



January 2014

# Preparing Administrators For Leadership In The Rural Context

Michael David Mcneff

Follow this and additional works at: <https://commons.und.edu/theses>

---

## Recommended Citation

Mcneff, Michael David, "Preparing Administrators For Leadership In The Rural Context" (2014). *Theses and Dissertations*. 1685.  
<https://commons.und.edu/theses/1685>

This Dissertation is brought to you for free and open access by the Theses, Dissertations, and Senior Projects at UND Scholarly Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Theses and Dissertations by an authorized administrator of UND Scholarly Commons. For more information, please contact [zeinebyousif@library.und.edu](mailto:zeinebyousif@library.und.edu).

PREPARING ADMINISTRATORS FOR LEADERSHIP IN THE RURAL CONTEXT

by

Michael David McNeff  
Bachelor of Science, Valley City State University, 2004  
Master of Education, University of North Dakota, 2010

A Dissertation

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty

of the

University of North Dakota

in partial fulfillment of the requirement

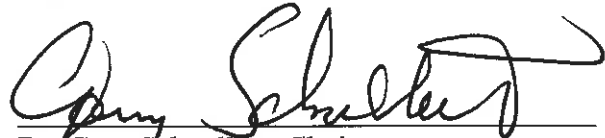
for the degree of

Doctor of Education

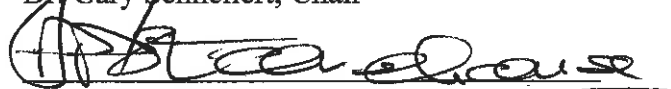
Grand Forks, North Dakota  
December  
2014

Copyright 2014 Michael David McNeff

This dissertation, submitted by Michael David McNeff in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Degree of Doctor of Education from the University of North Dakota, has been read by the Faculty Advisory Committee under whom the work has been done and is hereby approved.



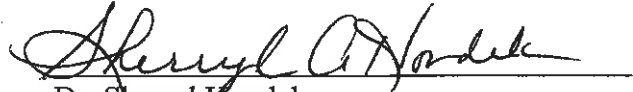
Dr. Gary Schnellert, Chair



Dr. Pauline Stonehouse



Dr. William Siders



Dr. Sherryl Houdek



Dr. Pamela Beck

This dissertation is being submitted by the appointed advisory committee as having met all of the requirements of the School of Graduate Studies at the University of North Dakota and is hereby approved.



Wayne Swisher  
Dean of the School of Graduate Studies



Date

## **PERMISSION**

Title	Preparing Administrators for Leadership in the Rural Context
Department	Educational Leadership
Degree	Doctor of Education

In presenting this dissertation in partial fulfillment of the requirements for a graduate degree from the University of North Dakota, I agree that the library of this University shall make it freely available for inspection. I further agree that permission for extensive copying for scholarly purposes may be granted by the professor who supervised my dissertation work or, in his absence, by the Chairperson of the department or the dean of the School of Graduate Studies. It is understood that any copying or publication or other use of this dissertation or part thereof for financial gain shall not be allowed without my written permission. It is also understood that due recognition shall be given to me and to the University of North Dakota in any scholarly use which may be made of any material in my dissertation.

Michael David McNeff  
December 2, 2014

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

LIST OF TABLES .....	x
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS .....	xi
ABSTRACT .....	xiii
CHAPTER	
I.    INTRODUCTION .....	1
Need for Study .....	2
Purpose of Study .....	2
Research Question .....	4
Researcher's Background .....	5
Delimitations .....	6
Assumptions .....	6
Definitions of Terms/Acronyms .....	6
Organization of Study .....	9
II.   LITERATURE REVIEW .....	10
Introduction .....	10
Historical .....	10
Leadership .....	11
Rural Leadership .....	13
Effective Rural Schools .....	23

	Rural Principalship Barriers.....	29
	Rural School Research.....	35
	Scarcity of Resources.....	37
	Rural Poverty .....	42
	Declining Enrollment.....	43
	Effective Professional Development of Rural Principals .....	44
	Rural Teacher Recruitment and Retention.....	48
	Technology and the Rural Principal .....	51
	Summary.....	53
	Organization of Study.....	54
III.	METHODOLOGY .....	55
	Purpose of the Study.....	55
	Rationale for Qualitative Study .....	56
	A Phenomenological Approach .....	56
	Research Questions.....	58
	Sample Selection.....	58
	Definition of Urban and Suburban.....	58
	Definition of Rural.....	58
	Subjects.....	60
	Interview Questions .....	61
	Data Collection .....	62
	Validity .....	62
	Data Analysis .....	63

Organization of Study .....	66
IV.    PRESENTATION OF FINDINGS .....	67
Purpose of the Study .....	67
Participant Selection .....	67
Description of Participants.....	68
Participant 1 .....	68
Participant 2 .....	68
Participant 3 .....	68
Participant 4 .....	69
Participant 5 .....	69
Participant 6 .....	69
Thematic Findings .....	69
Theme 1: Areas of Support for the Rural Principal .....	70
Principal PLCs and Regional Principal Meetings.....	70
Collegial Support .....	70
Family Support.....	71
Support from Stakeholders .....	71
Superintendent Support.....	72
Theme 2: Resource Availability, Networks, and Scarcity .....	73
Resource Challenges .....	73
Regional Education Associations .....	74
Established Networks.....	75
Building Issues.....	76



	Access to Specialized Staffing.....	76
	Dependence on Class Size .....	77
	Theme 3: Professional Development Processes in Rural Schools.....	77
	Decision Making.....	77
	Early Out Professional Development.....	79
	Impact of Teacher Turnover .....	79
	Follow Up .....	80
	Financial Incentives .....	80
	Administrative Involvement .....	80
	Professional Development Challenges .....	81
	Theme 4: The Rural Context and Its Impact on the Principal .....	82
	Why Rural Principals Choose to Stay in Rural Schools.....	82
	Impact of the Rural Principals on Personal Life.....	84
	Staying Current in a Rural Setting.....	85
	Organization of Study.....	87
V.	CONCLUSION, DISCUSSION, AND RECOMMENDATIONS.....	88
	Conclusion and Summary of Findings.....	88
	Recommendations and Discussion .....	89
	Recommendation 1: Establish a State Mentorship Program for New Administrators .....	90
	Recommendation 2: Support Superintendents in Developing Principals.....	92

Recommendation 3: Develop Teacher Partnerships .....	94
Recommendation 4: Improve Professional Development Practices in Rural Schools .....	96
Professional Learning Plan .....	97
Recommendation 5: Prepare Principals for the Rural Context .....	99
Recommendation for Future Research.....	107
Conclusion .....	107
APPENDICES .....	109
A. Interview Questions .....	110
B. District Consent .....	112
C. Principal Consent .....	114
REFERENCES .....	118

## LIST OF TABLES

Table	Page
1. Example of Data Analysis – Codes, Categories, Themes, and Assertions Involved in Determining Theme 1 .....	64
2. Professional Learning Plan – Description for School Visitations .....	98
3. Professional Learning Plan – Description for Online Learning.....	98
4. Professional Learning Plan – Description for Study Group .....	99
5. Professional Learning Plan – Tracking the School Visitation Plan.....	100
6. Professional Learning Plan – Tracking the Online Learning Plan .....	102
7. Professional Learning Plan – Tracking the Study Group Plan .....	104

## **ACKNOWLEDGMENTS**

I want to thank my former advisor, Dr. Sherryl Houdek, for assisting me through this process. It has been the most challenging, yet rewarding, experience I have ever had. Dr. Houdek supported me through the ups and downs of the last three years.

During the last three years, I moved from a Bismarck cohort to a Grand Forks cohort. The cohort experience has been great, and I have been able to meet many great people. They are certainly in this business for the right reasons.

I appreciate Dr. Gary Schnellert and his willingness to take another advisee on as I neared the end of the program. Thank you to my committee who helped to guide me through the dissertation process; they have provided excellent feedback throughout this journey.

I want to thank my wife, Mandy! This journey has been more stressful for her than anyone. She has been juggling a full time job and three kids during the last three years. There is no possible way that I could have ever accomplished this by myself. Her relentless positivity has kept me upbeat and motivated. I love you! I want to thank my three wonderful children – Mya, Eli, and Annie – for their love and excitement. I have always loved seeing their smiling faces when I have arrived home. They too have had to endure quite a bit during this time.

I want to thank the tireless educators out there that have inspired me to achieve my dreams. To Steve Nygaard and Mitch Lunde, a special thank you for your positive

influence on me in school. Never underestimate the influence a teacher has over a child.

Thank you!

Finally, I want to thank my grandparents Ron and Lois McNeff. They provided a healthy environment that allowed me to grow and prosper. I love you both and thank you!

## **ABSTRACT**

The purpose of this study was to identify advantages and disadvantages, such as scarcity of resources, of the rural principalship in North Dakota. The study and review of literature explored availability and lack of resources that impact North Dakota rural principals' leadership. The unique challenges of a rural principalship had an impact and influenced instructional leadership of rural principals. An era of accountability has forced a shift in the principal's role, duties, and expectations (Rice, 2010). This shift has been difficult on both rural and urban principals. This study included a sampling of six rural principals in North Dakota. The research focused on factors that support or impact a rural principal's effectiveness and school/community relationships including: leadership, professional development, education, and personnel. Six rural principals were interviewed, and the data was coded into categories, themes, and then assertions. Outcomes identified for rural principals were: key support systems, availability and scarcity of resources, current professional development practices, and impact of a rural environment on a leader. This study provides recommendations for principal preparation programs, rural principals, and school districts in rural settings.

## **Keywords**

Rural Principal, Leadership, Instructional Leadership, Rural Education

## **CHAPTER I**

### **INTRODUCTION**

In the age of education accountability, principals are at the fore front of school improvement. Principals are expected to be instructional leaders. Gone are the days of the principal as manager, and in are the days of instructional leadership. Prior to this new paradigm shift in school leadership, principals were expected to be disciplinarians and building managers (Starr & White, 2008). Principals are now expected to do more than just manage a building and a group of teachers. Principals are expected to be the “lead learners” in their building and to lead change. This shift from manager to leader is especially difficult in rural schools. The urban and suburban schools, to which all accountability reforms tend to be focused, often do not to fit the rural school. Theobald & Nachtigal (1995) stated, “The work of the rural school is no longer to emulate the urban or suburban school, but to attend to its own place” (p. 13). Rural schools typically have barriers that make it extremely difficult for a principal to be an effective instructional leader. Hamel, Allaire, & Turcotte (2012) found that rural schools have unique challenges like: geographic isolation, lack of resources, multi-grade classrooms, small numbers of students, professional isolation, and the inability to retain talented staff. As the saying goes, “It’s lonely at the top.” Findings from this study indicate that isolation has a major impact on a rural principal. Rural school populations may not outnumber urban districts, but that doesn’t make rural schools less important. According

to the United States Department of Education (as reported in Keaton), in the United States, rural schools outnumbered city schools 29,202 to 22,492 during the 2010-2011 school year. Close to a quarter of all students in America attend rural schools (Keaton, 2012).

### **Need for Study**

North Dakota is a rural state where approximately 40% of our students attend rural schools. Rural schools and rural school principals are often “looked down upon” by their urban counterparts in Class A schools in North Dakota (Luessen, 2014). This study provides recommendations for principal prep programs, rural principals, and rural districts by identifying issues rural principals face from the perceptions of six North Dakota rural principals. This study will help prepare administrators for working in a rural context, and the review of literature in this study explored and identified best practices for administering to schools in rural settings. Rural principals deal with the same accountability requirements from state and federal policy makers as their urban counterparts. We cannot forget about their development as leaders and the issues that are associated with rural school districts. The majority of research studies available on the rural principal comes from outside the United States. This study is relevant to the “uniqueness” of rural principals in North Dakota.

### **Purpose of Study**

This study attempted to identify advantages and disadvantages rural principals in North Dakota face when performing their job duties. Emphasis was placed on identifying barriers, such as scarcity of resources rural principals must overcome to effectively perform their duties. I chose phenomenology as a methodology and explored the



perceptions of six North Dakota rural principals through an interview process. The literature at the time of this study focused on urban principals, and rural principals outside the United States. There was a gap in the literature when it came to understanding the rural principal within the United States. The context of this study focused primarily on the North Dakota rural principalship. At the time of this report, North Dakota was a rural state where 43.4% of students attended rural schools (Keaton, 2012). There are three different definitions for rural settings according to Keaton (2012):

*Rural, Fringe:* Census-defined rural territory that is less than or equal to 5 miles from an urbanized area, as well as rural territory that is less than or equal to 2.5 miles from an urban cluster.

*Rural, Distant:* Census-defined rural territory that is more than 5 miles but less than or equal to 25 miles from an urbanized area, as well as rural territory that is more than 2.5 miles but less than or equal to 10 miles from an urban cluster.

*Rural, Remote:* Census-defined rural territory that is more than 25 miles from an urbanized area and is also more than 10 miles from an urban cluster. (Keaton, 2012, p. B3)

Based on the above mentioned definitions from the U.S. Department of Education, most communities in North Dakota are considered rural in all three sub-categories. For the purpose of this study, I refer to large cities in North Dakota as urban areas. Urban areas will be cities that have a Class A school as defined by the North Dakota High School Activities Association (NDHSAA). A Class A school is defined by its student enrollment. To be classified as Class A, a school must have 325 students or more enrolled in Grades 9-12 – all schools below this threshold are classified as Class B (North Dakota High School Activities Association, 2014). The rural principals in this

study lead Class B schools according to the NDHSAA classification. For this study, potential participants were selected from 13 school districts that fit the following criteria.

1. The school district had to have a district enrollment between 250 students and 450 students, with 325 students or less in Grades 9-12.
2. The rural principal had to have served at least one or more years within their current school to be interviewed. It was assumed that tenure would play a key role in understanding the rural principal.
3. The school district had to be at least 45 miles or further from a regional hub, which is defined as having a Class A school in an urbanized community. I wanted to focus on rural schools that were geographically isolated.

I interviewed six principals from the school districts that met the above mentioned criteria. Rural principals often do more with less than their urban counterparts while still facing the same accountability requirements. In an age of educational accountability, rural principals feel pressure to increase student achievement, but according to the findings from this study, they lack access to resources. State and federal mandates do not change based on size of school.

### **Research Question**

The following research question guided this study of rural principals in North Dakota:

1. How does a rural environment impact principals in North Dakota?
  - a. What are the advantages and disadvantages associated with the rural principalship in North Dakota?

- b. How do rural principals increase their knowledge and ability to build school and district capacity?

### **Researcher's Background**

I have been an educator for 10 years in North Dakota. I began my career at Dakota Prairie High School, a rural district with less than 300 students enrolled in K-12. The Dakota Prairie School District spans many miles. At the time of this report, the high school was located in the town of Petersburg, North Dakota. The elementary school was located approximately 20 miles to the south in McVile. I learned early in my career of the challenges associated with a remote rural school district. I spent 2 years at Dakota Prairie and moved to Devils Lake, North Dakota, to accept another teaching position. Devils Lake was a community that would be considered urban in North Dakota. I taught at the high school. The school district was fairly large for the state of North Dakota, exceeding 1,000 students in Grades K-12. Shortly thereafter, I began to work on my master's degree in educational leadership. After 3 years at Devils Lake High School, I accepted a position at Velva High School as their high school principal. Velva High School was considered a rural school district while I worked there, and their total district enrollment was approximately 400 students in Grades K-12. I spent 3 years at that school and moved into the superintendent role at Rugby Public School District. Rugby was considered a rural school district, but was also a regional hub for surrounding areas. At the time of this report, I had been at Rugby for 2 years. I have spent the majority of my career in rural school settings. In my 10 years of educational experience, I have learned to understand the struggles and challenges that can occur within a rural school district. I hope to provide guidance to rural administrators and rural school districts through this

research study. Due to the small number of administrators serving in North Dakota, there was a strong possibility that I would know my interviewees. This was a potential bias of the study. My experience as a practicing administrator at the time of this study added credibility to the study.

### **Delimitations**

This study took place in a rural region within the state of North Dakota. Six rural principals in North Dakota were interviewed. Outcomes identified for rural principals in North Dakota were: key support systems, availability and scarcity of resources, current professional development practices, and the impact of a rural environment on a leader. This study can be applied to other rural areas in the United States, and it adds to an area that at the time of this study lacked research.

### **Assumptions**

The study involved interviewing rural principals. I assumed the principals responded truthfully to the questions that were asked of them. I am also making the assumption that there are unique barriers to a rural principalship because a rural principal in North Dakota “wears many hats” compared to urban principals that make it more difficult for a rural principal to do his/her job.

### **Definitions of Terms/Acronyms**

The following terms and acronyms will support the reader in understanding the study.

AYP (Adequate Yearly Progress) – These are objectives for schools to meet every year. By 2014, all public schools must have reached 100% proficiency in reading and math. This means every student, 100% of the students, enrolled in a school must score at

a certain level when taking standard tests (all students must pass the test) in math and reading in order for a school to have made adequate yearly progress for a given year. Making AYP can be difficult for small and rural schools due to fluctuations of class sizes, and certain sub groups.

Class A – this is a school classification defined by the North Dakota High School Activities Association (NDHSAA), specifically for sports in North Dakota. It is a term that refers to schools in North Dakota with enrollment numbers of 325 or more in Grades 9-12.

Class B – this is a school classification defined by the NDHSAA. It is a term that refers to school enrollment numbers of less than 325 students in Grades 9-12.

PISA (Programme for International Student Assessment) – PISA is an international assessment that launched in 1997. PISA is used to measure a country's educational system. It has become the key driver of accountability reforms in the USA due to our low scores in reading, mathematics, and science at the time of this study (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development [OECD], n.d.).

PLC (Professional Learning Community) – Professional learning communities are designed to decrease professional isolation within schools. The term was popularized by Dufour, Dufour, Eaker, and Many in their book, *Learning by Doing*. PLCs use collaborative methods for improving schools, and in the process create teams of teachers working together to improve themselves (Dufour, Dufour, Eaker, & Many, 2006).

PLN (Personal Learning Network) – Personal Learning Networks are established through the use of Twitter. They are personalized because a user decides who he or she

follows, and therefore, establishes their online learning network through Twitter.

Primarily used for professional development (Ferriter, Ramsden, & Sheninger, 2011).

REAP (Rural Education Achievement Program) – This program allows rural schools to consolidate their federal dollars. For example, a school district can combine Title I and Title IIA funds into one lump sum. This allows rural schools more flexibility in how these dollars are spent (North Dakota Department of Public Instruction, 2014).

Rural School in North Dakota – For the purpose of this study, I have defined three characteristics of a rural school in North Dakota. First, they must be classified as Class B. Second, a school must be geographically isolated and at least 45 miles from a Class A district. Finally, they must have a K-12 enrollment of fewer than 450 students.

Singleton – A teacher who alone teaches a specific subject in a school, who does not teach the same subject as another teacher within a school. Singleton teachers are typically found in rural schools due to the size of the schools. Singleton teachers may also exist in large schools, where they typically teach elective subjects (Eaker & Keating, 2009).

Tweet – A term to describe a message when using the Twitter social network. On Twitter, messages are very short. A user can post a microblog of up to 140 characters to his or her followers (Ferriter, Ramsden, & Sheninger, 2011).

Twitter Stream – The incoming tweets a user receives when using Twitter. These are the microblogs of all the different people a user follows on Twitter (Ferriter, Ramsden, & Sheninger, 2011).

Urban School in North Dakota – According to the literature, there are conflicting definitions of rural. All of North Dakota school districts could be considered rural due to

size. However, in North Dakota we consider Class A school districts as urban areas. For the purpose of this study, urban school districts will have enrollments in excess of 450 students.

### **Organization of Study**

This study is organized into five chapters. Chapter I presented the Introduction, Need for Study, Purpose of Study, Research Question, Researcher's Background, Delimitations, Assumptions, Definitions of Terms and Acronyms, and Organization of Study. Chapter II contains a literature review that includes the following subsections: Historical, Leadership, Rural Leadership, Effective Rural Schools, Rural Principalship Barriers, Rural School Research, Scarcity of Resources, Rural Poverty, Declining Enrollment, Effective Professional Development of Rural Principals, Rural Teacher Recruitment and Retention, and Technology and the Rural Principal. Chapter III provides the methods used to gather and analyze data for the study. Chapter IV presents findings from rural principal interviews. Chapter V contains a conclusion and summary of the aforementioned data as well as recommendations.

## **CHAPTER II**

### **LITERATURE REVIEW**

#### **Introduction**

The following is a literature review on rural principals and leadership. It has been divided into the following subsections: Historical, Leadership, Rural Leadership, Effective Rural Schools, Rural Principalship Barriers, Rural School Research, Scarcity of Resources, Rural Poverty, Declining Enrollment, Effective Professional Development of Rural Principals, Rural Teacher Recruitment and Retention, and Technology and the Rural Principal.

