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Identifying and Allocating Resources for Learning Improvement: A Study of Sustainably Improving Rural Schools

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This article investigates efforts by rural superintendents and rural principals to identify and leverage the local resources available to them to support learning improvement agendas within their schools. This study investigates practices within a diverse range of rural schools located in Washington State to understand how resources can be identified and allocated to best support student learning. In addition, this article explores the importance of family and community engagement in administrators' school improvement agendas. The conceptual framework for this study is informed by literature investigating resource allocation for educational improvement. This study was designed to better understand how rural education leaders identify, leverage, and allocate supports and resources, particularly those available within their immediate communities, to meet the needs of their staff and students. The rural schools represented in this study demonstrate trends in student achievement gains, despite challenges facing rural schools, such as increasing economic stratification in rural communities and diseconomies of scale in operating small schools and districts. Administrators meet these challenges by (a) maximizing teacher's instructional time through assuming duties often performed by nonadministrative personnel in other settings, thereby reaffirming the particularly multifaceted nature of rural school leadership; (b) forging formal and informal partnerships within the immediate community and geographic region to support student learning; and (c) leveraging the interconnected nature of rural communities in ways that increase community engagement in schools. Thoughtful community engagement strategies help manage the external politics of resource distribution within schools and ultimately materialize support for student learning.

***Keywords*: rural education, rural principals, rural superintendents, resource identification, community engagement, school improvement**

Approximately one-third (32.9%) of the nation's schools are located in rural districts (Johnson, Showalter, Klein, & Lester, 2014), and more than 8.9 million U.S. students attend rural schools, which makes rural school enrollment larger than the enrollment of New York, Los Angeles, Chicago, and the next seventy-five largest districts combined (Showalter, Klein, Johnson, & Hartman, 2017). These districts are becoming more diverse: racial and ethnic minorities represented 83% of the population growth in rural counties between the 2000 and 2010 census (Johnson, 2012). Additionally, as upwardly mobile residents continue to move away from rural communities, the remaining population is less affluent, which may impact the likelihood of local schools meeting federal mandates and targets (Jimerson, 2005). Rural schools, like their urban counterparts, educate students where high rates of poverty impact educational offerings and students' academic achievement (Bouck, 2004), but discourse regarding educational equity often focuses exclusively on urban communities (Corbett, 2007). The purpose of this study is to identify rural

schools that are demonstrating improvement in students' academic achievement and to better understand the ways in which administrators in these successful schools seek and distribute resources to support learning improvement efforts.

Extended Change in Rural America

Rural populations have been in decline in many areas over the last 75 years, and rural America continues to experience significant change in the 21st century (Harmon & Schafft, 2009). In particular, employment opportunities and economic development are limited in many rural regions (Dayton, 1999; Howley, Pendarvis, & Woodrum, 2005). Though rural industries around the nation are quite diverse, they have all been subject to ongoing economic hardship (Budge, 2006; Howley et al., 2005; Mathis, 2003; McGranahan, 1994; Showalter et al., 2017). Additionally, the rural experience is not valued by dominant culture (Budge, 2006), and this dynamic disempowers those living in rural communities (Nachtigal, 1995). As a result, policy makers are often unaware of the important role that schools play in rural communities (Morton & Harmon, 2011). As Budge (2006) notes, the economic distress in many rural communities contributes to social problems that, in turn, impact rural schools and the achievement of students in those schools. It falls to many rural principals to protect their students from marginalization and to identify services for students living in poverty, including homeless students, undocumented students, and children of migrant workers.

The Dimensions of Rural School Leadership

Schools in many rural communities are more than a place to receive an education; they serve as social and cultural hubs for the community and surrounding area. As a result, the vision for local schools is often closely tied to individual community values (Hardré, 2007). Residents see schools as a critical part of their local infrastructure and as an institution that gives them a sense of community and identity (Abshier, Harris, & Hopson, 2011). The tight coupling between schools and communities increases the scrutiny that rural administrators may face. For example, civic organizations, special interest groups, and influential individuals can all play an active role in rural schools and communities (Farmer, 2009), and these individuals and groups may pursue a narrowly focused, potentially adversarial, agenda (Kersten & Ballenger, 2012).

