Education Procurement in Rural Communities: Lessons for Developing, Adopting, and Scaling Evidence-Based Products

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Rural[1] school districts, which account for more than half (57%) of districts in the United States and serve nearly a fifth of U.S. school children, present a significant opportunity for **developers of evidence-based educational products** to expand their market reach and more equitably serve communities.[2] Rural locales possess unique assets such as strong community ties and a capacity to creatively solve problems and education leaders and product developers can leverage these assets to support the adoption of evidence-based products. At the same time, rural schools and districts often face persistent challenges, including staffing shortages, technological limitations, and limited community resources.[3] Understanding the unique needs of rural communities and how rural schools and districts procure educational products can help developers, educators, and education leaders address common challenges and support positive outcomes for rural students.

The LEARN Network is a team of researchers and product developers working on ways to scale evidence-based products and programs, with funding from the Institute of Education Sciences. The Network set out to understand the landscape of educational decision-making as it relates to **product procurement**. We surveyed a nationally representative sample of school and district leaders and interviewed a broad array of education leaders and other members of the education community. A sizeable portion of the weighted survey sample respondents were from rural communities (68% of district leaders and 40% of school leaders).

In this brief, we share our findings on the procurement process in rural communities—specifically, what sources of information decision-makers in rural communities consider when selecting products and who is involved in the decision-making process. From our findings, we share practical takeaways for how product developers and rural education leaders can work together to ensure that both students and teachers benefit from the procurement of evidence-based educational products in rural contexts. Importantly, we discuss strategies for scaling evidence-based products to meet the needs of rural communities and effectively integrate those products into rural schools and districts.

What is the education procurement process?

Education procurement is the process through which schools, districts, and states discover, evaluate, select, acquire, and pilot educational products.[4] Through procurement, districts and schools acquire new core and supplemental materials and teacher professional learning materials. The procurement process involves various decision-makers, who consider student needs, budget, and local context (among other considerations) when deciding whether to adopt an educational product.

How do rural communities approach procurement?

Rural districts often operate differently from their urban district counterparts, and recognizing these differences can help developers tailor approaches to marketing and outreach about their products to serve rural communities. Recognizing these differences can also help rural districts be more strategic in their own processes of procuring relevant products for their students.

Our research revealed that rural school leaders (46%) reported using **noncompetitive procurement processes** more than their counterparts in urban school districts (36%) did. Instead of relying on competitive procurement processes, rural leaders may leverage their relationships with product developers when making procurement decisions. Many of the rural leaders we interviewed shared that, for them, the quality of relationships with product developers is as important as the quality of the products themselves. Discussions during the LEARN Network panel on designing and scaling in rural communities reinforced this finding that rural leaders especially value long-term relationships with product developers.

Key terms:

Competitive procurement processes involve schools or districts soliciting an open call for request (or bids) before selecting a specific product, suite of products, or product developer.

Educational products encompass interventions, programs, or solutions designed to meet specific needs in educational settings. Examples of educational products include curricular materials, educational technologies, and professional development.

Noncompetitive procurement processes involve schools or districts selecting a specific product developer or inviting a few trusted suppliers to bid, without opening the process to all potential suppliers.

Product developers and researchers create, design, and produce educational products aimed at facilitating learning and improving educational outcomes. Once a product reaches the market, these individuals are often considered vendors to schools and districts.

Product procurement involves discovering, evaluating, selecting, acquiring, and piloting educational products.

A **request for proposals** or RFP is distributed when a school or district identifies a need for a new product and wants to solicit bids from qualified developers.