#### **Historical**

The challenges of rural principals have not gone undocumented. Chance and Lingren (1989) referenced challenges occurring over two decades ago similar to challenges rural principals were facing at the time of this study. Involvement of principals with professional organizations was minimal. They perceived themselves as instructional leaders, but spent the majority of their day dealing with managerial issues. Chance and Lingren stated, “If the perception of instructional leadership is ever to become reality, rural principals must be provided opportunities to become effective leaders” (p. 11). To help balance the many hats that rural principals wear, distributive leadership is recommended. Distributive leadership is when leaders distribute and delegate powers that have typically been reserved for the leader. Rural administrators



should take advantage of being rural. The tight knit staff that tends to exist can be beneficial, as well as community and school connections.

### **Leadership**

Strong leadership is a key element of any successful school in an urban or rural setting. Kouzes and Posner (2007) discussed five practices of effective leadership. The five practices were: model the way, inspire a shared vision, challenge the process, enable others to act, and encourage the heart. Leaders model “the way” by setting examples and “walking the walk.” Leaders inspire a shared vision by appealing to others’ shared aspirations and imagining possibilities. Leaders challenge “the process” by creating a culture that allows risk taking and failure. Continuous improvement is embedded into a culture as well. Leaders enable others to act by creating collaborative atmospheres and establishing methods for building capacity from within. Finally, leaders encourage the heart in their employees by recognizing small wins and creating a spirit of community.

In an age of accountability, such as the age we have been living in at the time of this report, strong school leadership has become extremely important as international comparisons to other educational systems have become the norm. The Programme for International Student Assessment or PISA has become the measuring stick for successful educational systems in the world. Barber and Mourshed (2007) studied PISA results and developed the following outcomes from the data. The quality of an educational system cannot exceed the quality of its teachers; and so, to improve outcomes we must improve instruction. High performance requires every child to succeed. In other words, to improve teaching we must have strong leaders in place to ensure that all teachers are continuously improving.

“It turns out that leadership not only matters: it is second only to teaching among school-related factors in its impact on student learning” (Leithwood, Seashore Louis, Anderson, & Wahlstrom, 2004, p. 3). Leithwood et al. explained that a leader may play a larger role in schools that struggle with student learning than in schools that do not. Successful leadership has a major impact on student achievement. If leadership is improved at every level, a school could see a large return on investment. Leithwood et al. could not find any examples of turn around schools that had an ineffective leader. A powerful leader in a struggling school could pay huge dividends on positively impacting student achievement. Leithwood et al. warned about fads found in the literature. There are many different fads and one has to be leery of “leadership by adjective” literature, in which we insert different terms to describe a certain leadership style. They also warned us about throwing the “instructional leader” term around. They suggested defining this term for your specific school. It should vary based on a school’s mission, instructional program, and learning climate. Leithwood et al. gave a few basic pointers for successful leadership:

### **Setting directions**

A critical aspect of leadership is helping a group to develop shared understandings . . . people are motivated by goals which they find personally compelling, as well as challenging but achievable . . . . Often cited as helping set directions are such specific practices as identifying and articulating a vision, . . . creating high . . . expectations . . . and promoting effective communication. (Leithwood et al., 2004, p. 9)

### **Developing people**

Specific leadership practices that significantly and positively help develop people include offering intellectual stimulation, providing individualized support and providing an appropriate [leadership] model. (Leithwood et al., 2004, p. 9)

### **Redesigning the organization**

Successful educational leaders . . . support and sustain the performance of administrators and teachers as well as students. . . . Practices typically associated with this category include strengthening district and school cultures, modifying organization structures and building collaborative processes. (Leithwood et al., 2004, p. 9)

### **Rural Leadership**

In a rural setting it may be difficult to recruit and retain high quality leaders.

Browne-Ferrigno and Allen (2006) explained the difficulties that rural districts have in developing and retaining high quality school leaders. And in 2001, according to the United States Department of Education, one out of every six students in the country was attending a rural school (as cited in Keaton, 2012).

The Principal Excellence Program or PEP was established in rural Kentucky to help mentor and guide educational leaders in rural areas. PEP aimed to grow and create leaders. The school district involved in PEP developed a program that targeted skills of an effective principal. Each PEP member had to:

(a) understand Kentucky's core content and learning goals, (b) believe all children can learn at high levels, (c) have a thorough knowledge of curriculum and assessment, (d) demonstrate instructional leadership . . . , (e) show evidence of being a master teacher, (f) work well as a team member, (g) show evidence of being a lifelong learner, and (h) understand the teaching and learning process. (Browne-Ferrigno & Allen, 2006, p. 5)

The district used processes like role playing to develop successful school leaders. There was a strong focus on collaboration, and a belief in "growing their own leaders." School districts agreed to release principals one day a week for an entire year to focus on professional learning. This forced principals to develop teacher leaders to "run" the building in their absence. "Rural districts are not able to recruit . . . so it becomes

absolutely imperative that districts focus on developing those already there” (Browne-Ferrigno & Allen, 2006, p. 11). “Preparing principals is not a single event, but rather a continuous process” (Browne-Ferrigno & Allen, 2006, p. 14).

In rural settings, school leaders balance many roles and may often have a dual role of principal and superintendent. Canales, Tejada-Delgado, and Slate (2008) studied the dual role of superintendent and principal in rural schools in Texas. The study found that even though the schools were small, handling both jobs effectively was difficult and stressful for the dual role administrator. Canales et al. recommended that superintendent/principals prioritize their work – primarily the most critical issues. They also felt that administrators needed mentors or peer support. Rural leader positions are lonely due to the nature of not having another administrator nearby.

Mentorships and “growing your own leaders” in rural schools may help with the difficulty of filling, and keeping, effective leaders in rural schools. Clarke and Stevens (2009) argued that, “the ways in which school leaders develop sustainable leadership are mediated by their contextual circumstances” (p. 32). This means we cannot train and prepare our future leaders for one context. School leaders must be prepared (must be taught to function) within settings in which they will lead. Clarke and Stevens explained:

Rural communities tend to be distinguished by a profound sense of place because they are imbued with particular societal and cultural values, some of which may appear unusual from the urban perspective that many principals will have acquired before appointment.” (Clarke & Stevens, 2009, p. 32-33)

Clarke and Stevens recommended preparing rural leaders with a rural training model that places a focus on community and school partnerships. It begs the question: Should

principal preparation programs differentiate between urban and rural futures for the aspiring principal?

In a study comparing leadership skills of principals in urban, suburban, and rural contexts, Erwin, Winn, and Erwin (2010) found very little variation between these three groups. Rural principals at exemplary schools were more likely to take risks, whereas rural principals at lower achievement levels were more likely to exercise traditional leadership practices. Rural principals from exemplary schools were the only principals to include staff development among their top five skills (Erwin, Winn, & Erwin, 2010). In Erwin et al.'s study, the only difference between the three classifications of school leaders was found in exemplary schools. The greatest difference among these groups was between suburban and rural principals in exemplary schools. The researchers believed this could be attributed to differences in financial resources. Erwin et al. suggested there is a . . .

. . . need for professional development aimed at nurturing systemic practices among campus leaders. In addition, clear communication, both individually . . . and within groups . . . appears to differentiate leaders at more highly rated campuses, indicating a need to develop these skills to a greater extent" (Erwin et al., 2010, p. 3).

Superintendents play a vital role in developing principals at all sizes of schools. This study focused on leadership practices of effective superintendents. The researcher referenced effective superintendent leadership practices determined by Waters and Marzano (2006). They are: (a) collaborative goal setting that includes relevant stakeholders, (b) establishing non-negotiable goals for student achievement and classroom instruction, (c) aligning board support with a district's non-negotiable goals, (d) continuous monitoring of a district's progress in attaining its non-negotiable goals, (e)

effectively utilizing resources to support the accomplishment of goals, (f) provide autonomy to principals within clearly defined operational boundaries. However, Waters and Marzano believed that these leadership methods may not be suitable for rural leaders. Waters and Marzano's research came from urban and suburban school leaders.

Fornier, Palmer-Bierlein, & Reeves (2012) found three contextual challenges rural school leaders often face: poverty and economic loss, administrators overburdened with a wide range of responsibilities, and school leaders forced to serve more in public roles than administrative roles due to size of community. Fornier et al. found that students living in rural areas usually experience higher rates of poverty than those living in metropolitan areas. Staffing limitations, resource scarcity, and the public role of superintendents are all unique challenges rural superintendents must deal with. Fornier et al. found there is a need for rural superintendents to act as change agents. Rural superintendents may find it easier to implement change than their urban counterparts due to the size of rural school districts and lack of bureaucracy. Fornier et al. found that a successful school leader constructively confronts teachers and administrators that are unwilling to grow. School leaders in school districts in Fornier et al.'s study effectively adopted a "grow or go" mentality in their districts. School leaders involved in this study made difficult decisions and kept students at the center of those decisions. Fornier et al. found that school leaders were all willing to sacrifice popularity if it meant furthering their district's interest. "The rural school is still a respected institution . . . with more of an emphasis on the people than on the business" (Fornier, Palmer-Bierlein, & Reeves, 2012, p. 12).

An isolation consumes rural principals and rural superintendents and is often prevalent in rural teachers as well. Harmon, Gordanier, Henry, and George (2007) found several challenges that rural teachers face. Teachers in schools studied, taught the way they had always taught. They cited time as being the factor that caused complacency for them. The geographic isolation was a factor in accessing quality professional development. Quality professional development programs must allow teachers some choice in direction. Teachers need to be able to attend professional development that directly helps them get better.

In Harmon et al.'s study, schools showed a lack of consistency in curriculum and lack of communication among professional staff. Another common issue or problem of rural schools in the study was lack of money to provide quality professional development. Schools in the study found success in regional partnerships where they could network and receive direct assistance from other colleagues. Rural teachers are often isolated because they are singleton teachers; each teacher is the only teacher teaching their particular subject or grade. Teachers in the study found it helpful to be able to collaborate with other teachers that faced the same hardships.

Building relationships in any organization is important for a leader. It may be more important for a rural leader than one who leads in an urban setting according to Laub and O'Connor (2009). Laub and O'Connor explained that a leader must develop the following common sense factors to be effective; establish honest, open relationships with all stakeholders equally; establish a safe, healthy, and stress-free environment; and provide opportunities for growth. These recommended factors are universal regardless of the size of a school. Laub and O'Connor stressed the importance of focusing on what the

best interests of the students are, not on what is in the best interests of a leader. It is important to remain grounded. Laub and O'Connor (2009) discussed five key components that lead to successful learning environments.

1. Do we allow stakeholders of the school to be involved?
2. Have we created an environment where stakeholders feel empowered?
3. Do stakeholders feel supported and challenged?
4. Are stakeholders comfortable with speaking openly and honestly with school leaders?
5. How does an outsider feel when they walk into our school building?  
Positive or Negative?

There are many complex issues that rural educators or leaders face according to Masumoto and Brown-Welty (2009). The following themes were exhibited in the successful rural schools they studied. Strong modern leadership practices were found, more specifically, distributive, instructional, and transformative leadership. Distributive leadership is sharing or distributing leadership functions across the organization. Instructional leadership is how a leader positively affects teachers, student achievement, and teaching outcomes. Transformational leadership refers to leadership practices that are necessary to facilitate change. These practices include “intellectual stimulation, inspirational motivation, and idealized influence” (Masumoto & Brown-Welty, 2009, p. 3).

Masumoto and Brown-Welty (2009) found formal and informal linkages between schools and communities; and, a direct focus on instruction, standards, and expectations were found in “effective” schools. Finally, there was a support system for students that



struggled, in the three schools involved in the study. The development of professional learning communities were prevalent in schools studied. Masumoto and Brown-Welty found evidence of staff exodus due to changes; this was considered a good thing. In successful rural schools, leaders found ways to maximize their resources. In all three schools, teacher leaders played a key role in decision making.

McCloud (2005) described how rural schools are not only different from suburban and urban schools; they are also very different from each other. McCloud presented nine themes preparation programs should consider when preparing school leaders for rural settings.

Theme 1 – Preparation of rural leaders must be tailored and not a cookie cutter approach. Rural school leaders must be able to be flexible and have the ability to balance many jobs at the same time. McCloud found that outsiders struggle in rural settings if they don't take the time to understand the community. It may be beneficial to establish “grow-your-own leader” programs in rural settings. When schools focused on growing their own leaders, they found it easier to keep and retain quality staff. If rural administrators focused on teachers with leadership potential and groomed them into leadership roles, this significantly reduced turnover (McCloud, 2005).

Theme 2 – “A clear vision of leadership skills and qualities needed must be developed; then each school must work with universities, colleges, and other partners to create preparation programs that meet those needs” (McCloud, 2005, p. 3). Rather than preparing aspiring school leaders in a similar way, preparation programs should differentiate for the school setting. This includes rural preparation as well as suburban and urban preparation. McCloud (2005) stated, “Today, school principals and

superintendents must know how to do more than manage change – they must know how to lead it” (p. 3).

Theme 3 – “New partnerships are needed to provide better links between theory, research, and practice” (McCloud, 2005, p. 4). McCloud explained, “Universities must shed their ivory-tower image and change their role from gatekeeper to supportive partner” (McCloud, 2005, p. 4). Developing relationships with universities in urban and suburban communities is relatively easy compared to rural areas. Geography gets in the way of possible partnerships with universities in rural school districts.

Theme 4 – “Ongoing relationships with skilled and carefully matched mentors offer a powerful source of leadership preparation and support” (McCloud, 2005, p. 4). High quality mentors are scarce in rural areas. At the time of this report, Washington State organized six training sessions a year for 15-20 rural leaders with retired principals to provide mentorship and support for rural leader trainees. In New Mexico, mentors traveled from school to school providing support to rural principals.

Theme 5 – “Community is a potent – but sometimes overlooked – source of leadership and support in many rural schools” (McCloud, 2005, p. 5). McCloud supported the fact that rural leaders have a unique opportunity to develop strong community ties. She stated, “Effective principals and superintendents have strong connections to the community (McCloud, 2005, p. 5).” Preparations must put more emphasis on developing leaders that nurture and build strong relationships with community members.

Theme 6 – “Technology – combined with face-to-face sessions – provides an important tool for increasing access to more diverse school leadership preparation and

support services” (McCloud, 2005, p. 6). McCloud believed that preparation programs should create rural leaders that can harness the power of technology. Rural leaders should take advantage of online learning, know how to blog, and use social media to develop themselves as leaders (McCloud, 2005).

Theme 7 – “Certification, licensing, and pension policies need to be revised” (McCloud, 2005, p. 6). Leaders in rural areas often lack proper certification. This is largely due to the scarcity of leaders in rural settings.

Theme 8 – “There is a need for greater awareness of and more research on rural schools” (McCloud, 2005, p. 7). McCloud found that there has been very little research available on rural schools. Most research looks at enrollments of 400-650 students. Very little is known about what works in districts of less than 150 students.

Theme 9 – “Money matters” (McCloud, 2005, p. 7). Rural schools face budget shortfalls due to declining enrollment. Quality leaders are expensive. Rural districts must continue to lobby for more funds.

Wallin and Newton (2013) studied rural leaders that also have teaching duties on top of their duties as principal. Teaching principals remain grounded in teaching and might possibly establish credibility. Wallin and Newton’s study focused on how principals’ teaching impacts their ability to be an instructional leader. They interviewed 12 principals who also taught classes, and they noted the principals had many other duties besides teaching. “One of the advantages of being a teaching principal . . . if we’re doing something new, you’re doing it too” (Wallin & Newton, 2013, p. 23). Blurring of relational lines creates issues for a teaching principal. Wallin and Newton’s study categorized instructional leadership into four categories; developing people, redesigning

people, setting direction, and managing instructional programs. Principals depended on their leadership networks to manage issues. Teaching principals felt they had better relationships with staff than principals that don't teach, because the teaching principals were fighting the same battle as their teachers.

Principals are no longer expected to just manage; they are expected to be instructional leaders in their buildings. Renihan and Noonan (2012) found that rural leaders struggle with isolation. They explored how rural leaders have been approaching the changing expectations of school leadership. Lack of time and excessive managerial demands are the two greatest obstacles modern principals must overcome if they wish to change with the times and be instructional leaders. Starr and White (2008) explained the challenges associated with being a small rural school principal in rural Australia. They interviewed 76 principals using a variety of methods. Some interviews were conducted face-to-face; and others, by phone. Research questions included:

- What are the major challenges confronting principals of small rural schools?
- How do principals perceive these challenges to be particular to small rural school contexts?
- What do principals perceive the causes of these challenges to be?
- How do small rural school principals address the major challenges they confront? (Starr & White, 2008, p. 2)

The role of principal continues to change from a building manager to an instructional leader. Starr and White (2008) found that small school leaders have very little support in completing their tasks, whereas large school leaders may find it easier to delegate and share tasks. Most common challenges raised by rural leaders in Starr and

White's study were: workload proliferation, educational equity issues, the re-defined principalship, escalating role multiplicity, and school survival. Principals in the study expressed anger and resentment over changes to the principalship. Time to complete tasks seemed to be an issue throughout. Small rural school educators tended to lack professional contact or support. There appeared to be a lot of animosity directed towards the state and local education departments. Principals in general have multiple roles, and for the rural principal number of roles are greater than urban principals due to size of rural systems (Starr & White, 2008).

Starr and White (2008) found a looming concern in rural schools resulting from school closures stemming from decreased enrollments. Equity issues have occurred in Australia due to the formula used to determine school funding. To help cope with dwindling funds and low enrollments, rural school leaders sometimes combine their funds with other school leaders in other school districts to share learning resources (Starr & White, 2008). Starr and White found that rural innovation is occurring in small schools through collaboration with other neighboring districts.

### **Effective Rural Schools**

Barley and Beesley (2007) studied how high performing high needs (HPHN) rural schools are successful. Their study was conducted in two phases. In the first phase, 20 high performing high needs schools were selected. Principals from each school were contacted and questions centered around 19 factors that were attributed to the success of HPHN schools. In Phase 2, five schools were selected for focus groups, four schools took part. The following themes were prevalent throughout data obtained from selected HPHN rural schools: strong connection to community, high retention of staff, school as

the community center, strong focus on aligning curriculum to standards, clear goals, teachers using student data to improve instruction, close relationships between leaders and teachers, and strong leadership (Barley & Beesley, 2007).

Collaboration and developing relationships may be the key to improving rural schools according to Chance and Segura (2009). These researchers found that collaboration was the heart of a successful rural school. Three principles guided collaborative practices in successful rural schools. Collaborative practices included: (a) job embedded time for teacher collaboration, (b) collaboration time that was structured and focused, and (c) administrators centering on student and maintaining accountability practices. Improving schools begins with change, and key stakeholders' ability to accept that change. Chance and Segura (2009) found that effective change agents "initiate the action, listen to input, establish expectations for staff in collaboration, and then follow through on recommendations made by the group" (p. 9). Chance and Segura explained that rural schools may have natural advantages for building community and collaborating on school improvement. Small populations may make it easier to understand a community and spark collaboration. Rural communities may share common values due to a lack of diversity which may allow innovative change to occur more quickly than in larger more impersonal school districts (Chance & Segura, 2009).

Professional learning communities (PLCs) have become a popular method of school improvement for teaching collaboration methods and developing teams of teachers in schools seeking improvement. PLCs provide rural schools with the "how to" in terms of collaboration. They are used to create collaborative work experiences that are focused

on improving student achievement. According to Dufour, Dufour, Eaker, and Many (2006), highly effective collaborative teams focus on these four key questions:

1. What do we want students to know and be able to do?
2. How do we know if they know?
3. What are we going to do if the student struggles or didn't understand?
4. What do we do if the student already knows?

This method of school improvement has been proven to increase student achievement.

In a rural setting it can be difficult to establish PLCs due to the prevalence of singleton teachers. Singleton teachers are teachers who do not share a subject or class with another teacher within a school. So in rural settings, it becomes difficult to establish highly functioning teams within a single common subject area (Eaker & Keating, 2009).

Ferriter (2011) addressed the issues of singleton teachers in rural schools. He recommended developing six common denominators for uncommon teachers, singleton teachers that have no colleague to collaborate with:

1. Organize teams based on common learning goals,
2. Focus on common issues,
3. Identify a most common outcome,
4. Develop a common method of assessment,
5. Share results and evaluate them,
6. Come back and discuss common strategies to improve performance.

Small schools can implement PLCs as methods of improving student achievement by making collaborative teams fit a school.

