



RURAL SCHOOLS  
PARTNERSHIP

# Building Rural School Foundations

*A blueprint for stronger  
rural communities*



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## INTRODUCTION

*“Education is the linchpin issue in rural economic development.”*

This simple belief is the credo of the Community Foundation of the Ozarks’ Rural Schools Partnership and its work with school districts, local community foundations, and national partners. Schools truly are the lifeblood of small towns, and everyone must do all they can to maximize the learning opportunities for teachers and students.

Starting a school foundation is not a cure-all, but it is of the utmost importance in these times of economic hardships, rural capital flight, and small town brain drain.

A thriving school foundation engages citizens and alumni in the school, facilitates important school partnerships, and can provide much-needed resources to the school community. This booklet and its companion websites ([cmi.ruraledu.org](http://cmi.ruraledu.org) and [ruralschoolspartnership.org](http://ruralschoolspartnership.org)) showcase the need for school foundations, successful foundation-building strategies, and what can happen when thoughtful and caring people come together on behalf of rural schools and their students.



CONWAY SCHOOL  
FOUNDATION

# Teaching Science, Life, and Giving

## *Conway's Mr. Do-Everything Leaves a Lasting Legacy*

*"Moving our school community into true foundation building may ultimately be his most important legacy."*

— Chris Berger,  
Conway  
Superintendent

Some teachers just don't know when to quit. Conway, Missouri's Billy Coyle is one of those teachers, and his students are all the better for it. A science teacher for 44 years, Coyle has touched the lives of many students both in and outside of the classroom. One former student credits Coyle with teaching him and others how to be mentors as adults.

"It is like virus growth," he says, "but a good virus!" Another former student remembers with emotion how Coyle opened up his home to him when his family was having difficulties. The stories are endless, but Conway School Superintendent Chris Berger believes Billy Coyle's impact goes far beyond his roles of teacher, mentor, and compassionate friend.

"Mr. Coyle has always been civic-minded," Berger reflected before adding with a laugh, "he even served as Mayor."

Considering all that Billy Coyle has done, it should not be surprising then that his "giving" has extended into more formal philanthropy. Inspired by his personal commitment to encouraging, challenging, and inspiring students, Coyle made a substantial gift to the Community Foundation of the Ozarks to establish the Billy Coyle Leadership Fund, an endowment dedicated to students with an interest in science, science education, and law en-



forcement. Not only will this fund assist scores of Conway students in the years to come, but it became an anchor fund for the establishment of the Conway School Foundation.

"Mr. Coyle has given more than \$100,000 to support the school and students," Berger remarked. "But moving our school community into true foundation building may ultimately be his most important legacy."

In fact, Berger believes the Conway School Foundation's ability to facilitate community engagement is every bit as important as the money. "This foundation will keep people aware of our good news and the challenges we face. Also, we can attract foundation board members whose children may have graduated or even left the community. Hopefully, we can put people in a position where they can really help us throughout their lifetimes."

Billy Coyle. He keeps giving; he keeps teaching. And it seems like folks in Conway are learning their lessons well.

On top of his 44 years of teaching, Billy Coyle helped establish the Conway School Foundation.



## BRADLEYVILLE SCHOOL FOUNDATION

# Running for Scholarships

### *The Combs Family Organizes Funds for Local Students*

Basketball is king in the rural Ozarks, a valuable part of community lore. Bradleyville's legendary teams of the 1960s are even the subject of a popular book, Leon Combs' "The Hicks from the Sticks."

Leon Combs truly understands his sense of place. From Brownbranch Hill outside Bradleyville, Missouri, (pop. 69) he can survey the landscape of his childhood. The building where his father operated a grocery store stands nearby. Down the road lies the field where a local farmer paid him \$2 a day to haul rocks before spring planting, long before most people in the Ozarks had phones or electricity.

"We didn't know we were poor," says Combs, reminiscing about his youth. "We fished and swam in the creek all summer. We had good times."

When Combs left for college in 1953, he planned never to return. But he did.

In 1995, Combs, a retired salesman for Jostens, the national school yearbook company, came home to 3,300 acres of land he'd bought to start a ranch. He had been away a long time, more than 40 years. Within a year of returning, he found a way to help others improve themselves, as he had, through higher education.

Leon, his brother, Joe Combs, who was athletics director before becoming superintendent of schools in 1999, and their cousin, the late Lonnie Combs, president of Southern Construction, came up with the idea of a Scholarship Walk/Run to assist Bradleyville students who wanted to go to college.

Combs put his marketing skills to work, and the first



Bradleyville 5K Walk/Run raised \$15,000, largely from ad sales in the souvenir booklet. The annual run has since awarded more than \$300,000 in scholarships. No student who applies for the \$1,000 scholarships for college or trade school is turned down. Most importantly, perhaps, is that post-secondary matriculation by Bradleyville graduates has increased three-fold.

"They don't have to be the best academically," Joe Combs explains. "We want every student to be gainfully employed, and these scholarships encourage them to go on."