Rural schools and districts were defined using National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) locale codes. For the purposes of this brief, we included schools and districts classified as either rural or town.[5]
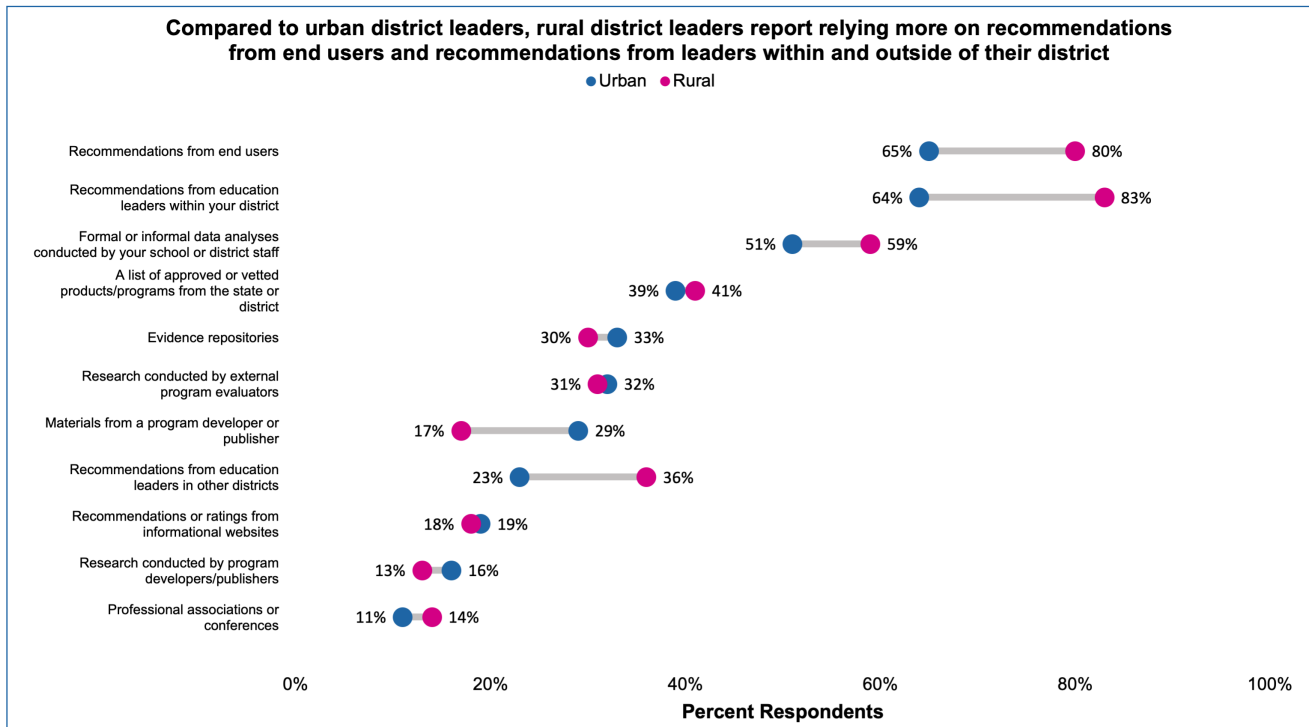
Panel insight: Rural leaders often rely on strong relationships with developers for support and guidance throughout the procurement process.

"I want to caution drive-through approaches. You can't assume you know everything already. These fast approaches can be superficial and not effective. Focus on building relationships and spend time listening and learning. Find opportunities for collaboration while considering the unique needs of a community."

— Darris Means,
Executive Director for Rural and Community-Based Education,
University of Pittsburgh School of Education

What sources of information do decision-makers in rural communities turn to when procuring new products?

Based on the survey results, rural school and district leaders rely on a variety of trusted sources when selecting evidence-based educational products.

Compared to urban district leaders, rural district leaders report relying more on recommendations from end users and recommendations from leaders within and outside of their district

● Urban ● Rural

Source	Urban	Rural
Recommendations from end users	65%	80%
Recommendations from education leaders within your district	64%	83%
Formal or informal data analyses conducted by your school or district staff	51%	59%
A list of approved or vetted products/programs from the state or district	39%	41%
Evidence repositories	33%	30%
Research conducted by external program evaluators	32%	31%
Materials from a program developer or publisher	29%	17%
Recommendations from education leaders in other districts	23%	36%
Recommendations or ratings from informational websites	19%	18%
Research conducted by program developers/publishers	16%	13%
Professional associations or conferences	14%	11%

Percent Respondents

District leaders were asked on the survey "Which sources of information influenced your school's or district's decision to procure a core, supplemental, or professional development program?" within the last two school years. Participants rated each information source on a 3-point scale where 1 = Had little or no influence; 2 = Had some influence; and 3 = Heavily influenced. There was also a fourth option for "I don't know." This exhibit displays the weighted percentages of school and district leaders who found an information source to be somewhat or heavily influential. The exhibit displays the weighted percentage of district leaders in urban or rural districts who indicated each individual or group was involved in evaluating products or programs. If a respondent selected "not involved / not applicable" or "I don't know," their responses are not shown in the exhibit.

Survey data suggest that rural and urban *district leaders* look to different sources of information when deciding to procure products. Rural district leaders reported that recommendations from end users and leaders within and outside their district were more influential.