Rural schools can implement PLC concepts into their school settings according to Young (2009). In 2009, Young was a principal of a rural school in Nevada. He had implemented PLC concepts into his rural school by using common assessments in uncommon courses. In most rural schools, there is only one section of a grade level, and there might only be one or two math teachers. It is difficult to establish cohesive teams when teachers do not teach the same content or skills. “*Common formative assessments* require teachers to agree upon what they will teach, what they will assess, and how and when they will administer assessments” (Young, 2009, p. 135). Establishing common formative assessments encourages teachers to compare results and have discussions about instruction. Young (2009) believed, “Common formative assessments demand discussion about the best ways to help students learn the agreed-upon outcomes” (p. 135). In a rural school environment, Young created commonalities in an otherwise uncommon environment. They started with identifying common denominators, i.e.,

An English team might agree upon common skills and mastery levels for reading, writing, and language usage. A social studies team might define common skills essential to their discipline – skills such as asking questions to seek out pertinent information, determining cause-and-effect relationships, and distinguishing fact from opinion.” (Young, 2009, p. 138)

In rural schools, a teacher may not teach the same grade level as another teacher, but there are commonalities among subject areas and different grade levels teachers can focus on. According to Young, PLC concepts can work in rural schools. Teachers in rural schools can establish vertical teams to develop what students should know and be able to do at each grade level.



Jimerson (2006b) found 10 reasons why small rural schools are successful. Small rural schools: have greater participation, are safer, generate belongingness, typically have small classes and allow individualized instruction, are easier to implement change in, have a better climate, have high expectations, are more likely to have multi-age exposure between students, have less bureaucracy, and finally have fewer transitions between schools (Jimerson, 2006b, p. 8). The report found that teachers in small schools appeared to exhibit greater collective responsibility than teachers in large schools. Small rural schools may foster greater personal interaction due to small size. Jimerson's report referenced previous studies on the negative impact of ability grouping and tracking. The author referenced varying data from K-12 organized schools in America. The power of close relationships was determined to be the major reason why small schools are successful.

In a study out of Chicago, Illinois, enrollments of schools were reduced to mimic the qualities of small schools. Under the Chicago High School Redesign Initiative (CHSRI), two dozen small schools were established in the heart of Chicago. Stevens's (2008) analysis found three conditions present in schools with high achieving students in a sample of 10 CHSRI schools: "strong teacher professional communities, deep principal leadership, and strong teacher influence" (p. 2). Both principal and teacher leaders played a role in sustaining collective work on academic improvement and keeping the work relevant. Reducing size did not automatically lead to improvement. Stevens found that CHSRI schools were more easily able to develop and foster relationships than larger schools. Better relationships, in turn, created highly personalized relationships with

students and a collegial environment. This allowed leaders to speed up improvement initiatives.

Stevens (2008) found that creating small schools alone does not lead to increased student achievement. Small schools provide a vehicle for improvement, not improvement by itself. Successful small schools have the following: personalized relationship development, strong teacher professional communities, opportunities for growth within the school, strong leadership and ability to distribute power to teacher leaders, emphasis on pushing all students towards high academic achievement. The combination of strong principal leadership, developmental practices, and strong teacher influence are necessary for improved student achievement. “Developmental practices, deep principal leadership, and teacher influence must all be present in schools with strong student achievement” (Stevens, 2008, p. 12). They must work in unison with each other. Deep principal leadership isn’t enough; teacher engagement must be at a point where they actively shape the work (Stevens, 2008).

According to Witte and Sheridan (2011), it may be easier to develop family and school partnerships in small schools than in large schools due to the sheer size of rural schools. In most rural towns, the school is the community center. Rural administrators are much more accessible to community members than their urban counterparts. Rural school leaders have the ability to develop solid relationships with parents and become active members of the community. Witte and Sheridan (2011) gave the following recommendations on how schools can develop family engagement in a rural school:

- 1) Set high partnership expectations for *all* families. . . .

- 2) Establish a “family space” within the school, with resources for families, a schedule of events, and open times of parent-parent and parent-teacher interactions.
- 3) Establish regular, bidirectional communication mechanisms between home and school, such as two-way home-school notes.
- 4) Identify ways to extend educational goals through existing events . . . , such as athletic events. Eliminate the separation between academics and extracurricular activities.
- 5) Create a structure for parent-teacher meetings that allows for sharing of information, goals, plans, and solutions for all children, and especially those developing learning or behavioral challenges. (p. 5)

Supporting teachers in their first few years of teaching is very important. It may be even more important to establish a supportive system for a rural teacher than an urban teacher due to the isolation that comes with being the only teacher of a grade or subject area. White et al. (2009) found the following themes supported beginning teachers.

1. A supportive principal that values risk taking and encourages it.
2. Allowing a teacher to take an active role in the community. White et al. recommended holding a “meet and greet” for all new teachers.
3. Staff members that support new teachers.
4. Informal mentors as key to retaining beginning teachers. Beginning teachers need veterans to vent to and bounce ideas off of.

### **Rural Principalship Barriers**

The overarching theme of this study was to dig into perceived barriers to professional development of principals in and effective administration of rural principalships. Clarke and Wildy (2011) found it important to build capacity of school leadership through quality professional development practices. Clarke and Wildy recommended on-the-job training or job embedded professional development for teachers

and administrators. Clarke and Wildy issued three suggestions for supporting and developing principals. First, they believed more accountability is needed in monitoring schools. Second, schools need to provide better pre-service training to school leaders. On the job training is good, but Clarke and Wildy called for high quality preparation prior to job placement. Finally, Clarke and Wildy urged more research be conducted on principals who are dealing with challenging circumstances in small remote schools.

Budge (2006) examined rurality as a place. According to Budge, rural communities have long suffered from out-migration, to closings of key factories, or to lack of a diversified economy. Budge found that rural communities are often viewed as expendable in the eyes of policy makers. Budge felt that school and community leaders supported out-migration.

Lack of adequate jobs in rural areas has led to declining communities. Budge's (2006) case study focused on a district that faced an economic decline and an out-migration of its young people. These are similar situations to what has impacted North Dakota rural communities as a whole. The data generated in Budge's study was similar to other studies that show a rural leader is expected to be a public figure. One of Budge's respondents mentioned this, "You just have to almost live, eat, and breathe your job to be successful in small communities." Budge found that it may be difficult to be a progressive leader in rural communities. Tensions exist between new ideas and community values and expectations. Leaders in Budge's study struggled with outside mandates and how to shape them to fit their rural communities. Budge referenced many studies that promoted values of rural schools and communities.

Education reforms have usually centered around college and career readiness, which typically forces our best and brightest to move to more urban areas. College/career positions are typically not available in rural communities. Budge (2006) questioned whether promotion of a national and global economy is the right thing for our rural youth. It might be equally important to nurture rural values or rurality living as well as preparing them for “the real world” outside their small town. Technology could be considered a way to expose rural youth to the outside world.

There is a considerable amount of research on rural schools in Australia. Graham, Paterson, and Miller (2008) explained how schools in rural Australia have been struggling to deal with a rural teacher shortages. Australian rural schools have been battling the same issues rural schools in America have dealt with in terms of teacher shortages. Graham et al. interviewed eight early career teachers. According to teacher responses, leadership positions were offered to all individuals early in their careers. This was because of the instability of retaining quality teachers that exists in rural schools. Successful rural schools find ways to stretch resources. Graham et al. (2008) found, in rural schools, “People sometimes took on leadership positions without realising the responsibility that was associated with those roles” (p. 7). Much like principals in rural school, teachers struggled with balancing their personal and professional lives. Teachers realized they needed to keep a distance between personal and professional lives, but realized that this was difficult. Many teachers and principals interviewed referenced the phrase, “in a fishbowl.” According to one respondent, “You’re actually part of the community. It’s not just when you’re at school. And it’s even more so in a small

community because everything that you do, you're in the looking glass" (Graham, Paterson, & Miller, 2008, p. 9).

Loveland (2002) described issues that hinder, or at least challenge, rural school principals. Some of these issues are: declining enrollment, threat of consolidation, and high principal and superintendent turnover. Loveland (2002) found, "In larger schools, people are assigned to do many different tasks. In rural schools, principals do it all" (p. 1, 6). Loveland (2002) described another challenge of rural schools, the dual role principal. Due to declining enrollment, some rural schools lose funds. In many rural districts, principals lead multiple schools which spread them very thin. The rural administrator juggles many different roles making it difficult to focus on developing as an instructional leader. Instructional leaders take an active role on improving instructional practices of teachers in the classroom. Loveland (2002) described the challenges that come with school consolidation, and she urged leaders to keep their focus on kids. Norm Yoder, superintendent of Heartland Community Schools in Nebraska stated, "Kids mesh well. It's the adults who sometimes have problems" (as cited in Loveland, 2002, p. 7).

Attracting and retaining quality teachers is very difficult for a rural principal. Salaries often do not compare to urban and suburban teaching opportunities. There is also an issue with the high cost of living in a rural area. The commute to a urban hub can be costly for those that live in small communities. Loveland (2002) encouraged rural principals to, "see resources that they have in rural areas, which are different than resources in urban and suburban settings" (p. 9). Close proximity to stakeholders in rural settings can be a benefit and advantage of small school districts. Change initiatives in

rural areas have the potential to advance quickly because small organizations have fewer people involved in decision-making.

According to Powell, Higgins, Aram, and Freed (2009), the impact of the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act (2001) on rural schools has been significant. Federal mandates are difficult to attain within rural schools because of lack of resources. Responses from rural teachers indicated pressures of NCLB are influencing outdated teaching methods that focus on tests. Powell et al. (2009) stated, “NCLB has allowed tests to dictate what is taught in schools regardless of the students’ academic and personal needs” (p. 27).

The impact of teachers leaving the teaching profession directly affects rural schools. Rural districts have small interview pools, and fewer teachers in the profession does not help overcome this barrier (J. Welk, personal communication, August 14, 2014). Loss of autonomy as a result of NCLB was a large concern for teachers involved in the Powell et al. (2009) study. Teachers also felt that in trying to conform to NCLB, they lost their professional judgment, and all decisions were based solely on making adequate yearly progress (AYP).

By the year of this study (2014), adequate yearly progress meant all school districts in the United States were expected to reach 100% levels of student proficiency in selected subject areas as required by the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001. Reeves (2003) explained how small student populations and geographic isolation made it problematic for small schools to achieve AYP. This deals more with a “highly qualified” clause in NCLB and the impact this clause has had on hiring and retaining teachers in rural schools.

At the time of this study, in many rural areas, student enrollments were decreasing (Although due to an oil boom in western North Dakota, declining enrollment was no longer an issue in many districts in North Dakota.). In the past, rural school districts depended heavily on local levies for financial resources which placed burdens on local tax payers.

There have been disparities in financial resources when comparing rural schools to urban schools. Many rural counties lack an adequate tax base, and rural schools have been forced to increase taxes or cut programs. Reeves (2003) provided an example from North Carolina:

The wealthiest counties average effective tax rate is .444, whereas the poorest counties tax rate is .729. The poorest counties tax themselves at a 61 percent higher rate than the wealthiest counties. The dependence on local property taxes leaves poorer rural districts with few alternatives for increasing revenue. (p. 3)

According to Reeves (2003), the smaller the school district, the more it costs per-pupil to operate. Rural schools lack the professional staff that urban schools have because of the added cost to educate rural students. The federal government has provided some flexibility to rural schools in using federal funds. The government allows rural schools to consolidate their federal dollars through the Rural Education Achievement Program (REAP).

As a requirement of NCLB, all states must establish standard levels of proficiency; and by 2014, 100% of students must be able to achieve those standard levels of proficiency. These are objectives for schools to meet every year. Reeves (2003) explained how meeting standard levels of student proficiencies and attaining AYP is an issue for rural schools. In rural schools, average test scores often fluctuate greatly from



year to year as each cohort may be vastly different, and one-time factors (teacher turnover, sicknesses, or construction) affect small groups of students more drastically than the larger groups of students found in large schools. One of the mandates of NCLB is school choice – families can choose to send their children to schools outside their neighborhood or local school district. Meeting this mandate can be problematic for small schools. In North Dakota, because of the vast distances between school districts, school choice may not be an option for most. Transportation is a major cost in rural districts. The state of North Dakota provides some funding for transportation, but it doesn't cover all expenses (Reeves, 2003).

Lack of course offerings is another disadvantage rural students face. Interactive television allows districts to provide professional development to rural teachers without incurring unreasonable costs. Still, attracting and retaining high quality staff is an issue as well. There is a difference between what a teacher gets paid in a rural school and an urban school. Keeping salaries competitive is important and at the same time difficult as a result of financial constraints in rural schools. Retaining high quality staff is hard as rural districts are often used as stepping stones to larger districts and better paying jobs. Large school districts in large cities are attractive to teachers (Reeves, 2003).

### **Rural School Research**

Arnold, Newman, Gaddy, and Dean (2005) conducted a literature review of rural education research and found that there was not a consistent definition in the literature of what constitutes a rural school. Identifying what rural means in North Dakota is identified in Chapter III. Arnold et al. separated their research into two categories: rural specific (research that specifically targets rural education issues) and rural context only

(research conducted in a rural context, but not specifically targeting rural education).

Arnold et al. provided a list of rural research topics they found in the literature between the dates of 1991-2003.

Arnold et al.'s (2005) top five most researched topics included: programs and strategies for students with special needs, instruction, school safety and discipline, student life and work planning, and factors that influence academic achievement. Arnold et al. reported on a study by Midcontinent Research for Education and Learning (McREL); the McREL study found that the quality of research conducted up to the time of their study was poor. McREL recommended nine priority areas in rural education needing to be researched: "opportunity to learn, school size and student achievement, teacher quality, administrator quality, school and district capacity, school finance, local control and alternative organizational structures, school choice, and community and parent aspirations and expectations" (as cited in Arnold et al., 2005, p. 16).

McREL provided potential research questions for each of their recommended research topics (Arnold et al., 2005). In the context of this study, administrator quality is of interest. I believe that preparation programs may not prepare school leaders effectively for working in a rural setting. According to Arnold et al. there has been a lack of research on providing professional development to rural school leaders. Rural administrators may have more roles to fill due to size of rural schools, receive less pay, and may be more of a public figure than urban and suburban counterparts. Professional isolation may be more prevalent in rural schools, and may potentially make it difficult to build teacher capacity (Arnold et al., 2005).

As of the 2010-2011 school year, there were a total of 29,202 rural schools compared to 22,492 city schools. According to Keaton (2012), 24.7% of students in the United States attend rural schools. Keaton included three definitions of rural in his report. These definitions were obtained from the United States Department of Education's Common Core of Data program.

*Rural, Fringe:* Census-defined rural territory that is less than or equal to 5 miles from an urbanized area, as well as rural territory that is less than or equal to 2.5 miles from an urban cluster.

*Rural, Distant:* Census-defined rural territory that is more than 5 miles but less than or equal to 25 miles from an urbanized area, as well as rural territory that is more than 2.5 miles but less than or equal to 10 miles from an urban cluster.

*Rural, Remote:* Census-defined rural territory that is more than 25 miles from an urbanized area and is also more than 10 miles from an urban cluster (Keaton, 2012, p. B-3).

### **Scarcity of Resources**

Lack of leadership positions in a rural school would be considered a lack of resources. In a large urban school district, there is typically a large administrative team. In a rural school district, traditionally there are only a few leadership positions. Anderson (2008) discussed the power of teacher leadership within a rural school. In Anderson's case study, distributive leadership and shared decision making allowed a school to develop a shared vision. Teacher leadership is an often overlooked method of school improvement. Cultivating teacher leadership may encourage teachers to buy-in to necessary change initiatives. In a rural school, developing teacher leaders may be another way to stretch scarce resources. Anderson (2008) found, "Teacher leadership and

influence on school decision making could come from any individual or groups on staff” (p.16).

According to Anderson and White (2011), these conditions are necessary for change: trust, access, cooperation, reciprocity, proximity, ties, norms and networks, support and learning” (p. 31). Anderson and White explained how social entrepreneurship plays a key role in rural schools, which are typically resource poor. School leaders should create social capital within their community to access much needed resources. Anderson and White argued that just because schools are rural does not mean social capital is already available; it must be nurtured. They recognized that before quality teaching and learning can occur, school leaders and teachers must understand the demographics of their community.

Anderson and White (2011) conducted a case study on a principal of a small school in Australia. The principal leaned heavily on a high rate of volunteerism in the community to bring in resources that otherwise would be impossible locally. According to Anderson and White, for small school principals to be successful, they have to be social entrepreneurs.

School and community relationships appear consistently in the research on rural education. According to Bauch (2000), there are six types of connections in rural communities that play a key role in developing a strong school to community relationship. They are social capital, sense of place, parent involvement, strong church ties, strong school-business-agency relationships, and use of the community as a curricular resource. Bauch discussed how we should not be mimicking urban and suburban schools in rural settings. We should be linking rural schools and their

respective communities together and creating something new. The accountability that accompanies the No Child Left Behind Act (2001) requires rural schools to fit into urban and suburban school reform efforts. This is not possible in many instances due to differences between urban, suburban, and rural contexts.

Superintendents in rural districts ranked knowledge of curriculum and assessment as top qualities they look for in principal candidates (Cruzeiro & Boone, 2009). They also looked for leadership that existed outside the classroom. This ranged from school improvement committees to curriculum committees. They also preferred candidates to have “principal like” experiences. In a rural district, it is more likely (than in an urban or suburban district) that candidates for a principalship would have little to no experience as a principal (Cruzeiro & Boone, 2009). Cruzeiro and Boone found rural superintendents also preferred the following characteristics in principal candidates:

- An academic focus, with high expectations for self, teachers, and students
- Experience evaluating teachers
- A proven motivator of others
- Skill and knowledge in helping teachers improve classroom performance
- Knowledge of both state and federal standards
- Knowledgeable and experienced in the school improvement process
- A clear vision of teaching and learning that can be clearly communicated to teachers and community (Cruzeiro & Boone, 2009, p. 6)

Rural superintendents believed another important characteristic of rural principals is developing and maintaining social capital. Contrary to popular belief, rural school districts did not have a shortage of qualified candidates for principal positions. Instead,

candidates applying for rural positions typically were aspiring and beginning administrators (Cruzeiro & Boone, 2009).

Harmon and Schafft (2009) found a historical link between rural schools and the communities they serve. They felt that thinking globally may interfere with building relations between a rural school and the community in which it resides. Instead, an enlightened rural leader cannot focus on student achievement alone, but must blend in the goals for social and economic success of a community with goals to improve academics. This is a complex task for school leaders that are typically trained only to increase student achievement. The Interstate School Leaders Licensure Consortium (ISLLC) recently developed new standards for preparing school administrators, and these standards may be aligned with community building efforts. However, Harmon and Schafft were critical of the ISLLC standards because of the unique nature of rural schools and how they connect to their communities. A one-size-fits-all school leader preparation program may not create the type of leader that is needed to lead rural schools (Harmon & Schafft, 2009).

Ashton and Duncan (2012) focused on creating a plan for new rural administrators based on literature available. They found that number of rural schools outnumber urban schools. (Ashton & Duncan, 2012)

The challenges that new rural administrators face may include; lack of decision making experience, feelings of professional loneliness and isolation, little administrative support, as well as compliance issues with state and federal reporting that may not account for school or staff size. (Ashton & Duncan, 2012, p. 1)

The complexities of being a new school leader can be compounded if they are a rural principal. This is more than likely due to a small administrative staff and the isolation

that comes with the position. Ashton and Duncan spoke of a study of new rural high school principals that found rural principals needed mentorship in the following areas: “dealing with professional isolation and loneliness, getting to know and thriving in a rural community, and basic management skills for the lone administrator” (Ashton & Duncan, 2012, p. 3).

Eckert and Petrone (2013) urged universities to include experiences for pre-service teachers in rural schools. They explained that the majority of student teaching experiences that were occurring in Montana were in the vicinity of a university. This urban experience created an issue when novice teachers took their first job in a rural area. Eckert and Petrone argued that urban and rural teaching are very different. They believed a rural teacher may not have access to effective professional development and felt it is becoming increasingly important to expose rural students to multiculturalism. A rural teacher essentially becomes a representative of culture to a rural community.

Scarce resources exist in rural school districts in terms of attracting and retaining teachers (Lowe, 2006). Rural schools are often used as stepping stones to the next job at a larger school and in a larger city. Lowe discussed efforts needed to recruit and keep staff at rural schools. He gave the following suggestions for building a quality school environment and claimed a quality environment was important in attracting and retaining staff at rural schools:

- Welcome accountability . . . ,
- Establish community building as a top priority . . . ,
- Provide authentic mentoring for new teachers . . . ,
- Invest in quality staff development . . . ,
- Budget for teacher recruiting . . . ,
- Focus on planning . . . ,
- Offer incentives to teachers [loan forgiveness, housing] . . . ,

Develop a marketing strategy [use faculty and staff to recruit] . . . ,  
Provide a school/community induction program for new teachers . . . ,  
Form cooperatives . . . ,  
Don't neglect the locals [grow teachers from within].