All education leaders must work with an array of stakeholders to marshal sometimes competing interests to support the goals of schools. Rural superintendents, in particular, face potential political challenges when resources become strained (Lochmiller, 2015). Exacerbating these challenges, rural schools and administrators are often positioned between the values of local traditions and state and federal policies (Howley et al., 2005). For example, unrealistic federal expectations are among the top challenges articulated by rural school district personnel (Morton & Harmon, 2011). As a result, many small district superintendents experience difficulty when attempting to align local priorities with state and federal government mandates (Alsbury & Whitaker, 2015).

Rural schools often compete with other local entities for valuable resources, and to do so successfully, administrators must build partnerships with stakeholders that will support the district's goals (Farmer, 2009). As a result, successful rural superintendents must be outgoing in their approach to community relations and, in particular, their interactions with the local board of education (Cooper, Fusarelli, & Carella, 2000). Public relations skills are important for educational leaders who seek to push change in schools (Lamkin, 2006). In particular, administrators may find themselves in a difficult position when it is necessary to eliminate prized local education programs to support curriculum that will appear on mandated, standardized tests (Howley et al., 2005). Yet, with an emphasis on building and sustaining connections to the community, rural education leaders can leverage their visibility to foster the rapport necessary for rural school leadership (Ashton & Duncan, 2012).

Rural Resource Gap

Rural America is experiencing social change without the resources to address such challenges (Hardré, 2007). Per pupil costs are higher in smaller schools (Thorson & Edmondson, 2000), and higher per pupil expenditures are associated with expenses ranging from instruction to transportation

(Levin, Manship, Chambers, Johnson, & Blankenship, 2011). Such costs lead to cuts in what schools are able to offer students, from course options to the updated facilities more common in bigger and wealthier districts (Lee, 2003). These dynamics present challenges for educators, particularly since children living in poverty typically require additional investment from their schools to succeed (Howley et al., 2005). Resources for education and the attention of policy makers for issues devoted to education are finite. As Dayton (1999) notes, disadvantaged rural schools are in competition with their urban counterparts for financial resources, and in this competition the urban districts have significant political and fiscal advantages. For example, a strategic advantage enjoyed by urban districts is their ability to form financial partnerships with the private sector (Farmer, 2009). In most cases, rural schools simply do not benefit from the same variety of philanthropic safety nets common in many urban areas.

Conceptual Framework

Aligning resources to learning improvement goals is not a linear process reflecting resource inputs and achievement outcomes; rather, it is a multidimensional process involving specific goals and the allocation of fiscal and nonfiscal resources to achieve those goals (Pan, Rudo, Schneider, & Smith-Hansen, 2003). The work of rural superintendents is "very much about identifying, managing, and responding to the political forces surrounding their leadership" (Lochmiller, 2015, p. 132). Leaders looking to enact a long-term, sustainable learning improvement agenda often view the distribution of resources as investing in that agenda over the long term (Knapp, Honig, Plecki, Portin, & Copland, 2014). As leaders consider these investments in their learning improvement agendas, they must take care to maximize that investment. Plecki and Knapp (2014) stress the importance of leaders' efforts to evaluate the impact of their investment strategy and to adjust on an ongoing cycle. City (2008, p. 154) emphasizes the need for educators to make resource allocation decisions with "purpose and priority" and to develop a rationale for choosing one option over others. As City posits, resource use and school improvement drive each other.

Plecki, Alejano, Knapp, and Lochmiller (2006) identify the three basic categories of resources, money, human capital, and time, and stress that all resources and resource uses are linked and depend on the others for intended outcomes. Pan et al. (2003) provide additional layers to the types of resources that drive allocation practices targeting student learning. In addition to money, staff, and time, additional resources include physical resources and parents and the community. These additional resource typologies are of particular importance to this study because material resources, such as educational technology equipment supporting Internet connectivity, are a pressing need for many rural districts (Consortium for School Networking, 2015). In addition, considering the unique supports that families and local communities provide schools and better understanding how education leaders can leverage these resources to support teaching and learning are key components of rural school improvement work.