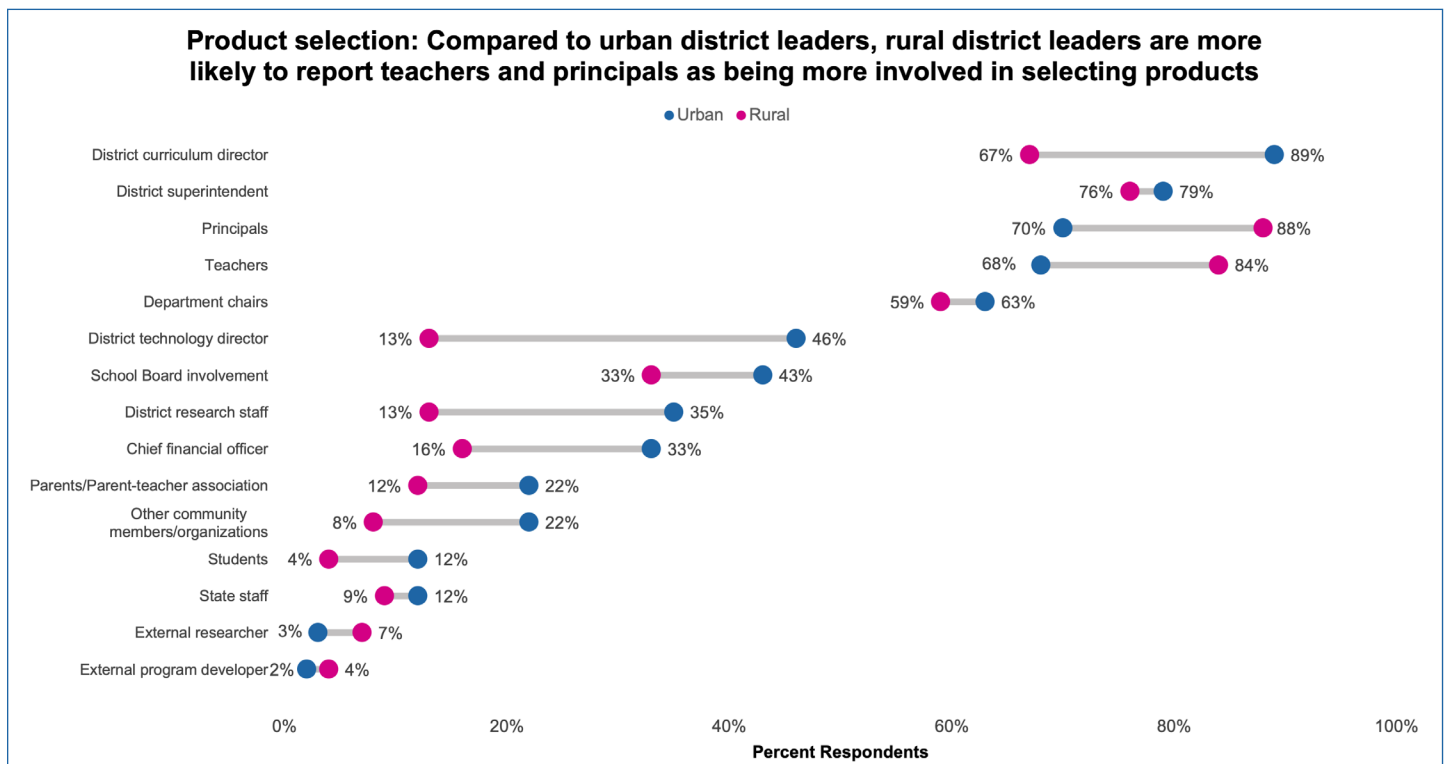**Interview insight: Rural leaders look to leaders in nearby school districts when making procurement decisions.**

"I go and ask mainly the small (districts). What are you using? How do you like it? I do some of that informal outreach … all those questions that you don't necessarily want to initially engage with a product because then you just get phone calls constantly, and I try to do as much research behind the scenes."

— Superintendent (who is also a principal)
in a rural district

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Rural and urban *school leaders* also tend to look to different sources of information when deciding to procure products (data not shown in exhibit). Like rural district leaders, rural school leaders rely more on information from educators from their own and other districts, compared with their counterparts in urban schools. Leaders from rural schools reported being less influenced by research conducted by external program evaluators and professional associations or conferences than their urban counterparts. They also reported that a lack of research relevant to the school and district context was one of the barriers to using evidence in the procurement process.

Who is involved in the procurement decision-making process in rural communities?

The survey included a question about the involvement that different individuals or groups have in identifying, evaluating, and/or deciding to select evidence-based educational products. For example, district leaders report that teachers were involved in selecting products in 84% of rural districts and just 68% of urban districts. Similarly, urban district leaders reported teachers as less likely to be involved in identifying and evaluating products (not shown in exhibit).