(Lowe, 2006, p. 28-31)

Recruiting and retaining high quality teachers in a rural district is a very important factor in improving a school district. This is another area that leaders must focus on within a rural school district.

Rural schools may suffer from inadequacies that are similar to low income urban schools according to Katrina Schwartz (2014). Schwartz interviewed Daisy Dyer Duerr, a principal of a rural Prek-12 school in St. Paul, Arkansas. Duerr recommended students BYOD or Bring Your Own Device to increase resources for students in rural schools. Duerr allowed students to bring their own smart phones and devices to school. She said, "We need to use what we have [in rural schools]" (Schwartz, 2014, Item 4, Paragraph 2).

### **Rural Poverty**

O'Hare and Johnson (2004) described a rural out migration that occurred after 1950. Student populations were decreasing in rural areas at that time. At the time of this report, a high percentage of older people lived in rural areas. A "rural rebound" occurred from 1990 to 2000 largely in counties adjacent to metropolitan areas. Even though populations increased, child populations continued to drop. A dwindling farm economy caused most of the migration to metro areas, and mechanized factories played a role as well. At the time of this report, less than five percent of the rural labor force worked on farms (O'Hare & Johnson, 2004).

According to O'Hare and Johnson (2004), Hispanics have accounted for nearly 25% of rural population growth in the 1990s. This migration of English language learner



(ELL) students to rural American has put a strain on a once primarily white population. “Child poverty rates are higher in rural areas for every racial group except for Asian Americans” (O’Hare & Johnson, 2004, p. 8).

### **Declining Enrollment**

At the time of this report, enrollment in rural schools was continuing to decline. Declining enrollments impact a school and community in a host of ways. Bard, Gardener, and Wieland (2006) referenced studies that suggested school districts should not exceed 5,000 students and be no less than 750 students. These recommendations were based on cost per pupil and were not feasible in a rural state like North Dakota. According to Bard et al. (2006), small school size impacts student achievement positively. So the question is: Do we want to invest in small schools and possibly provide a better education to students, or do we focus on being more efficient and consolidate small schools. Bard et al. (2006) suggested, “Support the local decision making process of rural school districts and oppose arbitrary consolidation efforts at the state and local levels” (Bard, Gardener, & Wieland, 2006, p. 44).

The main question is: Is it important to keep a rural school open if they are declining? According to Jimerson (2006a), “Declining enrollment has the potential to slowly drain critical revenue from small rural districts” (p. 14). This results in: “staff and program reductions, neglected facility maintenance and improvement, lowered morale, decreased educational opportunities and experiences, curtailment of professional growth activities . . . and eventual school closure” (Jimerson, 2006a, p. 14). Jimerson provided some recommendations for rural schools and rural communities. She argued that rural districts are not the only districts experiencing enrollment decline. There are instances of

enrollment decline in urban districts as well. Those left behind by out-migration are those most at-risk. They are unable to leave a dying town due to poverty. Consolidation and school closings force deliberate depopulation of a region, according to Jimerson (2006a).

### **Effective Professional Development of Rural Principals**

Bizzell (2011) discovered important implications for rural principals and barriers to quality professional development in rural settings. Professional educators value continued learning and that was apparent in Bizzell's study. He stated, "The desire for professional learning can be suppressed by the demands of the principal's job unless continual professional learning is encouraged, supported, and initiated by school division leadership" (Bizzell, 2011, p. 42). Rural principals in Bizzell's study wanted to network and learn collaboratively. Learning collaboratively is vital especially for isolated rural principals. Informal discussions appeared to be valued by most rural principals for professional development purposes. Bizzell (2011) defined quality professional development as "on-going, job-embedded, and connected to school improvement goals" (p. 43).

Rural principals in Bizzell's (2011) study felt that professional development needed to be connected to their own personal improvement goals. Bizzell found that more effort is put into providing quality professional development for teachers than principals. Opportunities for teachers to develop as professionals did not necessarily qualify as meaningful professional development for principals. Based on rural principals' perceptions, Bizzell created a list of professional development needs for rural principals. These needs were: what to look for when observing classrooms, access to best practice

techniques for instruction, and how to support and monitor the implementation of new instructional strategies.

Educational innovation is occurring in rural settings in Canada. Hamel, Allaire, and Turcotte (2012) discovered a program, the Remote Networked Schools (RNS), designed to bring quality professional development to small rural schools. There are unique challenges associated with small rural schools. These challenges include: geographic isolation, lack of specialized resources, multi-grade classrooms, small numbers of students, professional isolation, and high turnover of teachers. The Remote Networked Schools or RNS was established by the Ministry of Education in Quebec to provide high quality professional development to small rural schools. The Ministry provided RNS service to remote schools over video conferencing equipment. Officials from universities collaborating with RNS assisted teachers and administrators on an as needed basis. Two areas the RNS program focused on dealt with pedagogy and technology implementation. University-school partnership was a key component in the success of this innovation (Hamel et al., 2012).

Another study took place in rural schools in South Africa. Msila (2010) focused on the rural principal and effective professional development. A professional development program was established to create transformational leaders. Msila found three key components defined what it meant to be a transformational leader: “‘to have and sustain a vision’, ‘being able to lead change’, ‘commitment to share leadership with others’” (Msila, 2010, p. 175). Mentorship was also considered a potential aspect of good leadership. The cornerstone of the program was the mentorship component. Msila explained the importance of a mentor in leadership development, “The rural principal in

particular, usually faces problems alone ‘with no other people to bounce ideas on’” (Msila, 2010, p. 175).

Msila (2010) discussed “opportunities and possibilities” for professional development through four themes he discovered from individuals he interviewed and his own observations.

1. “The value of peer learning and networking” (p. 180) provided a forum to vent and solve problems collectively. It helped to decrease the isolation associated with leading a rural school.
2. “Mentoring” (p. 181) supported leaders emotionally even though some of their mentors were deemed ineffective.
3. “Support from HEIs” (p. 182) or higher education institutions helped principals. Mentors worked with university staff and also provided support to rural principals. Msila stated that, “higher education institutions need to work closely with schools to enhance the leadership skills of the principals and their educators.” (Msila, 2010, p. 183)
4. “Leading and caring” (p. 183). Msila explained, “The caring conscientious leader can be a missing link between an effective and a failing school” (Msila, 2010, p. 185).

In a study on “professional development needs of rural high school principals to lead school improvement” (Salazar, 2007, p. 25), Salazar found that rural high school principals want the following “for effective organizational development and continuous improvement” (Salazar, 2007, p. 25): (a) to build a team commitment to create a learning organization, (b) effective communication skills to communicate instructional direction and to motivate staff, and (c) to understand the change process to sustain continuous growth. Like teachers, principals need continuous high quality professional development to improve. Salazar explained the importance of high quality professional development, “Effective instructional leaders must be developed and supported with the latest

knowledge about what works. Research must be continued to better understand rural schools, rural settings, and the challenges of rural school leadership” (Salazar, 2007, p. 26). Based on Salazar’s study, workshops, hands-on/field-based, and seminar/conference were the most popular delivery models of professional development. Surprisingly, online/self-paced and university coursework were the least popular methods.

High poverty school districts have been making gains in student achievement according to Togneri (2003). Togneri found certain strategies prevalent throughout each of the school districts in a study by the Learning First Alliance in the area of professional development. Some high-poverty school districts had been improving student achievement in spite of their situations at the time of Togneri’s report. One professional development strategy was to connect professional development of teachers and principals to district goals and student needs. Another strategy was to base professional development on data and not anecdotal evidence. Professional development focused specifically on improving instructional strategies. Districts sought out experts in instructional strategies inside and outside their districts to help teachers and principals. In North Dakota, we have experts in our own buildings, and we often fail to showcase their abilities. This applies to rural school districts. Developing and nurturing local experts are key to small rural schools improving instruction and raising student achievement. Small schools may not have the budgets to bring in national experts for professional development, but they can develop their own experts by having them conduct research on best practices. Finally, the reallocation of dollars played a pivotal role in improving instruction by increasing funding for professional development (Togneri, 2003). An

administrator in the study mentioned, “Professional development must be comprehensive, not just the feel-good flavor of the month” (Togneri, 2003, p. 6).

### **Rural Teacher Recruitment and Retention**

During the interview process for this study, it became apparent that a major concern of rural principals was recruiting and retaining quality teachers. I added this section to explore the research on teacher retention in rural areas. According to Monk (2008), recruiting quality teachers in a rural setting can be difficult – if we equate quality to teacher certification test scores. On average, teachers who teach in rural schools score lower on the Praxis I and II tests than their urban counterparts. Praxis tests are tests required for teaching certification in some states.

There is a fair amount of research on teacher shortages within special education in rural schools. Berry, Petrin, Gravelle, & Farmer (2011) surveyed rural special education administrators and special education teachers. Administrators surveyed provided four reasons why special education teachers left their districts: (a) to retire, (b) personal reasons, (c) special education paperwork, and (d) better salaries and benefits in competing districts. Berry et al. (2011) also surveyed special education teachers. Administrators and teachers did not share similar reasons for leaving. For example, special education teachers that left a rural district cited these reasons as why they left: (a) retirement; (b) teacher burnout, stress, pressure of job, and/or lack of support; (c) desire to change schools or age groups. According to Berry et al. (2011), only 6% mentioned issues cited by administrators. “The increased attrition of special education personnel in rural areas . . . confirm that the difficulty with recruiting new teachers and the demands of the position . . . place teachers at greater risk for attrition” (Berry et al., 2011, p. 10).

There are successful recruitment and retention practices found throughout the country in rural settings (Cahape-Hammer, Hughes, McClure, Reeves, & Salgado, 2005). Cahape-Hammer et al. found the following characteristics exist in rural districts that successfully recruit and retain high quality teachers: strategic recruitment and retention practices (describes districts that use data to generate a plan that is specific for their district, specific recruitment and retention practices (one-size-fits-all may not work for all districts especially for shortage areas, so recruitment/retention practices are based on specific needs of a school district), sustained recruitment and retention practices (districts have “high quality” induction phases for new staff), and recruitment and retention practices rooted within the community. Cahape-Hammer et al. (2005) explained,

Recruiting and developing local talent is seen as a strategy with high potential for helping rural areas because it results in a pool of teaching candidates who are (1) already familiar with the rural lifestyle and (2) already rooted to the community by family or other connections. Comfort and connectedness within the rural community are especially important because these advantages can help beginning teachers overcome feelings of isolation. (Cahape-Hammer et al., 2005, p. 12)

Rural districts will never be able to fully avoid teaching vacancies from occurring, but they can prepare themselves by continually planning for recruitment and retention.

Districts have to be able to develop the professional capital of individuals they hire. The applicant pool in a rural district will always be smaller than an urban district. It is imperative rural schools develop the capacity of their teachers. In rural areas, you may not always be able to hire a quality applicant.

According to Hodges, Tippins, and Oliver (2013), there is a link between de-professionalization and teacher satisfaction in rural settings. Hodges et al. described the impact of deprofessionalization on science teachers in the deep rural South. They found

that teachers interviewed for their study perceived that administrators devalued their professional knowledge. Teachers felt that standardization had caused them to be considered less of a professional. A teacher explained,

They do not care that we do labs every day or that we integrate other subjects within our class. They have only one indicator for success and that indicator (standardized tests) does not align, even remotely, to what we know kids need to understand about science. (Hodges, Tippins, & Oliver, 2013, p. 271).

Hodges, Tippins, and Oliver concluded that science teachers will continue to leave the profession if they feel undervalued and deprofessionalized particularly in rural settings. Science teachers have a high market value and are able to find work outside of teaching. This may be the case for other teaching areas in rural settings as well.

Supporting teachers in rural areas may be important in relation to job satisfaction and commitment to a rural district according to Ann Berry (2012). Berry studied relationships between teacher support, satisfaction, and commitment for special education teachers in rural areas. She found that extensive and helpful support networks attributed to increased commitment of special education teachers to rural areas. She explains further that collaborative and supportive relationships are important elements in maintaining a healthy school climate. These supportive relationships are especially important if they are established by the school administrator (Berry, 2012).

There are many factors that influence job dissatisfaction. According to Huysman (2007), multiple factors influence job dissatisfaction. Huysman found that intrinsic factors tend to be more aligned with job satisfaction and extrinsic factors more aligned with job dissatisfaction. The intrinsic factors were: “security, activity, social service, variety, and ability utilization” (Huysman, 2007, p. 140). Extrinsic factors were:



“recognition, company policies, opportunities for advancement, co-workers, and compensation” (Huysman, 2007, p. 140). Extrinsic factors are typically out of our control. This could determine why these factors may lead to dissatisfaction.

Rural districts need to go on the offensive to recruit and retain quality teachers. Malloy and Allen (2007) suggested, “an ideal recruitment and retention strategy would be to emphasize the benefits of rural school, benefits such as, attractive class size, genuine and personal relationships, and a high degree of involvement in the decision making process” (p. 19). Rural districts appear to be reactive when dealing with teaching vacancies, and they need to be more proactive in selling their school and community.

### **Technology and the Rural Principal**

Because rural principals wear so many hats, it is difficult to find time for professional development. Ferriter, Ramsden and Sheninger (2011) explained how he uses Twitter to stay up to date. “I struggle to find time for professional development in my already crowded day. With Twitter, I can read and respond to messages from everywhere (p. 35).” Ferriter, Ramsden and Sheninger explained that a Twitter stream is full of robust blog posts, and Tweets about what other great educators are doing across the world. The ability to follow leading experts such as Diane Ravitch and William Richardson allows educators to have access to the cutting edge of best practice. Twitter is a tool that could potentially remove the barrier of isolation for rural principals.

Twitter may be thought of as a place where movie stars talk about their lives and what they ate for breakfast. However, Twitter can be very beneficial to helping educators develop professionally. According to Herbert (2012), the hashtag, #edchat, was born in 2009 and since then other more specific education related hashtags have been born.

Hashtags are used on the Twitter social network to funnel information focused on specific content. In her article, Herbert interviewed Derek McCoy. McCoy shared, “I really felt my Twitter experience had come alive. I’ve learned more about education leadership on Twitter that any PD in the world could have done. Once you develop your PLN, you can take that information to your schools” (as cited in Herbert, 2012, p. 53).

Twitter has become a way for isolated rural principals to develop themselves professionally online. Tarte (2011) provided guidance for educators seeking to join Twitter to develop their personal learning network or PLN. He provided 10 ways to connect with others professionally through the use of Twitter. They are:

- 1) Sign up for your Twitter account!
- 2) Spend some time watching and observing others . . .
- 3) Talk to educators who are using Twitter . . .
- 4) Start to interact with your followers . . .
- 5) Continue the conversation by leaving comments on their blogs . . .
- 6) It’s okay to be social [just remain professional] . . .
- 7) Be selective when it comes to who you follow [Find people that will challenge your thinking to help you grow professionally] . . .
- 8) You will get what you put into it [Be active and check your Twitter account several times a day] . . .
- 9) Remember . . . use Twitter as a tool to meet your needs. . . . Twitter thrives on the generosity and reciprocity of the Twitter community (Tarte, 2011). [Tarte recommended finding ways to interact with others.]
- 10) Share, explore, discover, collaborate and encourage others [There are many great people that are willing to help. You just have to find them] . . . (Tarte, 2011, Items 1-10)

Rural principals use other forms of social media to connect and reduce isolation. A common way to connect is through Skype and Google Hangout. In a conversation with Dr. Jim Stenehjem (personal communication, October 1, 2014), the director of the North Dakota Lead (ND LEAD) Center (ND LEAD provides training for current and aspiring administrators in the state of North Dakota), Dr. Stenehjem provided examples of how rural principals are connecting online. Stenehjem setup weekly and monthly meetings for rural principals in the southern region of North Dakota. Principals connect over Skype and Google Hangout. These services provide video conferencing and the ability to screen-share, view documents, and make changes in real time. Stenehjem found these types of technologies helped to reduce isolation for rural principals and encouraged their collaboration.

### **Summary**

This extensive review of the literature provided themes associated with the rural principal position. There are many factors that impact rural principals. Themes included: Historical, Leadership, Rural Leadership, Effective Rural Schools, Rural Principalship Barriers, Rural School Research, Scarcity of Resources, Rural Poverty, Declining Enrollment, Effective Professional Development of Rural Principals, Rural Teacher Recruitment and Retention, and Technology and the Rural Principal.

Themes were followed by a discussion of barriers that inhibit or challenge administrators of rural schools to meet requirements of their jobs, and also discussed, was scarcity of resources that exist in rural districts. Effective professional development

practices were identified for rural principals. Finally, the important role that technology plays in an isolated setting was discussed.

### **Organization of Study**

Chapter II provided a review of the literature on rural principalships. Chapter III provides the methods and population I used to gather and analyze data for the study.

Chapter IV will present findings from rural principal interviews. Chapter V will contain a conclusion and summary of the aforementioned data as well as recommendations.

## **CHAPTER III**

### **METHODOLOGY**

#### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this qualitative study was to interview rural principals regarding their perceptions of advantages and disadvantages rural North Dakota principals face when performing their job duties. Emphasis was placed on identifying barriers, such as scarcity of resources, North Dakota rural principals must overcome to effectively perform their duties.

The study and review of literature explored availability (or lack) of identified resources that impact North Dakota rural principals' leadership. The unique challenges of rural principals may impact or influence instructional leadership, which is needed in the era of accountability we lived in at the time of this report. This era of accountability forced a shift in the principal's role, duties, and expectations (Rice, 2010). This shift was difficult on both rural and urban principals. This study focused on a sampling of six rural principals in North Dakota and their perceptions. The research included reviewing leadership, professional development, education, personnel, and other factors that may support or impact a rural principal's effectiveness and school/community relationships. Six rural principals were interviewed and data was coded into themes and categories, ultimately to provide recommendations for principal prep programs, rural principals, and school districts.

## **Rationale for Qualitative Study**

I chose a qualitative study, because according to Slavin (2007), to understand the rural principalship, we must ask principals about it. The interview process lends itself well with opening up the vast experience of each of the six individuals that took part in this study. Within the literature review, there was a considerable amount of quantitative methodology in similar studies. It was important for me as a researcher to do something different and interview individuals to better understand the phenomenon of rural principalship. After reading Slavin (2007), I did not believe that a quantitative study would have been the right method for this type of research. I needed to go to the rural principals' schools to interview them, to hear them, and feel their experiences. This led to my understanding of the impact of the rural principalship on principals in North Dakota.

Rural schools will always play a role in our education system. At the time of this report, there was generally a lack of research on rural schools and primarily on rural principals. I believe this study has implications nationally and within the state of North Dakota. According to the findings within Chapter IV of this study, rural principals must deal with barriers that prohibit them from becoming 21<sup>st</sup> century leaders. We need to provide resources for rural principals so they are exposed to quality professional development. This may need to include increased funding for rural schools so rural principals can travel at times to educational workshops, seminars, etc.

## **A Phenomenological Approach**

I used a phenomenological approach to study perceptions of North Dakota rural principals. Edmund Husserl created this approach for use in philosophy and the human

sciences in the early to mid-1900s according to Wertz et al. (2011). Phenomenology attempts “to faithfully conceptualize the processes and structures of mental life, how situations are meaningfully lived through as they are experienced” (Wertz et al., 2011, pp. 124-125). I am interested in the experiences of rural principals in North Dakota. I believe the only way to understand their lived experiences is to use this type of methodology. Giorgi (2009) explained phenomenology as, “nothing added and nothing subtracted.” It is the experience that is important. Wertz et al. (2011) explained: “Phenomenology investigates the person’s ways of being-in-the-world by descriptively elaborating the *structures* of the I (‘ego’ or ‘self’), the various kinds of intentionality (ways of experiencing), and the meaningful ways in which the world is experienced” (p. 126). The phenomenon of “rural principalship” was the focus of this study. Lived experiences and perceptions of those experiences will be different from principal to principal.

Slavin (2007) used the following characteristics to define qualitative research:

1. Qualitative research uses the natural setting as the direct source of data and the researcher as the key instrument,
  2. Qualitative research is descriptive,
  3. Qualitative research is concerned with process, rather than simply with outcomes or products,
  4. Qualitative research includes an inductive analysis of data,
  5. In the qualitative approach, meaning is subjective and of essential concern,
  6. Qualitative researchers are aware of their subject perspective.
- (p. 122)

Based on the literature, the rural principal has rarely been studied. I believed a phenomenological study would help understand the rural principalship. The perceptions of North Dakota rural principals provided much needed information for principal prep

programs and rural districts. Slavin (2007) defined phenomenology as, “to enter the world of individuals and to understand their perspectives” (p. 147). Interviewing rural principals allows us to view the world through their eyes.

### **Research Questions**

The following research question guided this study:

1. How does a rural environment impact principals in North Dakota?
  - a. What are the advantages and disadvantages associated with the rural principalship in North Dakota?
  - b. How do rural principals increase their knowledge and ability to build school and district capacity?