Resource Allocation

Resource allocation describes the way in which "fiscal and non-fiscal resources are divided between competing needs and expended for educational purposes" (Pan et al., 2003, p. 5), and a resource allocation strategy targets connecting resources to learning through professional knowledge and implementation (Adams, 2010b). Decisions about resources occur within the school but also within the policy and community contexts in which the school is situated (Adams, 2010a). As a result, individual school and district leaders must navigate the formal structures governing their operations, including district, state, and federal policies, and the broad politics of shepherding their learning improvement agendas through community buy-in and school or district implementation.

Plecki et al. (2006) provide a framework for considering key allocation issues in relation to learning improvement: (a) targeting achievement gaps, (b) organizing schools and districts to enable the alignment of resources with learning improvement agendas, (c) managing the politics of learning-focused leadership, and (d) developing the human capital of the school or district. These

resource allocation issues "are intertwined and cannot be addressed in isolation" (Plecki et al., 2006, p. 11). Aligning resources to learning goals for students requires using the goals as a guide for decision making and as a protective tool against competing interests (Adams, 2010b).

Targeting achievement gaps. Leaders can target resource allocation decisions to close achievement gaps by first examining disaggregated data and identifying needs, priorities, and goals for students within the context of the school or district. Sustaining targeted improvement efforts requires the ongoing collection and analysis of student data that ties resources to student performance outcomes (Pan et al., 2003).

Organization to support alignment of resources and agendas. Plecki et al. (2006) emphasize the importance of structuring time, staff, and programs to collectively emphasize learning improvement priorities. To do this, leaders must first take stock of the resources available to them and to identify how resources might be better allocated to support priorities for students instead of fulfilling allocation patterns dictated by tradition (Pan et al., 2003). Changing these components requires shifting norms to defy tradition, and tradition is a significant constraint facing leaders (City, 2008; Miles & Darling-Hammond, 1998).

Political dimensions of learning-focused leadership. The acts of reorganizing school and district structures and reallocating resources are likely to draw the attention and scrutiny of community stakeholders. As a result, in addition to cohesive allocation of resources to address targeted needs, it is critical for leaders to articulate their agenda to the community by communicating the "needs, priorities, goals, and strategies" of their plan (Pan et al., 2003, p. 82).

Developing human capital as a resource. As schools and districts are reorganized to better orient operations for improved opportunities for students, instructional, and noninstructional staff must also pivot their work and continue to develop skills and deepen expertise. Reorganizing staff with differentiated roles to better support teaching and learning is one way leaders can leverage their team for maximum impact (Miles & Ferris, 2015).

Not only are school and district leaders charged with making important decisions about allocating the resources available to their context, but they must also seek new resource streams and opportunities that will lead to resource-rich partnerships. In this light, leaders are not only the decision makers for allocating resources but also the "trust builders, articulators of guiding visions, mobilizers of energy, and developers of professional capital in pursuit of learning improvement goals" (Plecki & Knapp, 2014, p. 126). Leaders' ability to articulate a clear vision for learning improvement and the ability to build trust and capacity among stakeholders for executing that vision are critical skills for leading school improvement work (City, 2008). Therefore, this study was designed to better understand (a) how rural education leaders identify, leverage, and allocate supports and resources, particularly those available within their immediate communities, to meet the needs of their staff and students; and (b) how these leaders incorporate their strategies into their overarching school improvement agendas.

Methodology

Three of nine education service agency (ESA) regions in Washington State were selected to emphasize a purposeful sample population. These regions represent the state's variety of geographic and economic diversity and include an area surrounding an interstate corridor, an area isolated by a mountain range, and an area impacted by bodies of water and mountains. The ESA regions include a total of 79 school districts, and all schools designated as *rural* by the National Center for Education Statistics were isolated using 2010 census locale codes as reported in the Common Core of Data (U.S. Department of Education, 2014). The lack of a common definition of *rural* in education research can complicate comparing results across studies on rural issues (Arnold, Newman, Gaddy, & Dean, 2005), so employing locale codes strengthens the transparency of this study.

