

NEW: 2026 Rural Innovation & Impact Showcase Competition

Across rural communities nationwide, educators, institutions, and partners are developing powerful, creative solutions to help students succeed—often with limited resources, small teams, and complex local challenges. These solutions are working. But too often, they remain local stories instead of national examples.

New for 2026, this Showcase is a national competition hosted by NREA. Designed to go beyond recognition—the Showcase offers a platform to share results, amplify impact, and help shape what’s next for rural education.

Selected finalists will be invited to present their work in person at the Forum in San Antonio on October 21, delivering a live presentation before a panel of national judges and the conference audience.

We invite submissions that:

- Show **measurable gains in student outcomes**, including academic achievement, social-emotional learning, persistence, transitions, or workforce readiness
- Highlight **innovative or adaptive approaches** grounded in evidence and responsive to rural context
- Demonstrate **potential for scaling or replication** in other rural settings
- Are led by those closest to the work—**educators, institutions, students, and community partners**

Eligibility: Submissions must represent work implemented in rural-serving PK–12 schools, districts, institutions of higher education, or partner organizations supporting rural students in the United States.

Who Should Enter

- **Rural school districts and individual schools** leading innovative practices that improve student outcomes
- **Colleges, universities, and higher education programs** serving rural learners and strengthening postsecondary and workforce pathways
- **Regional education service agencies and cooperatives** supporting districts through shared services, professional learning, or systems-level innovation
- **Nonprofit organizations and community partners** advancing student success through place-based, rural-centered strategies
- **Educator-led or student-led initiatives** that are driving meaningful change from the ground up
- **To keep the focus on educator-led innovation, submissions from sales and service providers will not be considered.**

Recognition & Incentives

Top 5 Finalists will receive:

- **National recognition** at the National Forum to Advance Rural Education, including the opportunity to present your work live and in person in San Antonio before a panel of judges and a national audience
- **Two complimentary conference registrations** for the Forum (valued at \$1,200)
- **Three nights of hotel accommodations for two participants** (valued at \$1,000/person)
- **Invitation to share your work through NREA platforms**, including podcast features, webinars, or national seminars—extending your reach beyond the conference

In addition to the above, the winner will receive:

- **\$5,000 monetary award** to support continued innovation and impact for rural schools and students
- **Two days of personalized, virtual consulting** with a national education expert (valued at \$5,000)
- **Four complimentary registrations** to the 2027 National Forum (valued at \$2,400), travel costs not included

Submission Requirements

1. Written Application

Applicants will be asked to provide:

- A brief overview of the innovation or practice
- Description of the rural context and population served
- Evidence of impact on student outcomes
- Summary of sustainability and potential for scaling to other rural settings

2. Short Video Overview

- 2–3-minute video summarizing your work
- Share the challenge addressed, the solution implemented, and why it matters for rural students
- Informal recordings are welcome—professional production is not required

3. Supporting Materials (Optional)

- Data summaries or visuals
- Student, educator, or community voice
- Photos or links that help illustrate impact

Finalist Requirements

The top five submissions will be named Finalists and invited to participate in a live, in-person Showcase presentation before a panel of judges and live audience at the national conference on October 21. Finalists will be asked to:

- Prepare a **5–7 minute live presentation** (summary of submission)
- Prepare a **30-minute live presentation** (extended version of your submission)
- Participate in a **brief Q&A** with judges
- Provide a final **slide deck** for inclusion in post-conference materials

Selection Criteria

1. Rural Relevance & Context

- Address challenges or opportunities specific to rural schools, colleges, or communities
- Demonstrate awareness of local assets, constraints, and community needs
- Show how the approach is shaped by place, not simply applied to it

2. Innovation & Originality

- Demonstrate a creative or effective approach to improving student outcomes
- Show thoughtful adaptation or implementation of evidence-based practices in a rural setting
- Clearly explain what makes this work different from “business as usual”

3. Measurable Student Outcomes

- Include **both quantitative and qualitative evidence** of impact
- Show change over time (baseline compared to results after implementation)
- Demonstrate meaningful improvements for students
- Examples of outcomes may include academic growth, attendance, graduation, postsecondary enrollment, persistence, workforce readiness, or student voice and engagement.

4. Scalability & Sustainability

- Explain how the practice could be adapted or expanded in other rural contexts
- Describe the resources required to sustain or scale the work
- Acknowledge challenges and how they are being addressed
- Scalability may involve adaptation—not identical replication.

5. Clarity of Presentation

- Clearly describe the problem, approach, and results
- Use data or examples to support claims
- Show a logical connection between goals, actions, and outcomes
- Professional design is not required—clarity and coherence matter most.

Please Note: Size, budget, or geography are not determining factors. Judges are looking for what’s working, supported by evidence, and relevant to rural communities.

Key Dates

- **Submission Deadline:** March 27, 2026
- **Finalists Notified:** Late May
- **Finalists Present at Showcase:** October 21, 2026 in San Antonio, TX

Intellectual Property

Submissions will be used solely for evaluation and recognition purposes; applicants retain ownership of their work.

Questions? Contact nfare@nea.site