### **Sample Selection**

Due to the small population size in North Dakota, some communities may be defined as urban based on a different set of criteria than what is used to define urban in other states. All large cities or populations in North Dakota could be considered “rural” in some other large states according to Keaton (2012).

### **Definition of Urban and Suburban**

Keaton (2012) provided six definitions for urban and suburban settings:

*City, Large:* Territory inside an urbanized area and inside a principal city with population of 250,000 or more. (p. B-2)

*City, Mid-size:* Territory inside an urbanized area and inside a principal city with population less than 250,000 and greater than or equal to 100,000. (p. B-2)

*City, Small:* Territory inside an urbanized area and inside a principal city with population less than 100,000. (p. B-2)



*Suburb, Large:* Territory outside a principal city and inside an urbanized area with population of 250,000 or more. (p. B-2)

*Suburb, Mid-size:* Territory outside a principal city and inside an urbanized area with population less than 250,000 and greater than or equal to 100,000. (p. B-3)

*Suburb, Small:* Territory outside a principal city and inside an urbanized area with population less than 100,000. (p. B-3)

### **Definition of Rural**

Keaton (2012) provided three definitions for rural settings:

*Rural, Fringe:* Census-defined rural territory that is less than or equal to 5 miles from an urbanized area, as well as rural territory that is less than or equal to 2.5 miles from an urban cluster. (p. B-3)

*Rural, Distant:* Census-defined rural territory that is more than 5 miles but less than or equal to 25 miles from an urbanized area, as well as rural territory that is more than 2.5 miles but less than or equal to 10 miles from an urban cluster. (p. B-3)

*Rural, Remote:* Census-defined rural territory that is more than 25 miles from an urbanized area and is also more than 10 miles from an urban cluster. (p. B-3)

For the purpose of this study, large communities in North Dakota were referred to as urban areas. Urban areas were cities that had a Class A school within their boundaries as defined by the North Dakota High School Activities Association. A Class A school was classified by its student enrollment. To be classified as Class A, a school had to have an enrollment of 325 students or more in Grades 9-12. All schools below this threshold were classified as Class B. The researcher's sample was filtered down to 13 school districts that fit the following criteria.

1. The school district had to have a district enrollment between 250 students and 450 students, with 325 students or less in Grades 9-12.

2. The rural principal had to have served at least one or more years within their current school to be interviewed. It was assumed that tenure would play a key role in understanding the rural principal.
3. The school district had to be at least 45 miles or further from a regional hub, which is defined as having a Class A school in an urbanized community. I wanted to focus on rural schools that were geographically isolated.

The list of schools that fit the above mentioned criteria in North Dakota were: Hettinger, Langdon, Linton, Napoleon, Towner-Granville-Upham, Parshall, Cavalier, North Border, Dunseith, Mt. Pleasant, Kenmare, Surrey, and Harvey. These districts served as a sample base from which the principals to interview were identified and selected. I received approval for my study, and consent forms, and interviewed six principals from the 13 districts identified above.

### **Subjects**

Six rural school principals were selected and interviewed for this study. The six individuals chosen to be interviewed had to meet the following criteria.

1. Their school district had to have a district enrollment between 250 students and 450 students, with 325 students or less in Grades 9-12.
2. The rural principal had to have served at least one or more years within their current school to be interviewed. It was assumed that tenure would play a key role in understanding the rural principal.
3. Their school district had to be at least 45 miles or further from a regional hub, which is defined as having a Class A school in an urbanized

community. I wanted to focus on rural schools that were geographically isolated.

The six subjects that took part in the study were rural principals with various levels of experience, tenure, and education levels. To protect their anonymity, each principal was given a number. Principal 1 grew up in a community where he had just finished his 16<sup>th</sup> year as principal in that school. Principal 2 grew up in the area in which she served as principal and had served 13 years at her school. Principal 3 was in his 14<sup>th</sup> year as principal. He also served a dual role in his school district by serving as superintendent as well. Principal 4 was finishing up her 3<sup>rd</sup> year as principal of her school district. She lived in the community while working at another regional school before becoming principal. Principal 5 spent 18 years as a teacher in a school district before serving 2 years as principal. She had a master's degree in another area and chose to get an additional credential to be a principal. Principal 6 had been a principal for 10 years and had spent 6 years at the school she was working at during this study. All principals were working in North Dakota schools ranging from central to eastern North Dakota.

### **Interview Questions**

The interview questions (Appendix A) were created from the literature review, my experience, advice from my advisor, Dr. Sherryl Houdek, and my qualitative research professor, Dr. Cheryl Hunter. Several people reviewed these questions and helped shape them into their current form. My advisor was helpful in providing feedback. I also shared them with other colleagues, and they too provided helpful feedback in developing this set of interview questions.

## **Data Collection**

I received Institutional Review Board approval to conduct my research from the University of North Dakota and began contacting school districts. I also sent an email to 7 of 13 school superintendents in my school district base and sought their approval to interview principals in their district (Appendix B). I waited five working days for a response. After receiving consent from six school superintendents, I identified potential principals to interview and contacted the principals of the respective districts. The first six that contacted me back were interviewed.

Once participants gave me approval (Appendix C) to interview them, I began contacting the principals by email to establish an interview time with them. I went to their school districts to conduct interviews and no follow up interviews were needed. All interviews were guided by a semi-structured set of questions which can be found in Appendix A. Each interview lasted approximately 1 hour. Prior to each interview, I provided the principal to be interviewed with a consent form (Appendix C) explaining my research, objectives, and process. If they agreed, they signed the consent form. All participants signed their consent form. The semi-structured set of interview questions were aligned to the study's three research questions to create consistency in the data. I used an audio recording device to record each interview and then transcribed the interviews.

## **Validity**

The audio files were transcribed and sent to each principal to check for validity. I also sent the transcriptions to my advisor, Dr. Sherryl Houdek, to ensure I accurately interpreted the data from the transcripts. Dr. Houdek examined the transcripts and

reviewed codes, categories, themes, and assertions that I created from the data in the transcripts. We cross referenced them to ensure accurate analysis of the findings.

### **Data Analysis**

This qualitative study involved interviewing and recording six rural principals. Each piece of audio was transcribed verbatim. The transcription process created 200 pages of transcription data. I used a thematic approach in analyzing the data, in which I created significant statements from every sentence of the transcription data. I used a word document to highlight each sentence and made comments to develop significant statements. I created codes from the significant statements. There were over 40 different codes generated from the significant statements and over 850 total codes. I organized the codes into categories and then into themes and finally generated assertions from the data. Data analysis generated 15 pages of code data in a spreadsheet. Each assertion can be traced back to a theme, category, and code, and then finally back to the original transcription. Each code was labeled by a number assigned to a significant statement and another number assigned to each participant principal. In total there were four themes that emerged from the data.

The following is an example of how I analyzed the data for Theme 1 located in Chapter IV. To help the reader understand, here are the explanations of how I organized the data. First, I read the transcript and summarized each fact into a short phrase or code. Then I grouped related codes and assigned them a heading or category. Next, I grouped similar categories together into themes. An excerpt from the data analysis of 850 codes generated is shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Example of Data Analysis – Codes, Categories, Themes, and Assertions Involved in Determining Theme 1.

CODES	CATEGORIES	THEMES	ASSERTIONS	
Principal PLCs are nice	Principal PLCs and Regional Meetings	Theme 1: Areas of Support for the Rural Principal	PLCs are a great way to get principals together to discuss hot topics and provide professional development for principals.	
Fall, mid-winter conferences, and trainings				
Professional associations				
PLCs through NCEC				
Regional principal meetings				
Regional education association training				
Connections with people	Collegial Support			Principal PLCs and principal regional meetings are two positive ways principals can network with other principals.
Rely on family support, fellow colleagues, lead teachers				
Secondary principal supports				
District counterparts				
Colleagues throughout state				
Have a handful of people you can lean on	Family Support			Rural principals lean on professional organizations like the North Dakota Council of Education Leaders (NDCEL) for support.  Rural principals take advantage of family support.
Rely on family support . . .				
Dad was a principal, teachers in family – family support has been big				
Husband/Spouse				
Family conversations				

24

Table 1. cont.

CODES	CATEGORIES	THEMES	ASSERTIONS
SPED consortium	Support From Stakeholders	Theme 1: Areas of Support for the Rural Principal	Rural principals seek out teachers in their building for support.
Teachers support principals			Rural principals depend on people – business leaders and ministerial leaders – in their community for support.
Rely on people in the community – business people, ministerial associations			Superintendents support principals in three ways – they provide autonomy, foster trust, and listen to principals.
Can go to REA			Sometimes, principals flounder from lack of directions from their superintendents.
Secretaries are great supports			Mutual trust between a principal and superintendent is a two way street and is extremely important.
Superintendent is supervisor	Superintendent Support		Listening is an important trait of a superintendent.
Superintendent key to district and effective administration			
Trusts superintendent			
Supt. supports principal			
Supt. let's principals try things			
Supt. & Principal have good working relationship			
Principal trusts superintendent			
Supt. helps with professional development			
Supt. does not micromanage			
Supt. helps principal find answers			

## **Organization of Study**

Chapter III provided the methods I used to gather and analyze data for the study. Chapter IV will present findings from the rural principal interviews. Chapter V will contain a conclusion and summary of the aforementioned data as well as recommendations.



**CHAPTER IV**  
**PRESENTATION OF FINDINGS**

**Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this study was to identify advantages and disadvantages rural principals in North Dakota face when performing their job duties. Emphasis was placed on identifying barriers, such as scarcity of resources, rural principals must overcome to effectively perform their duties. This qualitative study explored the perceptions of six rural principals in North Dakota. This study may help university principal preparation programs, school districts, and principals in rural settings.

I chose a qualitative approach to explore the perceptions of rural principals in North Dakota. There is a dearth of research on rural principals. Most studies have been conducted outside the United States and have been primarily quantitative. This study helps understand the phenomenon of a rural principalship through interviews.

**Participant Selection**

Participants were selected from 13 school districts that fit the following criteria.

1. The school district had to have a district enrollment between 250 students and 450 students, with 325 students or less in Grades 9-12.
2. The rural principal had to have served at least one or more years within their current school to be interviewed. It was assumed that tenure would play a key role in understanding the rural principal.

3. The school district had to be at least 45 miles or further from a regional hub, which is defined as having a Class A school in an urbanized community. I wanted to focus on rural schools that were geographically isolated.

School districts were contacted, and I received approved consent forms from 7 of the 13 school districts. I contacted each of the principals in the school districts that consented to participate in this study, and six of them agreed to take part in the study. I set up interviews with a principal from each consenting school district and each interview lasted approximately 60 minutes.

### **Description of Participants**

#### **Principal 1**

He has been in his district for a total of 16 years as a teacher, and more recently, as an elementary principal. Principal 1 received his educational leadership degree through North Dakota State University. The program primarily took place online through Interactive Television (ITV).

#### **Principal 2**

She has 13 years of experience in her district. Principal 2 is the K-12 principal in a rural school. She graduated from the University of Mary. Principal 2 experienced most of her principal preparation face to face at University of Mary.

#### **Principal 3**

He has 14 years of experience as an administrator. His first administrator job was in a Class A school district. He received his certification from Northern State University located in Aberdeen, South Dakota. This program was primarily face to face at Northern State University. Principal 3 also serves as superintendent of his school district.

#### **Principal 4**

She is in her 3<sup>rd</sup> year as a rural principal and was previously a counselor. She received her educational leadership degree from the University of North Dakota.

#### **Principal 5**

She was a special education teacher prior to becoming principal in her district. She received her certification from the North Dakota Department of Public Instruction. Of the principals I interviewed, she was the only rural principal that did not have an educational leadership degree. Principal 5 was serving her 2<sup>nd</sup> year as a principal at the time of her interview.

#### **Principal 6**

She was in her 10<sup>th</sup> year as principal. She received her master's degree in educational leadership from North Dakota State University.

### **Thematic Findings**

I interviewed six rural principals in the state of North Dakota and the following themes emerged from the data.

1. Areas of support for the rural principal;
2. Resource availability, networks, and scarcity;
3. Professional development processes in rural schools; and
4. The rural context and its impact on the principal.

Due to the isolation of rural schools, a rural principal may lack a support system. Most rural principals do not have access to other principals in their schools and so lack support from professional colleagues holding equivalent positions. Rural principals

involved in the study found several ways of finding support outside their school buildings.

### **Theme 1: Areas of Support for the Rural Principal**

Rural principals in North Dakota found the following helpful in creating a support system for themselves: Principal PLCs and regional principal meetings, colleagues, family support, support from stakeholders, and support from their superintendent.

#### **Principal PLCs and Regional Principal Meetings**

A North Dakota Regional Education Association (REA) created professional learning communities for principals in the region addressed by this study. “Principal PLCs” are meetings established specifically for principals to learn from each other. PLCs are a great way to get principals together to discuss hot topics and provide professional development for the principals. Rural principals interviewed tended to support this way of networking and supported the work of the REA in creating this networking experience. Principal 1 said, “Principal PLCs are a nice support, nice time to get area principals together.” Rural principals also take part in regional principal meetings. Principal 4 found these regional meetings difficult due to the closeness of the other principals in the group. Principal 4 did not feel included at meetings and mentioned she did not receive notice of the meetings on a regular basis. She explained, “It’s hard because as a new person, I don’t always get the emails.” Overall principal PLCs and principal regional meetings were viewed as a positive way to network for most rural principals interviewed.

#### **Collegial Support**

Rural principals lean on professional organizations like the North Dakota Council of Educational Leaders (NDCEL) for support. Professional organizations have become

places where principals can network and create supports for themselves. Principal 2 found NDCEL instrumental in her growth as an educational leader. She explained, “Professional organizations have been in a huge help; and without them, I would be a fish out of water.” Not all rural principals were as involved in NDCEL as Principal 2. Most rural principals did attend the fall and mid-winter conferences. These conferences typically provided some professional development and continuing education credits.

### **Family Support**

Rural principals may lack other individuals in their line of work to bounce ideas off, but they take advantage of family supports. Principal 2 said, “Dad was a principal, and teachers in the family; my family support has been big. They understand.” Principal 6 also mentioned falling back on family for her support system. She explained, “My husband is a good ear, and we use the lake as a good stress reliever.” Many principals interviewed used “significant others” as sounding boards. Quite a few of the rural principals I interviewed came from a long line of educators. They relied on family members that were educators to help them during difficult times. It was also mentioned that family members knew what conversations they could be a part of when they talked “school” at home.

### **Support from Stakeholders**

Rural principals seek out teachers in their buildings for support. Participants in this study had developed positive relationships with their teachers and felt comfortable confiding in them. Principal 2 found success in placing teachers in leadership roles when she had to be out of the building. She explained, “My teachers are asked to step into roles that they normally wouldn’t when I’m gone.” It was suggested that this built trust

and groomed teacher leaders. Principal 6 used weekly staff meetings to maintain a close relationship with her stakeholders. Secretaries and other support staff were mentioned as stakeholders that provided support to rural principals. Rural principals also depended on people within their community – business leaders and ministerial leaders – for support. Principal 6 shared, “I rely on people in the community – business people, ministerial, and clientele that work for us.” He was the only principal/superintendent in the area and depended on similar CEO figures within the community for support.

### **Superintendent Support**

According to the rural principals, their superintendents supported them in three ways – providing autonomy, fostering trust, and listening to them. Four of the six rural principals interviewed explained that their superintendent granted them freedom to implement new initiatives. Their superintendents provided them with the autonomy needed to do their job effectively. Principal 1 said, “In a perfect world, the superintendent is the supervisor of principals.” Rural principals referred to autonomy, but were unable to articulate whether or not their superintendents assisted in providing direction in their growth as leaders. Superintendents supported participants with autonomy; the direction of their schools, and improvement processes, were decisions made solely by the principals. Principal 4 explained, “I’m not micromanaged in any way; he (the superintendent) says, “Go ahead and give it a whirl.” I found that autonomy was granted to rural principals in this study, but many floundered with a lack of direction from their superintendents. Superintendents provided flexibility, but led loosely. Principal 5 was the only one that referenced expectations associated with the flexibility to do their job.

Mutual trust between a superintendent and a principal was described as extremely important. Two of the six rural principals found trust to be significant in their relationships with their superintendent. Principal 1 discussed trust, “You have to find a way to trust your superintendent.” Principal 2 felt trusted by both her superintendent and the school board. Rural principals believe trust is a two way street for them. Not only does the superintendent have to trust the principal, but the principal must trust the superintendent.

Rural principals believed listening was an important trait of an effective superintendent. Three of the six rural principals supported this finding. Principal 6 said, “He’s up to listening to my ideas.” She also mentioned that sometimes you have to be forthright and tell them what you need. Listening, in the minds of participants, was the sharing of ideas with their superintendents and receiving feedback on those ideas. Rural principals appreciated having access to their superintendent for general questions and concerns.

## **Theme 2: Resource Availability, Networks, and Scarcity**

Rural principals navigate many complexities associated with lack of resources. The following are subsections within Theme 2: resource challenges, regional education associations, established networks, building issues, access to specialized staffing, and dependence on class size.

### **Resource Challenges**

Rural school principals understand that small populations do not lend themselves to vast amounts of resources. Principals interviewed found they had to do more work than their urban counterparts with fewer resources. In most situations, rural principals

interviewed described their communities as “not a regional hub” - which meant they had to drive to access resources for professional growth or trainings. Principal 2 shared her frustration, “Things are not held at my site and our location is an issue, so I have to travel.” Access to specialized staffing in curriculum and instruction were difficult. Principal 4 said, “In a larger school, you’ve got more people, a curriculum director. In a rural setting, you may not have as many people to ask for help.” Rural principals felt uncomfortable in making curriculum and instruction decisions and would have liked assistance with these decisions. Principal 6 would like more than 5-6 people looking at new curriculum and needed more input. Rural principals wear many hats, and the multiplicity of their jobs may impact their ability to specialize in any particular area.

### **Regional Education Associations**

A Regional Education Association (REA) is viewed as an organization that can assist with resources for a rural principal. Rural principals access professional development coordinators, data coaches, and college and career counselors through their local REA. Principal 2 relied on an REA and neighboring districts to access resources. Principal 3 differed in his opinion of an REA. He said, “We have an REA whereby we can work together, but we have individual and distinct needs – difficult to do that.” REAs tend to focus on broad one-size-fits-all programming for member schools. It may be important for REAs to begin to differentiate needs of individual schools in order for the purpose of REAs to remain relevant to educational needs of schools in their region. According to rural principals interviewed, each school had unique needs which made it difficult for their REA to assist rural schools in their improvement processes.



## **Established Networks**

Rural principals access REA resources through principal professional learning communities. In the beginning, principals interviewed were skeptical of PLC meetings and viewed them as just another meeting. Principal 2 explained, “The principal PLCs started a little shaky, and I was not keen on being out of the building.” Over time, principals have found that PLC meetings are beneficial to their growth as leaders. Principal 2 felt that over time the principal PLC meetings have proven to be invaluable. Rural principals find it important to share hot topics that are pertinent to them as educational leaders. These PLC meetings typically occurred on a monthly basis during the school year.

Rural principals created connections outside their schools. Five of the six rural principals interviewed believed that establishing strong networks were beneficial to combating the isolation that comes with their positions. Rural principals found support outside their school district and were able to bounce ideas off and gain insights from neighboring colleagues. They found making connections at state associations as a valid way to establish networks. Principal 5 was in her 2<sup>nd</sup> year as principal and struggled with the “newness” of her position. She was concerned about making meaningful connections with veteran principals in her region. Principal 5 explained, “I know I didn’t know it, but I didn’t want to look like I didn’t know it.” She was afraid to ask for help and did not feel comfortable in reaching out to other principals in her region. Principal 4 was also new to the principalship and found it difficult to establish a strong network. She said, “When I was a counselor, I had a really strong network, and I don’t have that as a principal.” This should be a concern to our profession that we are not supporting our less

experienced colleagues. Perhaps reaching out to them and establishing a mentorship program may help them feel more comfortable in their new role.

### **Building Issues**

Resource availability for rural principals also included access to adequate building facilities. Many schools I visited were archaic and had received very few upgrades in recent years. According to rural principals interviewed, building improvements are often put on the back burner due to the difficulty of passing a bond issue. Principal 1 said, “We do our best to keep technology, buildings safe, textbooks, and chairs up to date.”

Interviewees found it difficult to maintain an up to date educational environment.

Principal 6 shared, “I mean, we’re not just teaching from a chalkboard anymore, so we need some upgrades.” The elderly community found in many rural communities was deemed as the biggest hurdle in a successful bond election. This was because many elderly felt they should not have to contribute to the school when their kids had long graduated from the school.