In addition to the scholarships, the effort led to the establishment of the Bradleyville School Foundation, which now has four funds with more than \$110,000 in total assets. The Foundation's newest fund, a memorial to cousin Lonnie, gives real meaning to the term "legacy."

"Lonnie just did so many things for the school and Bradleyville," Leon says. "This new fund will honor his work and give a number of folks a way to give back."

Brothers Leon, left, and Joe Combs helped establish the Scholarship Walk/Run event to raise money for Bradleyville seniors who want to go to college.



CHADWICK SCHOOL  
FOUNDATION

# Entrepreneurs in Education

## *A Dedication to a Community Approach*

The Chadwick school district received \$600,000 in grants to build a storm shelter. Dr. Bill Wheeler helped secure an additional \$200,000 to complete the project.

**C**hadwick, Missouri, school co-superintendent Bill Wheeler is a self-described “scavenger,” and he will regale you with stories of pick-up truck trips over curvy Ozarks roads to garner everything from donated library books to surplus computer servers. In truth, though, Wheeler is an entrepreneurial school leader, who clearly recognizes the need for rural school districts to develop alternative resources.

Wheeler’s latest effort, a \$19,989 place-based education grant from the Community Foundation of the Ozarks’ Rural School Partnership program, is a prime example of his ability to leverage resources. The original purpose of the grant — a student-run herb garden with cross-curricular purposes — turned into a full-blown community project involving students, teachers, and an out-of-town business. With an additional \$5,000 Heroes Grant from Lowe’s, the Chadwick school campus now has a fully functional outdoor classroom and Ozark Mountain herb garden. All of this in what was once a hardscrabble patch of gravel and weeds.

Another example of Wheeler’s ingenuity was the school’s successful effort to build a community tornado shelter, which, in turn, provided much-needed classroom space. After receiving \$600,000 in FEMA and USDA grants, the school district fell two votes shy of the 4/7ths majority needed for a bond issue to complete the project. Wheeler wasn’t deterred, though, and he worked out



a partnership with the Community Foundation of the Ozarks’ Mission Related Investments committee, which provided \$200,000 through a purchase-lease arrangement.

Classrooms and gardens are not the only outcomes of the work by Dr. Wheeler and his co-superintendent, Dr. Tanna Wheeler, who happens to be his wife. Community members have seen the value of cultivating community resources, and they have responded by establishing the Chadwick School Foundation, which features a board of community leaders committed to fundraising and planned giving.

Wheeler believes school foundations facilitate much-needed community and parental involvement.

“These kinds of school-focused community organizations become catalysts for ideas and projects that provide the inner energy for students, teachers, and administrators to do their very best,” he says. “A school foundation is simply a wonderful way for community members to stay connected to the school and its students.”

Drs. Tanna and Bill Wheeler are co-superintendents of the Chadwick school district, where their leadership has helped build an outdoor classroom.

# Action Steps for Establishing a School Foundation

- 1 Establish a small, working group to explore the feasibility of establishing a school foundation as an independent 501(c)3 or under the umbrella of a community foundation's charitable status.
- 2 Keep administrators and school board members in the loop, and garner their support before moving forward.
- 3 Establish a formal board or advisory board, depending on the legal structure of the school "foundation."
- 4 Clearly articulate the foundation's mission statement.
- 5 Develop a launch plan that focuses heavily on community education/communication.
- 6 Determine short-term goals to build momentum and launch the foundation.
- 7 Determine long-range objectives and consider existing assets that eventually could be included in the school foundation's portfolio.

## Characteristics of a Successful School Foundation

- The primary focus is on student success and opportunities.
- Efforts to build a foundation are embedded in the community.
- All school foundation board members are donors.
- The foundation is open to collaboration and partnerships.
- Planned giving is at the forefront of foundation dialogue.
- Foundation leadership is active, engaged and persistent.
- The focus on communication and educating the school community is ongoing.
- A thoughtful plan is more likely to generate success in the start of a new school foundation.

WESSINGTON SPRINGS  
SCHOOL FOUNDATION

# The Value of Good Planning

## *Developing a Strategy*

**W**hen the Wessington Springs, South Dakota School District began a strategic planning process in 2009, it became apparent community resource development would be a key element. Involving more than 40 community members, the plan eventually included three strategies, of which the second was: “We will identify and promote utilization of community resources to enhance the learning process.”

Specifically, this strategy included the following objectives:

- 1 Acquire a commercial wind turbine to support new and existing curricula, student career exposure, and district revenue.
- 2 Develop and implement curriculum for online retail storefront.
- 3 Explore, investigate, and implement opportunities for school and community growth.
- 4 Explore and implement environmental practices to reduce our carbon footprint.
- 5 Each grade will develop a sustainable project to beautify Wessington Springs.

Since the plan's adoption, Wessington Springs Superintendent and The Cambrian Group Strategic Planning



Facilitator Lance Witte reports all five goals were accomplished, as well as another important outcome: the establishment of the Wessington Springs School Foundation. The Foundation already has paid dividends. A downtown building has been donated for a student-run consignment store, which produces annual revenues of nearly \$25,000, which go back into the community. These dollars, in turn, help fund a wide variety of community efforts.