Product selection: Compared to urban district leaders, rural district leaders are more likely to report teachers and principals as being more involved in selecting products

Legend: ● Urban ● Rural

Group	Rural	Urban
District curriculum director	67%	89%
District superintendent	76%	79%
Principals	88%	70%
Teachers	84%	68%
Department chairs	59%	63%
District technology director	13%	46%
School Board involvement	33%	43%
District research staff	13%	35%
Chief financial officer	16%	33%
Parents/Parent-teacher association	12%	22%
Other community members/organizations	8%	22%
Students	4%	12%
State staff	9%	12%
External researcher	3%	7%
External program developer	2%	4%

Percent Respondents

District leaders were asked on the American School District Panel survey to think about a core, supplemental, or PD product that their district purchased in the last two years. They were asked, "What involvement, if any, did each of the following individuals or groups have in identifying, evaluating, and/or deciding to select the products or programs?" For each individual or group listed, participants selected whether they were "not involved / not applicable," "involved in identifying the products or programs," "involved in evaluating the products or programs," "involved in the decision to select the products or programs," or "I don't know." The survey also identified each district's urbanicity using locale codes collected through the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES). The exhibit displays the weighted percentage of district leaders in urban or rural districts who indicated each individual or group was involved in evaluating products or programs. If a participant selected "not involved / not applicable" or "I don't know," their responses are not shown in the exhibit.

Rural and urban school leaders were asked the same survey question about the roles that individuals or groups have in procurement decision-making (data not shown in exhibit). Urban school leaders more often reported that district personnel select educational products. On the other hand, rural school leaders reported that teachers and principals are key decision-makers in all phases of the procurement process. In fact, rural school leaders reported that teachers and principals are more involved than any other personnel in all steps of the process (identifying, evaluating, and selecting products).

How can rural leaders make informed procurement decisions?

Below are some ways these leaders can make informed decisions and leverage strategic partnerships to serve rural students and teachers.

1. **Build peer networks**. According to the survey results, rural school and district leaders rely on recommendations from leaders outside their districts more so than their urban district counterparts. Rural leaders can strengthen peer networks by actively engaging with leaders from nearby rural districts to share insights and recommendations on evidence-based products. A strong network can provide valuable information and support to leaders making procurement decisions and provide a way to learn about new products that have demonstrated success in contexts like theirs.

2. **Utilize vetted lists**. Across rural and urban settings, when asked on the survey about which sources of information influenced their decision to procure a product, neither school nor district leaders reported vetted lists in their top three influential sources of information. However, because rural districts may have smaller curriculum departments that face time and human capital resource constraints, vetted lists can simplify the workload for rural leaders in the procurement process.

3. **Include teachers and principals in product selection committees**. If not already doing so, make sure that teachers and principals, who have direct insight into the needs of students and schools, are key members of product selection committees and establish mechanisms for gathering ongoing feedback from teachers and principals. Their involvement is essential for ensuring that the selected products are suited to the unique needs of teachers and students in rural contexts.

How can product developers engage rural communities?

When aiming for wide-scale adoption, it is important to develop educational products with rural communities in mind and engage rural educators and students in the process. Below are some ways product developers can strengthen their work with rural communities to increase adoption of evidence-based educational products.

1. **Offer ongoing support to build trusting relationships**. In interviews, education leaders expressed the importance of receiving ongoing and timely vendor support. When possible, developers can support teachers during the product identification stage and later in the implementation stage, which can boost educators' perceptions of and trust in the company and lead to enduring relationships.

For more information on how to engage decision makers and end users from product ideation through development to procurement, check out the LEARN to Scale interactive toolkit.

2. **Cultivate champions in rural districts**. Survey results suggest that rural school and district leaders rely on information and recommendations from leaders in other districts. Having champions who are leaders in rural associations and partnerships can help products gain visibility among decision-makers who value products that cater to specific rural needs.