### **Access to Specialized Staffing**

Rural principals find it difficult to access specialized staff like occupational therapists, physical therapists, special education teachers, school psychologists, and student behavior specialists. Rural schools belong to special education consortiums. These consortiums were established to provide rural outreach. Rural principals often lack immediate support when dealing with students that have special needs. Principal 1 said, “Sometimes, we have to wait for services from our special education consortium.” The consortium serves multiple schools, which makes it difficult if a school needs immediate assistance from an expert. Principal 5 explained, “In smaller schools, we have limited

resources and not as many support services.” School to school developed consortiums help rural schools afford high cost specialized services even though services may not be delivered in a timely manner.

### **Dependence on Class Size**

Rural schools are dependent on school enrollment. In a rural setting, school enrollment may be on the decline. Class size can vary greatly from class to class in a rural school. Rural principals depend on stable enrollments to have the financial means to access resources. The oil boom in western North Dakota has increased enrollment, but according to Principal 1, many students moving in are high needs students. Principal 1 explained, “Twenty-six kindergarten students, that’s a lot of kids, and half of them are on IEPs.” As enrollment increases, costs escalate depending on the amount of specialized services needed to serve students.

### **Theme 3: Professional Development Processes in Rural Schools**

Professional development processes varied from principal to principal and the following were subsections associated with Theme 3: decision making, early-out professional development, impact of teacher turnover, follow-up, financial incentives, administrative involvement, and professional development challenges.

#### **Decision Making**

In terms of making decisions on professional development, the data revealed that administrators set direction; professional development was data driven; and at times, professional development involved staff.

In rural schools, principals and superintendents made all decisions in terms of the direction of professional development. There was some reference to including teachers

and other stakeholders in making decisions, but this was minimal. One difference in Principal 5's region was that their REA established the direction of professional development in all member schools. A REA is typically led by superintendents of member schools. Rural schools often operate with little rhyme or reason as to the direction of professional development. Principal 4 elaborated, "Or sometimes, somebody [an administrator] will just have an idea." Planning for professional development appeared to lack a vision and a direction for those interviewed. Two of the six principals aligned their schools' professional development goals with school and program improvement plans.

Rural principals referenced the use of data to establish professional goals and planning. The data choice was derived from student standardized test scores. Principal 3 said, "Essentially, it comes down to evaluating the needs of students and the evaluation of test scores." Four of six rural principals discussed the use of data in their professional development decision making.

Stakeholders were rarely asked for input on professional development practices in their districts. The individuals making decisions on professional development focused on needs developed by administrators and adhered to state and federal mandates. Only two of six rural principals interviewed sought input from staff in terms of decisions related to professional development. Principal 4 was one of them, she said, "I spend a lot of time talking and getting input from teachers." It is important principals provide teachers an opportunity to voice their opinions to discover what their needs are and to help teachers improve professionally.

## **Early-Out Professional Development**

The North Dakota Department of Public Instruction has recently allowed school districts to modify their day to include early release times so teachers can leave earlier in the day and take advantage of professional development opportunities. Rural schools participating in this study have implemented “early outs” throughout the year for professional development. In schools that have multiple sites, rural principals and their teachers travel to a central site to take part in professional development. Principal 2’s district buses everyone together. Schools with multiple school sites also use technology to connect sites for full staff professional development seminars, lectures, or workshops. Early out professional development is viewed by rural principals as a positive effort to improve professional development opportunities. It was unclear if principals felt early out release times made an impact on teachers in the classroom.

## **Impact of Teacher Turnover**

Rural principals find it difficult to recruit and retain high quality staff on a yearly basis. High turnover rates impact professional development programs according to Principal 1. He explained, “People coming and going – we assume they know how to do those things.” Rural areas typically have high teacher and administrator turnover. Over the course of a few years, rural principals have often replaced a considerable number of staff, and their district may lack organizational memory. Principal 1 said, “We’ve got a lot of new teachers, and they aren’t familiar with our initiatives.” It is important to think about newly hired staff members if an initiative has been around for an extended period of time.

## **Follow-Up**

According to Knight (2011), high quality professional development provides follow up and is sustained throughout the year. Principal 2 referenced this practice for fall, winter, and summer principal conferences. She advocated for creating a common thread to run throughout conferences and continue throughout the year. This thought of a common thread may be valuable for teachers as well. Too often professional development is a presentation of one topic and then it's done. There was very little discussion from rural principals in terms of providing follow up for the professional development of teachers. The goal of professional development should be to change ineffective practices through a sustained effort.

## **Financial Incentives**

Rural principals and superintendents used stipends to motivate and encourage staff to participate in professional development activities outside of contract time. Principal 1 believed that his teachers had become dependent on stipends and in his words "spoiled." He explained, "The younger generation wants money for things like stipends to take part in professional development, special teachers put in hours and never mention money." Stipends can motivate, but they may become more difficult to provide as enrollment decreases and budgets shrink.

## **Administrative Involvement**

Rural principals must see professional development as important for teachers to buy into change. Rural principals must model by "being there" for professional development days. "Being there" involves being present and actively participating in the professional development for teachers. Principals should take part in professional

development activities. Principal 1 explained, “My job is to be knowledgeable and set an example, and I am in attendance.” He believed that administrators have to be role models and show enthusiasm for professional development activities.

### **Professional Development Challenges**

There are a myriad of challenges that impact rural principals in terms of professional development. The following three factors emerged from the data as top priorities for principals interviewed: distance and travel to quality professional development, individualizing needs for teachers, and the costs of experts.

Rural principals found travel and distance to high quality professional development as a barrier to achieving professional development. Principal 5 and staff traveled to Grand Forks, North Dakota, over a 2 year period. They would leave at 6:00 AM and get back home by 6:00 PM on professional development days. Notably frustrated, Principal 5 said, “It was a grumbling nightmare, not bad if it’s worth it, but it wasn’t worth their time.” Principal 5 explained that these days were draining for her and teachers. Principal 2 had a large number of staff that commuted from other communities. She dealt with contractual issues due to planned professional development that occurred after school. The long commute for many of her staff made it difficult for them to attend.

Rural principals believed, at the time of this study, professional development opportunities were not designed specifically for small schools. Principal 1 noted, “It’s gonna be valuable to half of the people and the other half are gonna get little or nothing out of it. That’s the way education goes.” Principal 3 had similar comments, “Everybody has different needs; in a rural school, they’re on an island.” Each of the participants struggled in providing meaningful professional development to all teachers

and staff. Their main method of professional development was one-size-fits-all. It was easier to deliver professional development in this form and much more difficult to individualize for each specific need. Everybody has different needs and singleton teachers struggled to collaborate due to their isolation and differences from other teachers in the same school building.

Rural principals found expert costs for big name presenters as a barrier to providing professional development for teachers. Cost of quality professional development was considered a large barrier to professional growth. Rural principals struggled finding someone to come to their school district. They knew what they wanted, but finding the right person willing to work at the right cost was the barrier. A few principals began to look inward at their organization for experts.

#### **Theme 4: The Rural Context and Its Impact on the Principal**

The impact of rural life on a principal is an interesting phenomenon. This theme includes the following subsections: why rural principals choose to stay in rural schools, impact of the rural principalship on personal life, and staying current in a rural setting.

##### **Why Rural Principals Choose to Stay in Rural Schools**

Five of the six rural principals interviewed had some kind of familial connection to the community they served. Principal 1 explained his connection, “I have something to give to the community, this community. I know the history. I feel I have something to give back to students and community.” Five of the six principals in this study, or their spouses, either grew up in or near the community where they worked. Principal 6 shared a similar connection, “You walk into this building and you know it’s your family away from home.”



Rural principals developed close teacher, student, and parent relationships at their schools. Four of the six principals interviewed found these close relationships as reasons why they remained at a rural school. Principal 4 explained, “I love being in a small school, you know their [students’] ups and downs and can help them grow academically.” Close knit relationships may develop faster in a rural setting due to a small number of kids being served. Principal 5 said, “Teachers are more invested, and there aren’t as many cracks to fall through.”

All rural principals that were interviewed had been at their school for a minimum of five years. They were invested and content with the location. The job was initially viewed as a stepping stone according to Principal 2. However, at the time of her interview, she said she now wanted to see students finish high school, and enjoyed watching first year teachers develop and grow over time. Principal 6 was content because of her proximity to her parents and enjoyed living in her hometown. These familial connections helped reduce administrator turnover in rural schools in this study. It may be important for schools that are hiring principals to attract leaders that have connections to their community.

Rural principals stay at rural schools to make a difference in the lives of kids. I do not believe this mentality is different for urban principals. In my experience, I believe that all principals go into the profession to make a difference in the lives of kids. Rural principals feel the small size of a rural school makes it easier to have a meaningful impact on students. Principal 3 had experience in a large district and preferred the small school setting. He explained, “After 8½ months in a large school, I couldn’t say who that kid was. At a large school, I didn’t even think I’d made a difference.” In rural schools, it

may be easier to develop relationships with kids as opposed to large districts with many more kids.

### **Impact of the Rural Principalship on Personal Life**

Similar to research found in the literature review, principals in this study felt like they were in the spotlight at all times. Principal 1 believed that the spotlight can be positive and negative. He explained that there was an expectation that you are active in the community. Principal 1 said, “You’re in a leadership role, and so the community looks to you to be a community leader as well.” Principal 2 shared that as a rural principal, you do not get a private life, and the job consumed her. Principal 3 shared similar experiences, he noted, “You gotta be ready and willing to meet every person’s need 24/7 and 365 days a year.” A rural principal is expected to make appearances in public and be a positive supporter of the community. Principal 4 shared, “It doesn’t matter if it’s the grocery store, or at supper, somebody always views you as the principal at the school.”

Due to being in a spotlight at all times, rural principals in this study found solace in getting away from their respective communities at times. This escape from their community was viewed as a stress reliever. Principal 2 spent weekdays in town and traveled outside of town to “the farm house” on weekends. Principal 4 liked going away on vacations, and Principal 6 would go “to the lake” in the summer to unwind. Creating a balance between work and relaxation plays an important role in a rural principal’s life due to “the spotlight.”

Rural principals struggle to find balance between their jobs and their home lives. The closeness of a school community can be suffocating for some rural principals.

Principal 4 explained, “My husband gets sick of school; we should have to have some personal life somewhere he says.” She felt that her husband did not understand the nature of her job. Principal 6 explained the isolation that occurs for her and her family. She said, “As a rural principal, you are more secluded just because of who you are and may be viewed as anti-social.”

Due to geographic isolation, rural principals lack immediate access to a lot of things from a professional level. They struggle finding colleagues in a similar position within their community. Principal 3 found that there was nobody he could go to within his community that shared his similar duties. The distance and travel associated with attending quality professional association meetings was seen as a barrier to rural principals’ abilities to collaborate with similar professionals dealing with similar job pressures.

### **Staying Current in a Rural Setting**

Four of the six rural principals interviewed kept up to date by reading various professional resources. Principal 3 enjoyed reading as a way to grow professionally because she could do it when no one is around. Principal 2 found reading difficult. She was not a big reader and had to push herself to read. Rural principals are beginning to rely on social media as a means of staying current in their profession. Following blogs and reading the *Education Leadership* magazine published by the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development (ASCD) were popular ways to stay current. Rural principals are beginning to use technology to find and create new support systems.

The most common social network participants used was Twitter for professional growth and sharing. Rural principals interviewed also followed blogs of other school

leaders across the nation. Principal 5 found that using Twitter was a nice way to reaffirm that she and her school were on the right track. She shared, “It’s good to know that it’s not just us dealing with these problems; other people in other schools have the similar issues.” REAs are beginning to use the “Google Hangout” social network to connect rural principals. Rural principals have also used Google+ as a way to connect, share, and grow as professionals. Principal 5 explained, “We setup Google+ for northeast principals; it’s a nice way to get support.” Rural principals in this study also took advantage of Interactive Television (ITV) located in their schools to collaborate with others. Rural principals are beginning to push the boundaries to connect “virtually” to combat the isolation of their jobs.

Rural principals in this study also accessed online methods of providing professional development for teachers. Principal 5 often used different sites and videos to encourage growth. She found that you can get high quality videos without traveling.

Rural principals interviewed found the state of North Dakota provided “Listserv” as a method of support. The Listserv is an email group that many administrators in North Dakota use to keep in contact and share issues. All members of North Dakota Council of Educational Leaders (NDCEL) have access to the Ed Lead Listserv. All rural principals are issued a sendit email address. This email address is used for communications between educators in the state of North Dakota. The Listserv was viewed as a way to share questions and issues to every school leader in the state. Rural principals in this study found the topics posted relevant. However, they lacked the confidence to post their own questions on the listserv. Principal 5 did not want to come across as stupid on the Listserv. Although the Listserv connects principals across the state, there have been very

few instances when topics posted on the Listserv have been focused on growth, at least at the time of this study.

### **Organization of Study**

Chapter IV presented findings from the rural principal interviews. Chapter V will contain a conclusion and summary of the aforementioned data as well as recommendations.

**CHAPTER V**  
**CONCLUSIONS, RECOMMENDATIONS, AND DISCUSSION**

**Conclusion and Summary of Findings**

Findings in this qualitative study of rural principals in North Dakota suggest the following:

- Rural principals tend to seek support outside their school districts because of the isolated nature of their positions. Principals interviewed in this study said support came from principal PLC meetings and regional meetings, state associations, colleagues, family, stakeholders, and support from their superintendent.
- Rural principals found it challenging to find enough available resources for their school districts. Regional Education Associations (REA) played a role in providing missing resources for school districts. Rural principals took part in networks established by their local REA. Access to specialized staff was a challenge; most districts accessed specialized staff through their REA and a special education consortium. Many special education services were not delivered in a timely manner.
- Providing and participating in high quality professional development was important for all principals involved in the study. Administrators made most of the decisions in terms of direction professional development for

teachers would take. This was largely done without input from stakeholders and lacked innovation. Challenges of professional development in rural schools included: high teacher turnover, lack of follow up, financial incentives for motivation, distance of travel to high quality professional development, and high cost of bringing expert presenters to rural schools.

- It was suggested that the reason rural principals stay in their respective schools and jobs may occur, at least in part, because they have a familial connection to the area. Also, it may be easier to develop close relationships with students, parents, and community members when working in a rural school. Rural principals interviewed felt that a spotlight was on them at all times and struggled with work/life balance. Many sought opportunities to get out of the community for trips and vacations to relieve stress. Rural principals stayed current by reading magazines, using Twitter, reading blogs, and following the Ed Lead Listserv.

### **Recommendations and Discussion**

During data analysis, five themes were identified that may assist principal preparation programs, rural school districts, and rural principals:

1. Establish a state mentorship program for new administrators,
2. Support superintendents in developing principals,
3. Develop teacher partnerships,
4. Improve professional development practices in rural schools,
5. Prepare principals for the rural context.

### **Recommendation 1: Establish a State Mentorship Program for New Administrators**

Rural principals need a support system. The isolation of a rural position can be suffocating for rural principals that lack someone they can vent to and receive support from. Four of the six rural principals interviewed advocated for a mentorship program for principals. Some interviewees appeared to have confidence issues, and would second guess their decisions. Principal 4 explained, “When I go to regional meetings, I feel like I’m not sure what I’m doing.” Rural principals interviewed appeared to mentally beat themselves up. Principal 5 saw an example of a teacher mentorship program and believed a similar program for administrators would be beneficial for her. Principal 6 said, “One thing you lack in the world is someone in the same position as you.” She felt isolated and did not feel she had anyone to turn to.

Rural principals involved in this study wanted more access to practicing administrators while involved in their principal preparation program. Principal 4 suggested, “Some of the best classes I took were from an adjunct professor.” The adjunct professor was a practicing administrator. She explained further that if you aren’t a practicing administrator and in schools on a regular basis, you begin to forget what it’s like on the front lines. More access to practicing administrators would begin an early network and a possible mentor for an aspiring administrator.

Rural principals found relationships with colleagues important in establishing informal mentors. Principal 1 explained, “Colleagues are the biggest resource, no book, class, is ever going to prepare you as much as your colleagues.” Principal 2 suggested shadowing principals in multiple schools. Principal 4 called for having aspiring administrators spend more time in internship programs to develop relationships with



other administrators. Principal 5 wanted to see the establishment of an administrator mentorship program. Principal 2 believed that she needed more embedded experience in schools during her administrative preparation. She gave the following suggestions: (a) Spend a day in a school, (b) shadow an effective principal for an extended period of time, (c) establish principal “shadowing” in multiple schools. Principal 4 requested more practicum time. Her practicum time during her preparation consisted of interviewing a principal. Principal 4 wanted to spend some time “in the trenches” doing administrative work rather just interviewing a practicing principal.

The state of North Dakota should employ a mentorship program for administrators during their first 3 years of administration. This mentorship program would benefit both rural and urban principals. I believe there are enough experienced administrators in North Dakota that would be willing to assist with this program. The following would be major components of the mentorship program:

- Experienced school leaders could choose to be a part of the program and they could serve as a mentor to 3-5 new administrators. The mentor would be located in the new administrators’ region to allow for school visitations.
- The mentorship program would include an orientation between the mentor and mentee. The orientation would consist of relationship building and laying out a professional growth plan for the year between the mentor and mentee.
- The mentor would make regular contacts with the mentee to “check in” on them. The mentee would feel comfortable to contact the mentor for anything. The mentor would include the mentee in his or her network.

- Establish principal shadowing in multiple schools so a mentee is able to visit 3-5 effective practicing principals.

School leaders in North Dakota should reach out to newly appointed principals. They need support and guidance. Supporting new principals is particularly important because of a scarcity of school administrators in North Dakota. School leaders should include new principals in their developed networks and welcome them at principal meetings, state conferences, and other events.

It may be important for a mentorship program to extend into principal preparation programs. Principal preparation programs should include more internships with multiple administrators in both rural and urban settings. These internships should include administrative work for the aspiring principal. Time constraints should be considered, but it is important that aspiring administrators experience what an administrator position is like prior to stepping into the role.

### **Recommendation 2: Support Superintendents in Developing Principals**

Rural superintendents provide autonomy and freedom to make decisions to their principals. Rural principals in this study appreciated the autonomy, but felt, at times, a need for more clear direction by their superintendents. In many instances, rural principals floundered in establishing a clear path of improvement for themselves and their school. In terms of professional development, principals would sometimes jump from initiative to initiative with no clear direction or unifying thread in initiatives. This was clear when Principal 4 said this in regards to professional development decision making, “Sometimes somebody will just have an idea.” On one hand, interviewees enjoyed autonomy; but on the other hand, they needed expectations set for them.

Rural superintendents should encourage their principals to attend professional learning opportunities. However, rural principals do not have assistant principals that can fill in for them when they are gone. The work load falls on a superintendent when a principal is at a professional learning opportunity. Principal 3 explained, “You know, it’s just too dang difficult to be gone.” Principal 4 shared similar beliefs, “I hate being gone from the building. I wish they [professional learning experiences] were closer.” Superintendents should fill in for their principals regularly to alleviate the stress a principal associates with being absent from their building. It is extremely important for principals to get away, learn, and reflect on their practice. Principal 6 shared her frustration, “Last year, he didn’t let me attend any professional development. I think because he wanted me here.” Rural principals and superintendents serve multiple roles, but we cannot lose sight of the importance of developing principals to be instructional leaders in spite of time restraints.

Rural school districts should establish retreats for leadership teams to discuss long term planning and goals, and to reflect on their current direction. Principal 1 found administrator staff retreats as a helpful way to improve communication amongst school leaders. He explained, “We need to get out of the building sometimes.” Rural principals and superintendents can get lost in the hustle and bustle of a school day and begin to lose track of a school’s vision or mission without time for reflection with their leadership teams. Rural school leaders should meet weekly to communicate and reassess current initiatives.

Rural superintendents should be provided with more professional learning opportunities on how to develop their principals. Current professional development

offerings from state associations rarely discuss professional development of principals. The university system in North Dakota should work with the North Dakota Department of Public Instruction (NDDPI) and state associations to provide high quality professional development for superintendents to, in turn, develop their principals. Current evaluation systems mainly focus on developing the manager aspect of administrators and fail to address instructional leadership. Some progress is occurring through the development of the Principal Teacher Evaluation Support System (PTESS) in North Dakota. The PTESS has placed an emphasis on improving the evaluation system for principals and teachers in North Dakota (North Dakota Department of Public Instruction, 2014). It is critical that state associations, the North Dakota DPI, and university systems provide adequate training to superintendents on evaluating principals effectively.

### **Recommendation 3: Develop Teacher Partnerships**

Rural principals should take advantage of their teachers to help balance the many roles of their job. Knight (2011) recommended developing a partnership between teachers and administrators. This partnership consists of the following seven principles:

1. **Equality:** Is when leaders put themselves on the same level as teachers. Power is automatically attached to administrative positions, and to create a true partnership between teachers and principals means principals must relinquish some of their power. Leaders should work to eliminate an “us versus them” mentality between teachers and administrators.
2. **Choice:** Professional learning should provide choice for teachers and administrators. Rural principals must allow teachers some level of choice when planning professional development.

