby enhancing student engagement and learning outcomes. Most impactful, the student-driven inquiry projects provided opportunity for real-time highlights of the strengths and resources inherent in rural settings rather than focusing solely on deficits. Centering rural-centered pedagogies such as place-based education creates more relevant and engaging learning experiences for students in a way that connects classrooms and communities. Empowering preservice teachers through autonomy and involvement in student-driven learning can build a generation of educators who are not only advocates for rural education and community interests but have confidence to develop curricula that are responsive to local needs. This approach by Clemson University can serve as a blueprint

for other universities seeking to engage with rural communities and increase the relevance of teacher education programs.

Finally, the student-driven inquiry projects enhanced professional development opportunities for both preservice and in-service teachers focusing on outdoor learning and place-based pedagogies. If we want teachers to be equipped with the necessary tools and experience to be successful in rural classrooms, we need to be thoughtful about ongoing educational experiences that are rooted in theoretical and practical approaches (Yin, 2019). As such, the initiatives described here included a variety of learner-centered practices designed to enhance educator pedagogical strategies specific to their rural setting. We know that educator preparation can be more effective when it is grounded in specific contexts (Hudson & Hudson, 2008), and this initiative was uniquely situated within the local rural community. Preparing new teachers to teach in rural settings requires a unique approach (Barley & Brigham, 2008), and we contend that this is also true for professional development of in-service teachers. Considering both the distinct needs, challenges, and assets of rural students and their communities should cause us to rethink the professional development of rural educators. This student-led inquiry project highlights one innovative approach through which to engage multiple educational partners in a rural locale through a powerful teacher learning experience.

Concluding Thoughts

This article described an innovative approach to designing rural educator learning opportunities through a student-driven inquiry situated within a university-school district partnership. Grounded in rural education scholarship and place-based theory, the project centered preservice teachers as co-designers while positioning in-service teachers and community members as vital sources of expertise. The narratives shared by Reagan and Michelle provide meaningful insight into the personal and professional impact of this work, highlighting how collaborative inquiry can deepen learning and relevance across roles.

Rooted in asset-based, culturally responsive commitments, this initiative demonstrates the potential of rural partnerships to leverage community strengths rather than focus on deficits. By drawing on the rural cultural wealth of the School District of Pickens County and the longstanding relationship with Clemson University, the resulting courses were intentionally responsive to local needs and meaningful for both preservice and in-service teachers. This work underscores the promise of reimagining how universities engage with rural districts by moving toward models that are collaborative, place-conscious, and mutually sustaining. At the same time, it offers a replicable example for rural-serving teacher education programs seeking to strengthen preparation through partnership and place.

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Michelle Conley, M.Ed., is an elementary educator with 26 years of experience teaching every grade level from kindergarten through fifth grade. Her passion is developing lifelong learners by fostering curiosity and a love of learning through hands-on experiences. Michelle regularly extends learning beyond the classroom by taking students on nature walks, incorporating outdoor learning spaces into instruction, and guiding them through hands-on gardening experiences in the school's raised-bed garden.