Witte credits the success to an open and flexible community planning process. “We have an annual review of our strategic plan every spring, and we look at changes in our environment that might require modifications in the plan.”

Jim Beddow, co-founder of South Dakota's Rural Learning Center and board member of The Rural School and Community Trust, believes the Wessington Springs effort is exemplary. “They understand the value of planning and acting upon a good plan. The results speak for themselves.”

Wessington Springs Superintendent Lance Witte (pictured with a group of WSHS seniors), credits the entire community for supporting the district's carefully crafted vision.

A wind turbine, which offsets the energy cost of running the lights in the school parking lot, meets one of the objectives of the Wessington Springs School District's strategic plan.



HARTVILLE SCHOOL  
FOUNDATION

# The Heart and Hub

## *School Finds Ways Everyone Can Help*

*“When I first moved here, it became very evident very early for me that the school was definitely the hub of this community and it had tremendous support.”*

— Dr. Sharon Hayden,  
Hartville R-2 Schools Superintendent

**W**hat does a threadbare 30-year-old eagle costume share in common with robotics technology and a school foundation?

No, it’s not a math story problem. It’s a great example of the power of collaboration when local resources can support a bright young mind to benefit a community.

In Hartville, Missouri, the Hartville School Foundation awarded a scholarship to send Vinnie Marco, a gifted 10th grader, to a Robotics Camp at the Missouri University of Science and Technology, a renowned engineering school up the road in Rolla.

The Foundation also contributed to the long overdue replacement of the Hartville Eagle mascot. But instead of sending the old eagle out to roost, Marco used his newfound robotics knowledge for a re-boot. He built a frame for it, installed a robotic wing and voice, and now it lives in the school’s entrance where the newly mechanical mascot waves and greets students, staff and visitors with “Go Eagles!”

Upon taking the Hartville job not long before the Foundation was created in 2010, Superintendent Dr. Sharon Hayden recognized the need to grow support for a school that functions as the hub of an area where about 70 percent of the 735 students are eligible for free or reduced lunch.

She met with the Rural Schools Partnership, studied other education foundations to assemble bylaws, market-



ing tools and ideas, encouraged donors and school board members to provide seed money, and coaxed community members to form a board.

Now firmly entrenched in the community and cultivating larger donor support, the Hartville School Foundation also holds an annual student-produced dinner and musical and sells a card offering discounts at local businesses, which gives everyone an affordable way to show support.

The Foundation provides teachers with annual \$100 gifts for their discretionary needs; has growing scholarship funds; and makes grants for school projects. Hayden’s next goal is to create grants for teachers with innovative ideas.

“I think we’ve been able to address ongoing needs with some money and work ethic to improve programs that minor donations and taxpayers could not,” Hayden says. “And it’s not all just about the money. It’s about the camaraderie, the commitment, the energy. It channels all that into a centralized place.”

Tenth-grader Vinnie Marco, who restored the old school mascot into a robotic greeter, is just one of the Hartville students whose efforts are showcased through the school foundation. Students also produce nearly all aspects of the foundation’s annual fundraising dinner each year.

# Ways of Giving

**T**here are many ways to make charitable contributions to school foundations. Considering these methods will help a donor find the one that best suits his/her current situation. In many cases, a donor may find there are tax benefits with certain ways of giving; always consult a financial advisor about the tax-related impact of a charitable gift.

A *cash contribution* is the easiest way to give, and can be spread over several years.

Gifts of *stock, mutual funds, or bonds* are a popular way to give and most donors find this a more advantageous way to make a generous gift.

*Paid insurance policies* are an excellent way of supporting a school foundation.

A donor may have *property or tangible goods* he or she would like to donate. Please be aware that tax law requires an individual to obtain an appraisal of any tangible goods valued at \$5,000 or more prior to the donation, and that immediate sale of the gift may affect the limits of its tax deductibility. In the case of a gift of real estate, one may need to have an envi-

ronmental appraisal. It is imperative to understand that land or farm gifts are one of the best asset development opportunities for rural school foundations.

*Planned gifts, or bequests*, are an increasingly popular way to make a long-term impact with a contribution. This could include trusts, retirement funds, charitable gift annuities and other estate-planning methods. As a tax-exempt organization, school foundations can benefit from a variety of trust arrangements that carry substantial benefits for the donor. Again, planned gifts involving land or a farm are vitally important to rural school foundation development.

Bequests will ultimately be the leading growth vehicle for most rural school foundations. Although a bequest cannot be budgeted in a "predictable" sense, rural school foundations that commit to planned giving will ultimately be the most successful. Establishing a rural school foundation "Legacy Society," where those who have made planned giving commitments are thanked and recognized, helps establish a culture of planned giving.

# For More Information

**T**his project was made possible with a generous grant from the Philanthropy Initiative, a program of the Community Foundation of the Ozarks. This was done in conjunction with the Foundation's Rural Schools Partnership and The

Rural School and Community Trust's Center for Midwestern Initiatives.

We stand ready to help you take the next step or to answer questions about starting a school foundation in your hometown. Please contact us as listed below.



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PARTNERSHIP**

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