3. Voice: Professional learning needs to value the opinions of all participants not just those of the leadership. When administrators implement step by step programs or practices without asking for input from teachers, administrators communicate the message that they do not trust teachers to think for themselves.
4. Reflection: Knight (2011) recommended administrators reflect on their actions in three ways – look back, look at, and look ahead. When we look back – “we consider an event that has passed and think about how it proceeded and what we might have done differently” (Knight, 2011, p. 37). When we look at – “we are monitoring how well an activity is proceeding, considering adjustments that have to be made, and making decisions about what the best method might be going forward” (Knight, 2011, p. 37). When we look ahead, we are “thinking about how to use an idea, practice, or plan in the future” (Knight, 2011, p. 37). Rural principals should make reflection a regular part of professional development.
5. Dialogue: Knight (2011) suggested that good professional learning is centered on dialogue. Teachers must be able to have crucial conversations and be open to changing their way of thinking. Dialogue must also be a way to build consensus between teachers and administrators.
6. Praxis: According to Knight (2011), praxis is the act of applying new ideas to our own lives. When we learn, reflect, and act, we are engaged in praxis.
7. Reciprocity: Reciprocity is the belief that each learning action is an opportunity for everyone to learn. Knight (2011) explained, “When teachers

are passionate about learning, their love of growth and development rubs off on students and often infects them with the same passion” (p. 45).

Rural principals take advantage of the staff they have. Principal 1 used the experts in his building to lead professional development. Rural principals who confide in their teacher leaders, seek teachers’ opinions prior to implementing change. Principal 2 encourages sharing and tries to prevent isolation by providing confidence to her lead teachers. Rural principals should consider implementing the partnership principles above to develop teacher leaders.

#### **Recommendation 4: Improve Professional Development Practices in Rural Schools**

Rural principals should create a professional development committee to explore the effectiveness of their professional learning activities. A needs assessment should be administered to determine teachers’ and other stakeholders’ perceptions of professional learning activities needed. Rural schools should implement Professional Learning Communities (PLC). According to Dufour, Dufour, Eaker, & Karhanek (2004), PLCs are comprised of a team of teachers that share a common bond. For example, English teachers may comprise the English Language Arts PLC. PLCs may be difficult to implement in a rural school due to the number of singleton teachers. Singleton teachers are teachers who do not share a common subject area. Rural principals can form PLCs with singleton teachers by finding common denominators in subjects taught (Young, 2009). For example, art and music share common themes because they are performance courses.

Professionals involved in PLCs should take control of their own learning. Rural principals should allow flexibility for PLCs to develop their own professional learning

goals. In North Dakota, professional development has traditionally occurred during specific days. Therefore, teachers rarely implement new initiatives with fidelity because the professional learning is not job embedded. The majority of districts in North Dakota have approximately three professional development days. School districts should allow PLCs to use traditional professional development days to direct their own learning. High quality professional learning is job embedded. Rural districts should begin implementing weekly late starts or early release schedules to ensure teacher collaboration occurs throughout the district. It is important that PLCs meet on a weekly basis so teachers can make progress.

Participants in PLCs should work together to develop a Professional Learning Plan (PLP). This is an agreed upon plan by members of a PLC and is directed by a common district-identified theme. Each PLP must include research based texts or journal articles. For instance, our district is working on improving student engagement in all classrooms. Tables 2-4 show three different PLP descriptions that provide three choices to PLC groups to try and improve student engagement.

#### **Professional learning plan.**

A professional learning plan should be filled out by each PLC group. They need to identify a problem of practice and research best practices to address it. In examples provided in this section, research was related to improving student engagement in classrooms. Turning power over to PLCs to direct their own learning helps to individualize and make professional development more meaningful for teachers. It is recommended for accountability purposes to tie a teacher's professional learning plan to their evaluation process. This allows a principal to give valuable feedback to teachers on

Table 2. Professional Learning Plan – Description for School Visitations.

<p>Reminder – The guiding question for our professional development this year is: “How can I improve student engagement in my classroom?”</p> <p>If your PLC chooses the school visitation option, you will identify a focus to improve student engagement within your PLC and obtain research articles or texts that are helpful. You must find a school or teacher that is implementing methods you would like to emulate. A visit must be completed by January 19, 2015.</p> <p>October 29 and December 3 are identified half days for our professional development. If at all possible, use those identified days for your visits. We do understand that you may need a full day to complete your visitation. You will need to carpool and complete your visits as a PLC team. Student engagement methods observed and research based activities should be incorporated into your classroom throughout the remainder of the year.</p>
---

Source: Rugby Public School District #5 (n.d.)

Table 3. Professional Learning Plan – Description for Online Learning.

<p>Reminder – The guiding question for our professional development this year is: “How can I improve student engagement in my classroom?”</p> <p>If your PLC chooses the continuing education course for your professional learning plan, you will be able to choose from a list of pre-approved 1 credit classes available through UND’s continuing education program. There will be a list of pre-approved courses relating to our goal of improving student engagement in your classroom. You will enroll on September 29<sup>th</sup>. Completion of the class is required and a transcript must be submitted to receive reimbursement.</p> <p>Course Options:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• 21<sup>st</sup> Century Tools for Teachers</li><li>• Authentic Innovation in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century Classroom</li><li>• Student Engagement: Inquiry Based (Teacher Driven)</li><li>• Differentiation: Inquiry Based (Teacher Driven)</li></ul>
--

Source: Rugby Public School District #5 (n.d.)



Table 4. Professional Learning Plan – Description for Study Group.

Reminder – The guiding question for our professional development this year is: “How can I improve student engagement in my classroom?”

If your PLC chooses the study group option, you will identify a focus to improve student engagement within your PLC and obtain research articles or texts that are helpful. You will research and select a book pertaining to your focus area. The book(s) or professional journal article(s) you choose should be research based and target your specific needs for improving student engagement within your classroom. Once texts are chosen, you will need to provide your rationale for the selection. You will then be expected to read, discuss, and implement specific ideas from the book according to the timeline for professional development. You will have put something into practice by January 19, 2015.

Source: Rugby Public School District #5 (n.d.)

new methods each PLC will implement into their classrooms. Tables 5-7 are practical examples recommended forms for tracking progress of the Professional Learning Plans in Tables 2-4. Plans and forms in Tables 2-7 were designed to develop professional learning goals for PLCs in rural schools.

### **Recommendation 5: Prepare Principals for the Rural Context**

Principal preparation programs must prepare principals for both a rural and urban context. Most principal preparation programs provide a cookie cutter program for all aspiring principals. This style is usually centered around urban and suburban school systems. Rural preparation should be included in all principal preparation programs, especially in the state of North Dakota where 40% of students attend rural schools. Principal 4 felt her program prepared her for a much larger school setting, which conflicted with her rural leadership position. Principal 1 suggested if you are going to be an administrator, you should have teaching experience. Principal 3 felt that he was

Table 5. Professional Learning Plan – Tracking the School Visitation Plan.

Name: _____	Date: _____
Please take time to reflect on your professional learning priorities for the year. Reminder—The guiding question for our professional development this year is: “How can I improve student engagement in my classroom?”	
<input type="checkbox"/> <u>School Visitation</u>	
1. Description of Professional Learning Option:	
If your PLC chooses the school visitation option, you will identify a focus to improve student engagement within your PLC and obtain research articles or texts that are helpful. You must find a school or teacher that is implementing methods you would like to emulate. A visit must be completed by <b>January 19, 2015</b> .	
<b>October 29<sup>th</sup> and December 3<sup>rd</sup></b> are identified half days for our professional development. If at all possible, use those identified days for your visits. We do understand that you may need a full day to complete your visitation. You will need to carpool and complete your visits as a PLC team. Student engagement methods observed and research based activities should be incorporated into your classroom throughout the remainder of the year.	
2. Identify a focus to improve student engagement.	
3. Resources: Must include at least one research based book or journal article(s). If you choose a researched based article please attach. If you choose a research based book(s), please list them here. The district will purchase resources for you. <b><u>All orders must be placed by September 29th.</u></b> PD Mentors will assist in ordering resources.	
Research Based Book(s):	
_____	
_____	
_____	

Table 5. cont.

<p>Research Based Title of Journal Article(s) (Please attach to plan):</p> <hr/> <hr/> <hr/>
<p>4. Guided Questions</p> <p>How will the research based selections improve student engagement in your classroom? <b>Completed on September 29<sup>th</sup>.</b></p> <p>Name of school selected: _____</p> <p>Please explain why you have chosen this school and how it relates to the above mentioned research based book(s) or journal article(s)? School visit(s) must be completed by <b>January 19, 2015.</b></p>
<p>5. Final Reflection</p> <p>a. How will you provide evidence that the school visitation and research based resources made an impact on your classroom? Please attach evidence of student work, a lesson, and an activity that shows evidence of your research and school visitation. <b>Due March 4, 2015.</b></p> <p>b. Please reflect on your learning this year in terms of your research and the school visitation. How did this improve engagement in your classroom? Please include research based strategies that were used in your classroom this year. <b>Due April 22, 2015.</b> (Minimum of 500 words)</p>

Source: Rugby Public School District #5 (n.d.)

Table 6. Professional Learning Plan – Tracking the Online Learning Plan.

Name: _____	Date: _____
Please take time to reflect on your professional learning priorities for the year. Reminder—The guiding question for our professional development this year is: “How can I improve student engagement in my classroom?”	
<input type="checkbox"/> <u>Continuing Education Courses/Workshops/Conferences/Webinars</u>	
1. Description of Professional Learning Option:	
If your PLC chooses the continuing education course for your professional learning plan, you will be able to choose from a list of pre-approved 1 credit classes available through UND’s continuing education program. There will be a list of pre-approved courses relating to our goal of improving student engagement in your classroom. You will enroll on <b>September 29<sup>th</sup></b> . Completion of the class is required and a transcript must be submitted to receive reimbursement.	
Course Options:	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• 21<sup>st</sup> Century Tools for Teachers</li><li>• Authentic Innovation in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century Classroom</li><li>• Student Engagement: Inquiry Based (Teacher driven)</li><li>• Differentiation: Inquiry Based (Teacher driven)</li><li>• Other course options: <a href="http://educators.und.edu/onlinecourses/">http://educators.und.edu/onlinecourses/</a> (Must be approved by PD committee)</li></ul>	
2. Identify a focus to improve student engagement.	
You must register for the online course and turn in the continuing education form by <b>September 29<sup>th</sup></b> . Attach form.	
Please discuss the following on <b>January 19<sup>th</sup></b> .	

Table 6. cont.

<p>Course you chose: __</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• What was required of this course?</li><li>• How did this course tie to student engagement?</li><li>• What were the positives of the course?</li><li>• What were the negatives of the course?</li><li>• How do you plan on implementing what you learned to improve student engagement?</li></ul> <p>3. Final Reflection</p> <p>a. Provide evidence that the course made an impact on engagement in your classroom? Please attach evidence of student work, a lesson, data, and an activity that shows evidence of your research for the course. <b>Due March 4, 2014.</b></p> <p>b. Please reflect on your learning this year in terms of your research. How did this improve engagement in your classroom? Please include research based strategies that were used in your classroom this year. <b>Due April 22, 2014.</b> (Minimum of 500 words)</p> <p>Please attach a transcript that includes the course you have taken. The district will reimburse costs of approved courses after it is completed.</p>
--

Source: Rugby Public School District #5 (n.d.)

Table 7. Professional Learning Plan – Tracking the Study Group Plan.

Name: _____	Date: _____
Please take time to reflect on your professional learning priorities for the year. Reminder—The guiding question for our professional development this year is: “How can I improve student engagement in my classroom?”	
<input type="checkbox"/> <u>Study Group</u>	
1. Description of Professional Learning Option:	
If your PLC chooses the study group option, you will identify a focus to improve student engagement within your PLC and obtain research articles or texts that are helpful. You will research and select a book pertaining to your focus area. The book(s) or professional journal article(s) you choose should be research based and target your specific needs for improving student engagement within your classroom. Once texts are chosen, you will need to provide your rationale for the selection. You will then be expected to read, discuss, and implement specific ideas from the book according to the timeline for professional development. You will have put something into practice by <b>January 19, 2015.</b>	
2. Identify a focus to improve student engagement.	
3. Resources: Must include at least one research based book. The district will purchase resources for you. <b><u>All orders must be placed by September 29th.</u></b> PD Mentors will assist in ordering resources. Please list research based book(s) below.	
Research Based Book(s):	
_____	
_____	
_____	

Table 7. cont.

<p>4. What was your rationale in selecting your research based book or books? <b>Due September 29<sup>th</sup>.</b></p> <p>5. Guided Questions</p> <p>How will the research based selections improve student engagement in your classroom? <b>Due September 29<sup>th</sup>.</b></p> <p>Develop a timeline for reading and discussion that aligns with professional development dates.</p> <p>6. Final Reflection</p> <p>a. How will you provide evidence that the research based resources made an impact on your classroom? Please attach evidence of student work, a lesson, and an activity that shows evidence of your research. <b>Due March 4, 2015.</b></p> <p>b. Please reflect on your learning this year in terms of your research. How did this improve engagement in your classroom? Please include research based strategies that were used in your classroom this year. <b>Due April 22, 2015.</b> (Minimum of 500 words)</p>
--

Source: Rugby Public School District #5 (n.d.)

prepared for everything, but a master of nothing. In other words, the program he participated in touched the surface on many areas and failed to provide depth. Principal 6 felt that her classes conformed to her as she passed through the program, because she was a practicing administrator while she worked through her program.

Rural principals in this study were not technically involved with a cohort model in their principal preparation programs, but they were able to build a network of like-minded individuals. At the time of this study, many still stayed in touch with people they met in their preparation program. It may be important to establish cohorts for aspiring leaders in rural areas to create networks for them as they enter the field.

Three of the six rural principals in this study accessed Interactive Television (ITV) services to meet online with their cohort as they progressed through their degree program. They found the ITV hybrid program attractive because the amount of travel for them was minimal. Principal 1 believed the hybrid model was geared towards working administrators. Principal preparation programs should keep travel in mind as many aspiring rural leaders must travel long distances for professional development. Hybrid models that involve online courses mixed with face to face studies might encourage more rural administrators to seek their certification. All six rural principals interviewed were hired for an administrative position prior to the completion of their degree or certification program. The majority of their courses took place over the summer which worked well for them. The hybrid model was popular, but they still preferred face to face course work.

Learning on the job was an important method of learning for each principal. Principal 4 explained that she gained a lot from on the job experience. She said, "Some of the things you're taught in college just aren't realistic in the workplace." Principal 4 expressed a need for more internships in principal preparation programs. She referenced her experience with an aspiring administrator that completed their internship in her school. The individual was surprised by the multiplicity of the job. Principal 2 also



believed that there was more to the job than what their educational system or principal preparation programs teach.

Principal preparation programs should: (a) prepare leaders for suburban, urban, and rural settings; (b) create cohorts for aspiring administrators seeking to become a principal – especially those that come from rural areas due to geographic isolation; (c) provide hybrid programs that mix online courses with face to face courses; and (d) provide more internships where aspiring leaders work side by side with an experienced principal. Aspiring administrators should experience real situations during preparation programs.

### **Recommendation for Future Research**

One possible area of future research might be to conduct a comparison between rural principals and urban principals and focus on advantages and disadvantages of the two jobs. Such research would be critical in determining if there is a difference between rural and urban environmental impacts on principals.

One way to create a comparison between rural and urban principals would be to duplicate the study in this report in an urban setting. This would provide an urban perspective and results of the two studies could be compared.

### **Conclusion**

This research was designed to provide a better understanding of rural principalships. Interviews provided an opportunity to see the world through the eyes of principals working in rural settings. Rural principals wear many hats in their positions and have unique needs. This research has provided recommendations for rural schools, principal preparation programs, and rural principals. The following recommendations

should be used to help better serve students in rural North Dakota where vast distances isolate school leaders:

1. Establish a state mentorship program for new administrators,
2. Support superintendents in developing principals,
3. Develop teacher partnerships,
4. Improve professional development practices in rural schools,
5. Prepare principals for the rural context.

All five areas must be supported by the university system, state associations/agencies, and rural schools.

## **APPENDICES**

## **Appendix A Interview Questions**

### **Barriers, advantages, disadvantages, and resource scarcity**

1. Describe advantages that principals face in rural areas?
  - a. What's good about being a principal in a rural area?
2. What are the challenges that principals face in rural areas?
3. What types of support(s) do you have as a rural principal (remove advantage)?
  - a. Support mechanisms?
  - b. What types of support do you get as a rural principal?
  - c. Probe: Support from district, teachers, families, superintendent?
4. Describe your perceptions about professional development for the principal?
  - a. Who makes decisions for professional development?
  - b. How do you get support for professional development?
  - c. What challenges do you face in terms of professional development?
5. Describe the resources that are available.
  - a. What are the resources for professional development for you and your district?
  - b. What resources would you like there to be?
  - c. What are the challenges of getting resources for professional development?

### **Impact of the rural principalship on the self**

6. Tell me why is it that you have chosen to stay in this position?
  - a. And community?

7. In terms of your personal life, what's it like to live in this area?
  - a. What's it like living in your community?
8. In terms of your professional life, what's it like living in this area?

**Building school and district capacity**

9. How does a superintendent support you?
  - a. What are your challenges you have had working with the superintendent?
10. How do you stay up to date and current with professional development?
11. Based on your own administrative leadership preparation, what are your recommendations about the needs of the rural principal for instructional leadership?
  - a. Can you describe to me your administrative leadership preparation program?  
What did it look like?
  - b. What type of preparation program were you in?
  - c. How do you feel that program prepared or did not prepare you for your role as a rural principal?
  - d. What are your recommendations about the needs of the rural principalship?
12. Throughout your career in administration, describe effective professional development in which you have engaged.
  - a. Describe your professional development and explain what things you feel like were missing?
  - b. What things did you feel like were advantageous?
  - c. What things did you feel like were not advantageous?
13. Is there anything else that you would like to add to our discussion about rural principals or the position?

## **Appendix B District Consent**

Date:

Dear Superintendent:

I am a doctoral candidate at the University of North Dakota. I would like to conduct research with your principal. The purpose of this study is to identify barriers, advantages, disadvantages, and scarcity of resources available for North Dakota rural school principals. I will be interviewing six principals in the state of North Dakota, and I would like access to interview your principal. I would like to conduct this interview onsite for approximately 1-2 hours with as little interruption to principal responsibilities as possible. No names or schools will be identified in this research. I will record your principal, but no one will have access to the recordings except for me, my advisor, and the UND Institutional Review Board. The audio recording will be transcribed, and a copy will be given to your principal for a validity check. I will take notes during the observation. Tentative questions are attached. The data will be kept and destroyed in three years.

There will be no benefits to the principals for being in the study. However, we hope that, other educators will benefit from this study because it may be able to assist rural school principals in their growth as an instructional leader. There are no foreseeable risks to participating in the study, and there will be no cost to the participants. The University of

North Dakota and the research team are receiving no payments from other agencies, organizations, or companies to conduct this research study.

If you will allow me to conduct this research, please sign the bottom of this letter and please contact us if you have any questions. Thank you.

Sincerely,

Michael McNeff

Sherryl Houdek

UND Doctoral Candidate

UND Associate Professor

(701) 840-2629

(701) 777-4255

[Michael.McNeff@sendit.nodak.edu](mailto:Michael.McNeff@sendit.nodak.edu)

[sherryl.houdek@email.und.edu](mailto:sherryl.houdek@email.und.edu)

---

Signature indicating approval of research

---

Date

## **Appendix C Principal Consent**

### **THE UNIVERSITY OF NORTH DAKOTA CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE IN RESEARCH**

**TITLE:** *Rural Principals and Leadership*  
**PROJECT DIRECTOR:** *Michael McNeff*  
**PHONE #** *701-840-2629*  
**DEPARTMENT:** *Educational Leadership*

#### **STATEMENT OF RESEARCH**

A person who is to participate in the research must give his or her informed consent to such participation. This consent must be based on an understanding of the nature and risks of the research. This document provides information that is important for this understanding. Research projects include only subjects who choose to take part. Please take your time in making your decision as to whether to participate. If you have questions at any time, please ask.

#### **WHAT IS THE PURPOSE OF THIS STUDY?**

You are invited to be in a research study about the rural principalship. The purpose of this study is to identify barriers, advantages, disadvantages, scarcity of resources available for North Dakota rural school principals. The researcher will be interviewing 6 to 10 rural principals. You have been chosen because you are a rural principal in a school district with a district enrollment ranging from 250 to 450 students.

The purpose of this research study is to determine how the rural principalship impacts principals in North Dakota.

