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Link to original story: <https://www.uwec.edu/stories/rural-teacher-initiative-opens-eyes-and-creates-opportunities>

Link to video: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ubqe4OLnvRQ>

Rural teacher initiative opens eyes and creates opportunities

**Story by UW-Eau Claire**

One key goal of the University of Wisconsin-Eau Claire’s Wisconsin Economic Development Corp. Workforce Innovation Grant was to address the shortage of elementary, middle and high school educators in our surrounding rural communities.

Jennifer Sisum, a clinical assistant professor of teacher education, is responsible for creating connections.

“One of the things we were charged with within the grant was to think about ways we can support the rural school districts in both hiring and maintaining educators within them,” Sisum says.

Sisum and her team created the Rural Teacher Initiative by utilizing their deep professional and alumni connections in the surrounding area. This new initiative takes place multiple times each academic year. It allows UW-Eau Claire students to travel to surrounding school districts and spend the day learning about the challenges and opportunities in small school districts.

The students were divided into two groups. One group visited Abbottsford, Edgar, Colby and Greenwood, while the other visited Independence, Blair-Taylor, Arcadia and Whitehall.

Students were matched with a professional in their area of interest and spent the day with educators in the classroom interacting with students.

Megan Graupmann, a sophomore special education and inclusive practices major, had never been to a K-12 combined school, so she found the experience very beneficial.

“Now I feel like I might flourish in a smaller school,” Graupmann says.

Helping UW-Eau Claire students step outside their past experience and meet successful rural teachers provides invaluable opportunities for them to ask questions, learn and consider new career paths after graduation.

Lane Reetz, a senior elementary education major, graduated from high school with a class of 950 students, so this was a new experience for him.

“I’ve never been in a school with K-12 classes, so I was excited to learn about the differences,” Reetz says.

When you teach in a smaller school, you become a part of the school community and a connected part of the entire local community, which, for some students, can be just the experience they seek.

Lexi Schultz, a senior elementary education major, came from a small rural school and feels that the more intimate setting has benefits.

“For me, a smaller atmosphere is a better environment,” Schultz says.

Results from the initiative have already been positive. A previous immersion student visited a school in Edgar and now has accepted a permanent position there.