3. **Partner with rural schools and districts to generate evidence**. Each rural community is rich with knowledge about its context. Developers can partner with rural districts to shape product development and research around the needs and contexts of rural communities and generate evidence that is relevant to the rural context. Developers can also highlight evidence from similar districts to build trust and demonstrate the real-world effectiveness of the product.
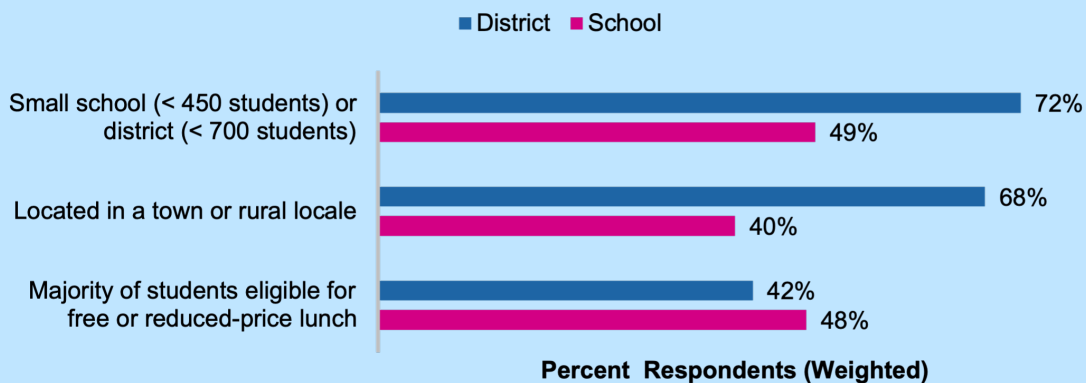
Endnotes

[1] Geverdt, D. E. (2015). *Education Demographic and Geographic Estimates Program (EDGE): Locale boundaries user's manual* (NCES 2016-012). National Center for Education Statistics. https://nces.ed.gov/programs/edge/docs/NCES_LOCALE_USERSMANUAL_2016012.pdf.

[2] Showalter, D., Hartman, S. L., Johnson, J., & Klein, B. (2019). *Why rural matters 2018–2019: The time is now*. The Rural School and Community Trust. https://eric.ed.gov/?id=ED604580.

[3] Schaefer, V., Farmer, T., Friedrich, L., Means, D., & Sadorf, M. (2024, April 8). *Designing and scaling for educational impact in rural communities* [Recorded panel discussion]. LEARN Network. https://learntoscale.org/designing-and-scaling-for-educational-impact-in-rural-communities/.

[4] Our definition of procurement is influenced by Jennifer Morrison and colleagues' "Action-Point" framework. This framework comprises five interactive and often overlapping "action points": allotment of funding, assessment of needs, discovery of [ed-tech] products, evaluation of products, and acquisition of selected products. Morrison, J. R., Ross, S. M., & Cheung, A. C. K. (2019). From the market to the classroom: How ed-tech products are procured by school districts interacting with vendors. *Educational Technology Research and Development, 67*(2), 389–421. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11423-019-09649-4.

[5] Geverdt, D. E. (2015). *Education Demographic and Geographic Estimates Program (EDGE): Locale boundaries user's manual* (NCES 2016-012). National Center for Education Statistics. https://nces.ed.gov/programs/edge/docs/NCES_LOCALE_USERSMANUAL_2016012.pdf.

About the LEARN Network and Our Research

To understand the complex landscape of education procurement decision-making, LEARN Network researchers conducted a mixed-methods study that included:

- **Interviews** with 19 education leaders with key roles at schools, districts, and state agencies serving students from diverse educational contexts and populations.
- **Focus groups** with 9 teachers in a range of grade levels and contexts and with 11 parents/caregivers.
- **Surveys** of nationally representative samples of 1,036 K–12 public school principals and 208 K–12 school district leaders through RAND's American Educator Panels. The analytic survey samples were weighted to produce estimates reflecting the national population of public schools and districts in the United States.

The weighted school and district leader survey samples reflect the national population of public schools and districts.

■ District ■ School

	District	School
Small school (< 450 students) or district (< 700 students)	72%	49%
Located in a town or rural locale	68%	40%
Majority of students eligible for free or reduced-price lunch	42%	48%

Percent Respondents (Weighted)

To examine the variation between schools and districts in the survey sample with different characteristics, such as size, we ran ANOVA tests with a Benjamini-Hochberg adjustment for multiple comparisons. In this brief, we describe only those differences among school or district subgroups that are statistically significant at the 5% level, unless otherwise noted. We coded interview and focus group transcripts to identify key themes and illustrative quotes.

Learn more about our research methods.

The LEARN Network is an Institute of Education Sciences-funded initiative to promote learning and growth among students by increasing the use of evidence-based products. To do this, the Network provides capacity-building to researchers in scaling their evidence-based products and provides decision-makers at the school, district, and state levels with information and considerations around product selection. The Network supports researchers in adapting their products while considering local contexts, decision-making processes, and usability, and in exploring options for bringing their products to market. For more information, visit the LEARN Network's website, interactive toolkit, and blog.

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To learn more about the LEARN Network, visit the website at https://learntoscale.org/