#### **HOW MANY PEOPLE WILL PARTICIPATE?**

Approximately six to ten rural principals will take part in this study across the state of North Dakota.

#### **HOW LONG WILL I BE IN THIS STUDY?**

The study will last approximately two to three months to generate the data from rural principals. Your participation in the interview will last 60 to 120 minutes. If you consent



to participate the researcher will come to your school site and interview you. Any follow up questions will be completed over the phone.

### **WHAT WILL HAPPEN DURING THIS STUDY?**

1. The researcher will contact the superintendent of the school district first and gain consent to conduct research in the school district.
2. After the researcher is granted a letter of support from the superintendent the researcher will email each rural principal in the district to gain consent from them to participate in the study.
3. The researcher will establish an interview time with the rural principal at their school site.
4. The researcher will interview the principal for 60 to 120 minutes. The researcher will use an audio recorder to record the interview.
5. The interview will be transcribed and no identifiable names will be used.
6. The subject is free to skip any questions that he/she would prefer not to answer.

### **WHAT ARE THE RISKS OF THE STUDY?**

There are no foreseeable risks for participating in the study.

### **WHAT ARE THE BENEFITS OF THIS STUDY?**

You will not benefit personally from being in this study. However, we hope, in the future, to provide recommendations for principal prep programs, rural principals, and school districts.

### **WILL IT COST ME ANYTHING TO BE IN THIS STUDY?**

You will not have any costs for being in this research study.

### **WILL I BE PAID FOR PARTICIPATING?**

You will not be paid for being in this research study.

### **WHO IS FUNDING THE STUDY?**

The University of North Dakota and the research team are receiving no payments from other agencies, organizations, or companies to conduct this research study.

### **CONFIDENTIALITY**

The records of this study will be kept private to the extent permitted by law. In any report about this study that might be published, you will not be identified. Your study

record may be reviewed by Government agencies, the UND Research Development and Compliance office, and the University of North Dakota Institutional Review Board.

Any information that is obtained in this study and that can be identified with you will remain confidential and will be disclosed only with your permission or as required by law.

No identifiable information will be used in this study.

The researcher will keep the audio tapes for three years at his home office and will destroy them after three years. Consent forms and personal data will be kept for three years and will be stored in a locked file cabinet at the researchers place of work. Both the researcher's advisor and UND IRB will have access to those tapes, consent forms, and personal data for that period of time. No names or identifying factors will be used in any publication or presentation.

If we write a report or article about this study, we will describe the study results in a summarized manner so that you cannot be identified.

The subject will have the right to review/edit all recordings, who will have access, if they will be used for educational purposes, and when they will be erased.

### **IS THIS STUDY VOLUNTARY?**

Your participation is voluntary. You may choose not to participate or you may discontinue your participation at any time without penalty or loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled. Your decision whether or not to participate will not affect your current or future relations with the University of North Dakota.

### **CONTACTS AND QUESTIONS?**

The researcher conducting this study is Michael McNeff. You may ask any questions you have now. If you later have questions, concerns, or complaints about the research please contact Michael McNeff at 701-840-2629. You may also contact my advisor Sherryl Houdek at 701-777-2394.

If you have questions regarding your rights as a research subject, you may contact The University of North Dakota Institutional Review Board at **(701) 777-4279**.

- You may also call this number about any problems, complaints, or concerns you have about this research study.
- You may also call this number if you cannot reach research staff, or you wish to talk with someone who is independent of the research team.

- General information about being a research subject can be found by clicking “Information for Research Participants” on the web site:  
<http://und.edu/research/resources/human-subjects/research-participants.cfm>

***[If applicable]* I give consent to be audiotaped during this study.**

**Please initial:**         Yes         No

***[If applicable]* I give consent to be videotaped during this study.**

**Please initial:**         Yes         No

***[If applicable]* I give consent to be photographed during this study.**

**Please initial:**         Yes         No

***[If applicable]* I give consent for my quotes to be used in the research; however I will not be identified.**

**Please initial:**         Yes         No

Your signature indicates that this research study has been explained to you, that your questions have been answered, and that you agree to take part in this study. You will receive a copy of this form.

Subjects Name: \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature of Subject

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

I have discussed the above points with the subject or, where appropriate, with the subject’s legally authorized representative.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature of Person Who Obtained Consent

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

## REFERENCES

- Anderson, K. D. (2008, Spring). Transformational teacher leadership in rural schools. *The Rural Educator*, 29(3), 8-17.
- Anderson, M., & White, S. (2011, August). Resourcing change in small schools. *Australian Journal of Education*, 55(1), 50-61.
- Arnold, M. L., Newman, J. H., Gaddy, B. B., & Dean, C. B. (2005, April). A look at the condition of rural education research: Setting a direction for future research. *Journal of Research in Rural Education*, 20(6), 1-25.
- Ashton, B., & Duncan, H. E. (2012, Fall). A beginning rural principal's toolkit: A guide for success. *Rural Educator*, 34(1), 1-13.
- Barber, M., & Mourshed, M. (2007). *How the world's best performing school systems come out on top*. London: McKinsey and Company.
- Bard, J., Gardener, C., & Wieland, R. (2006, Winter). National Rural Education Association Report: Rural school consolidation: History, research summary, conclusions, and recommendations. *The Rural Educator*, 17(2), 40-48.
- Barley, Z. A., & Beesley, A. D. (2007). Rural school success: What can we learn? *Journal of Research in Rural Education*, 22(1), 1-16.
- Bauch, P. A. (2000, April). School-community partnerships in rural schools: Leadership, renewal, and a sense of place. *Peabody Journal of Education*, 76(2), 204-221.
- Berry, A. B. (2012, Spring). The relationship of perceived support to satisfaction and commitment for special education teachers in rural areas. *Rural Special Education Quarterly*, 31(1), 3-14.
- Berry, A. B., Petrin, R. A., Gravelle, M. L., & Farmer, T. W. (2011, Winter). Issues in special education teacher recruitment, retention, and professional development: Considerations in supporting rural teachers. *Rural Special Education Quarterly*, 30(4), 3-11.

- Bizzell, B. E. (2011). *Professional development of school principals in the rural Appalachian region of Virginia* (Doctoral dissertation, Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University). Retrieved from [http://scholar.lib.vt.edu/theses/available/etd-03202011-093016/unrestricted/Bizzell\\_BE\\_D\\_2011.pdf](http://scholar.lib.vt.edu/theses/available/etd-03202011-093016/unrestricted/Bizzell_BE_D_2011.pdf)
- Browne-Ferrigno, T., & Allen, L. W. (2006). Preparing principals for high-need rural schools: A central office perspective about collaborative efforts to transform school leadership. *Journal of Research in Rural Education*, 21(1), 1-16. Retrieved from [http://illinoischoolleader.org/advisory\\_committee/documents/Browne-FerrignoAllen.pdf](http://illinoischoolleader.org/advisory_committee/documents/Browne-FerrignoAllen.pdf)
- Budge, K. (2006, May). Rural leaders, rural places: Problem, privilege, and possibility. *Journal of Research in Rural Education*, 21(13), 1-10. Retrieved from [http://www.nwp.org/cs/public/download/nwp\\_file/10544/kbudge\\_ruralleaders.pdf?x-r=pcfile\\_d](http://www.nwp.org/cs/public/download/nwp_file/10544/kbudge_ruralleaders.pdf?x-r=pcfile_d)
- Cahape-Hammer, P., Hughes, G., McClure, C., Reeves, C., & Salgado, D. (2005, December). *Rural teacher recruitment and retention practices: A review of the research literature, National Survey of Rural Superintendents, and case studies of programs in Virginia*. Charleston, WV: Edvantia.
- Canales, M. T., Tejada-Delgado, C., & Slate, J. R. (2008). Leadership behaviors of superintendent/principals in small, rural school districts in Texas. *The Rural Educator*, 29(3), 1-7.
- Chance, E., & Lingren, C. (1989). The great plains rural secondary principal: Aspirations and reality. *Research in Rural Education*, 6(1), 7-11.
- Chance, P. L., & Segura, S. N. (2009). A rural high school's collaborative approach to school improvement. *Journal of Research in Rural Education*, 24(5), 1-12.
- Clarke, S., & Stevens, E. (2009). *Sustainable leadership in small rural schools: Selected Australian vignettes* [Author manuscript version]. Retrieved from [http://www98.griffith.edu.au/dspace/bitstream/handle/10072/30334/62826\\_1.pdf?sequence=1](http://www98.griffith.edu.au/dspace/bitstream/handle/10072/30334/62826_1.pdf?sequence=1)
- Clarke, S., & Wildy, H. (2011, August). Improving the small rural or remote school: The role of the district. *Australian Journal of education*, 55(1), 24-36.
- Cruzeiro, P. A., & Boone, M. (2009, Fall). Rural and small school principal candidates: Perspectives of hiring superintendents. *The Rural Educator*, 31(1), 1-9.
- Dufour, R., Dufour, R., Eaker, R., & Karhanek, G. (2004). *Whatever it takes: How professional learning communities respond when kids don't learn*. Bloomington, IN: Solution Tree Press.

- Dufour, R., Dufour, R., Eaker, R., & Many, T. (2006). *Learning by doing: A handbook for professional learning communities at work*. Bloomington, IN: Solution Tree Press.
- Eaker, R., & Keating, J. (2009, March 17). *I'm the only one teaching this course. How do I collaborate?* [Web log post]. Retrieved from All Things PLC Web site: <http://www.allthingsplc.info/blog/view/43/I%26rsquo%3Bm+the+Only+One+Teaching+This+Course.+How+Do+I+Collaborate%3F>
- Eckert, L. S., & Petrone, R. (2013, October). Extending the conversation: Raising issues of rurality in English teacher education. *English Education*, 46(1), 68-81.
- Erwin, S., Winn, P., & Erwin, J. (2010). A comparison of urban, suburban, and rural principal leadership skills by campus student achievement level. *Administrative Issues Journal: Education, Practice, and Research*, 1(2), 3-17.
- Ferriter, W. M. (2011, May 30). *Small schools and singletons: Structuring meaningful professional learning teams for every teacher*. Retrieved from Slideshare Web site: <http://www.slideshare.net/wferriter/plcs-for-singletons-and-teachers-in-small-schools>
- Ferriter, W. M., Ramsden, J. T., & Sheninger, E. C. (2011). *Communicating & connecting with social media*. Bloomington, IN: Solution Tree Press.
- Fornier, M., Palmer-Bierlein, L., & Reeves, P. (2012). Leadership practices of effective rural superintendents: Connections to Waters and Marzano's leadership correlates. *Journal of Research in Rural Education*, 27(8), 1-13.
- Giorgi, A. (2009). *The descriptive phenomenological method in psychology: A modified Husserlian approach*. Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press.
- Graham, L., Paterson, D., & Miller, J. (2008, March). *Leadership in Australian rural schools: Bush track, fast track*. Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association, New York City, NY. Retrieved from <http://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED502757.pdf>
- Hamel, C., Allaire, S., & Turcotte, S. (2012). Just-in-time online professional development activities for an innovation in small rural schools. *Canadian Journal of Learning and Technology*, 38(3), 1-20.
- Harmon, H. L., & Schafft, K. (2009, Spring). Rural school leadership for collaborative community development. *The Rural Educator*, 30(3), 4-9.
- Harmon, H. L., Gordanier, J., Henry, L., & George, A. (2007, Winter). Changing teaching practices in rural schools. *The Rural Educator*, 28(2), 8-12.

- Herbert, M. (2012, April). Why all the chatter about #edchat. *District Administration*, 51-54. Retrieved from <http://www.nxtbook.com/nxtbooks/pmg/da0412/#/52>
- Hodges, G. W., Tippins, D., & Oliver, J. S. (2013, October). A study of highly qualified science teachers' career trajectory in the deep, rural south: Examining a link between deprofessionalization and teacher dissatisfaction. *School Science and Mathematics*, 113(6), 263-274.
- Huysman, J. T. (2007). *Rural teacher satisfaction: An analysis of beliefs and attitudes of rural teachers' job satisfaction* (Doctoral dissertation, University of Central Florida). Retrieved from [http://etd.fcla.edu/CF/CFE0001656/Huysman\\_John\\_T\\_200705\\_EdD.pdf](http://etd.fcla.edu/CF/CFE0001656/Huysman_John_T_200705_EdD.pdf)
- Jimerson, L. (2006a, February). *Breaking the fall: Cushioning the impact of rural declining enrollment*. Arlington: Rural School and Community Trust.
- Jimerson, L. (2006b, August). *The hobbit effect: Why small works in public schools*. Arlington: Rural School and Community Trust.
- Keaton, P. (2012, October). Numbers and types of public elementary and secondary schools from the common core of data: School year 2010-2011 (NCES 2012-325rev). Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics. Retrieved September 16, 2014, from <http://nces.ed.gov/pubs2012/2012325rev.pdf>
- Knight, J. (with Fullan, M.). (2011). *Unmistakable impact: A partnership approach for dramatically improving instruction*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin.
- Kouzes, J. M., & Posner, B. Z. (2007). *The leadership challenge* (4<sup>th</sup> ed.). San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Laub, J., & O'Connor, R. (2009). Leadership for rural schools - the postmodern challenge to theory and practice of educational leadership strategies. *The John Ben Sheppard Journal of Practical Leadership*, 4(1), 151-157.
- Leithwood, K., Seashore Louis, K., Anderson, S., & Wahlstrom, K. (2004). *How leadership influences student learning*. New York: The Wallace Foundation.
- Loveland, E. (2002, December). Challenges and rewards of rural school leadership. *Rural Roots*, 3(6), 1, 6-9. Retrieved from [http://www.mediabistro.com/portfolios/samples\\_files/37930\\_N9wkVXg\\_Q\\_tuRwOdfJNZSKI8A.pdf](http://www.mediabistro.com/portfolios/samples_files/37930_N9wkVXg_Q_tuRwOdfJNZSKI8A.pdf)
- Lowe, J. M. (2006, Winter). Rural education: Attracting and retaining teachers in small schools. *The Rural Educator*, 27(2), 28-32.

- Luessen, D. (2014, March 4). Budget cut complaints: JPS foreign language program cuts concern supporters. *The Jamestown Sun*. Retrieved from <http://www.jamestownsun.com/content/budget-cut-complaints-jps-foreign-language-program-cuts-concern-supporters>
- Malloy, W. W., & Allen, T. (2007, Winter). Teacher retention in a teacher resiliency-building rural school. *The Rural Educator*, 28(2), 19-27.
- Masumoto, M., & Brown-Welty, S. (2009). Case study of leadership practices and school-community interrelationships in high-performing, high-poverty, rural California high schools. *Journal of Research in Rural Education*, 24(1), 1-18. Retrieved from <http://jrre.vmhost.psu.edu/wp-content/uploads/2014/02/24-1.pdf>
- McCloud, B. (2005). *Preparing leaders for rural schools: Practice and policy considerations*. Washington, DC: Institute for Educational Leadership.
- Monk, D. H. (2007, Spring). Recruiting and retaining high-quality teachers in rural areas. *The Future of Children*, 17(1), 155-174.
- Msila, V. (2010). Rural school principals' quest for effectiveness: Lessons from the field. *Journal of Education*, 48, 169-189.
- No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act of 2001, Pub. L. No. 107-110, 115 Stat. 1425 (2001). Retrieved from <http://www2.ed.gov/policy/elsec/leg/esea02/107-110.pdf>
- North Dakota Department of Public Instruction. (2014, February 4). *Principal and teacher evaluation in North Dakota*. Retrieved from ND DPI Web site: <http://www.dpi.state.nd.us/approve/PTESS/faq.pdf>
- North Dakota High School Activities Association. (2014, July). *Constitution & bylaws and handbook of interpretations*. Retrieved from [http://www.ndhsaa.com/files/Constitution\\_and\\_ByLaws.pdf](http://www.ndhsaa.com/files/Constitution_and_ByLaws.pdf)
- O'Hare, W. P., & Johnson, K. M. (2004, March). *Child poverty in rural America* (Population Reference Bureau Reports on America). Washington, DC: Population Reference Bureau.
- Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development [OECD]. (n.d.). *Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA): Background and basics* [under PISA FAQ]. Retrieved from <http://www.oecd.org/pisa/pisafaq/>
- Powell, D., Higgins, H. J., Aram, R., & Freed, A. (2009, Fall). Impact of No Child Left Behind on curriculum and instruction in rural schools. *The Rural Educator*, 31(1), 19-28.



- Reeves, C. (2003). *Implementing the No Child Left Behind Act: Implications for rural schools and districts*. Naperville, IL: North Central Regional Educational Laboratory.
- Renihan, P., & Noonan, B. (2012, Spring/Summer). Principals as assessment leaders in rural schools. *Rural Educator*, 33(3), 1-8.
- Rice, J. K. (2010, April). Principal effectiveness and leadership in an era of accountability: What research says. *National Center for Analysis of Longitudinal Data in Education Research (Brief 8)*, 1-6. Retrieved from [http://www.urban.org/uploadedpdf/1001370\\_principal\\_effectiveness.pdf](http://www.urban.org/uploadedpdf/1001370_principal_effectiveness.pdf)
- Rugby Public School District #5. (n.d.). *Supervision and evaluation program* [Unpublished Professional Learning Plan]. Rugby, ND: Author. Retrieved from <https://www.dropbox.com/sh/vw2e5pf1s6qk8vk/AABTwe1K2D2qr-e4N0mME1BYa/Professional%20Learning%20Plan.docx?dl=0>
- Salazar, P. (2007, Spring). The professional development needs of rural high school principals: A seven-state study. *The Rural Educator*, 28(3), 20-27.
- Schwartz, K. (2014, February 10). *Think big: How to jumpstart tech use in low-income schools*. Retrieved from Mind/Shift How we will learn Web site: <http://blogs.kqed.org/mindshift/2014/02/think-big-how-to-jumpstart-tech-use-in-low-income-schools/>
- Slavin, R. E. (2007). *Educational research in an age of accountability*. Boston: Pearson Education, Inc.
- Starr, K., & White, S. (2008). The small rural school principalship: Key challenges and cross-school responses. *Journal of Research in Rural Education*, 23(5), 1-12. Retrieved from <http://jrre.vhost.psu.edu/wp-content/uploads/2014/02/23-5.pdf>
- Stevens, W. D. (2008, April). *If small is not enough . . . ? : The characteristics of successful small high schools in Chicago*. Chicago, IL: Consortium on Chicago School Research at the University of Chicago. Retrieved from <http://ccsr.uchicago.edu/sites/default/files/publications/SmallSchoolsApr2008.pdf>
- Tarte, J. (2011, January 11). *10 steps for educators new to Twitter*. Retrieved from Life of an Educator by Dr. Justin Tarte Web site: <http://www.justintarte.com/2011/01/10-steps-for-educators-new-to-twitter.html>
- Theobald, P., & Nachtigal, P. (1995). *Culture, community, and the promise of rural education* (ERIC Document Reproduction Service No. ED388464). Retrieved from <http://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED388464.pdf>

- Togneri, W. (2003, March). *Beyond islands of excellence: What districts can do to improve instruction and achievement in all schools - A leadership brief* (Stock No. 303369). Washington, DC: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development (ASCD).
- Wallin, D., & Newton, P. (2013). Instructional leadership of the rural teaching principal: Double the trouble or twice the fun? *International Studies in Educational Administration*, 41(2), 19-31.
- Waters, T. J., & Marzano, R. J. (2006). *School district leadership that works: The effects of superintendent leadership on student achievement*. Denver, CO: Mid-continent Research for Education and Learning (McREL).
- Wertz, F. J., Charmaz, K., McMullen, L. M., Josselson, R., Anderson, R., & McSpadden, E. (2011). *Five ways of doing qualitative analysis: Phenomenological Psychology, Grounded Theory, Discourse Analysis, Narrative Research, and Intuitive Inquiry*. New York: The Guilford Press.
- White, S., Lock, G., Hastings, W., Reid, J.-A., Green, B., & Cooper, M. (2009). *Supporting beginning rural teachers: Lessons from successful schools*. Refereed paper presented at the "Teacher education crossing borders: Cultures, contexts, communities and curriculum" annual conference of the Australian Teacher Education Association (ATEA), Albury, New South Wales. Retrieved from <http://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED524706.pdf>
- Witte, A. L., & Sheridan, S. M. (2011, June). *Family engagement in rural schools* (R<sup>2</sup>Ed Working Paper No. 2011-2). Retrieved from National Center for Research on Rural Education Web site: [http://r2ed.unl.edu/workingpapers/2011/2011\\_2\\_Witte\\_Sheridan.pdf](http://r2ed.unl.edu/workingpapers/2011/2011_2_Witte_Sheridan.pdf)
- Young, A. (2009). Using common assessments in uncommon courses. In T. R. Guskey (Ed.), *The teacher as assessment leader* (pp. 135-154). Bloomington, IN: Solution Tree Press.