Next, the Washington State Achievement Index score for each rural school in the 79 districts was analyzed (Washington State Board of Education, 2016). The Achievement Index score represents a composite of students' proficiency on statewide

standardized tests, student growth specifically in reading and math, and, for high schools, college and career readiness standards, including 5-year cohort graduation rates. Scores from the 2010–2011, 2011–2012, 2012–2013, and 2013–2014 school years were analyzed for schools with an upward trend in achievement scores. A limitation of this study is that a minority of the schools had increases and slight dips in their Achievement Index scores. These schools were not excluded from the study; instead, this added to the context of the interviews. Jimerson (2005) notes the volatility of scores in small and rural schools, due to the potential impact one or two scores could have on averages, so this study identified an upward trend as an indicator of general improvement. Stapel and DeYoung (2011) note that research on rural schools often lacks a focus on academic performance. Therefore, Achievement Index scores were employed as a method for creating a bounded system with an emphasis on academic achievement (Merriam, 2009).

In addition to representing the variety of geographic locations in Washington State, the elementary and secondary school sites selected also represent a range of diversity, socioeconomic status, and school size. For example, school enrollment ranged from less than 100 students to nearly 600. Students' free and reduced-price lunch eligibility ranged from 32% to 78%, with six of the eight schools above the state average of approximately 43%. The population of nonwhite students in the schools ranged from 17% to 96%, representing the spectrum of demographics found in Washington's rural communities (Washington State Office of the Superintendent of Public Instruction, 2018).

This study engaged eight schools from seven districts, and data consisted of semistructured interviews with seven principals, six superintendents, and one principal/superintendent. These schools were distributed across the three ESAs, as were interviews with 16 ESA administrators, including ESA superintendents, assistant superintendents for teaching and learning, school improvement administrators, special education administrators, and content specialists. These interviews provided opportunities to triangulate principal and superintendent perspectives and to gain rich context for each ESA region. Interviews lasted between 45 and 90 minutes, and with the exception of one district superintendent and one ESA assistant superintendent, all were conducted in-person in schools and district offices. Visiting communities provided rich context for this study, and the semistructured interview protocol engaged leaders in conversation regarding their learning improvement agendas within schools, their community's expectations for students, and the ways in which leaders identify resources within their community.

Similar to the diversity of the regions and communities represented in the study, participating administrators were diverse in age, gender, years of experience, and their time within their community. The leaders in communities closer to an interstate or located close to resort destinations were less likely to be native to those communities, whereas participants in the most remote locations tended to be from those communities or to have been long-time residents. Participating administrators were veteran educators, and several administrators across the schools, districts, and ESAs were planning retirement within the next few years. Within local districts, one principal was an early career administrator, and one superintendent was an early career superintendent but had prior district leadership experience.

All interviews were transcribed and analyzed using open and axial coding (Strauss & Corbin, 1998) and the general inductive method (Thomas, 2006). Following coding, memos for school, district, and ESA administrators were composed, followed by integrative memos (Emerson, Fretz, & Shaw, 1995). This facilitated the linking of coding categories and themes emerging from the data within and across ESA regions. Finally, document analysis was also used to better understand ESA, district, and school resources and outreach to families and communities.

Findings and Discussion

Analysis for this study uncovered three key themes regarding resource identification and allocation practices for rural schools that are

demonstrating positive trends in student achievement. According to state Achievement Index classifications, when comparing the first year included in the study (2010–2011) to the final year (2013–2014), one school moved from being in the *bottom five percent* of schools in the state to *fair* performance; two schools moved from *fair* to *good* performance; one school from *good* to *very good* performance; two schools from *very good* to *excellent* performance; and two schools remained static in their qualifying categories of *good* and *excellent* during the final year but experienced gains within the classification bands at various points across the years.

While discussing improvement strategies, many administrators noted efforts to channel funds for staffing, facilities, and supplies in ways that support student learning (e.g., after-school tutoring, arts offerings, and community building), which we explore in the sections below, but the following themes specifically address the practices connected to the rural nature of these schools. First, findings reaffirm the multifaceted nature of rural school leadership and suggest that leaders actively assume additional duties to protect teachers' instructional time. Second, principals and superintendents forge formal and informal partnerships that result in added capacity for supporting schools and student learning. Finally, administrators actively engage the community in the life of the school with an emphasis on building widespread investment in students' academic success. These overarching themes surfaced across all sites but were carried out in varied ways, distinctive to individual communities, as explored below.

Doing It All to Stretch Resources

Findings from this study suggest that administrators assume additional duties that would be spread across multiple positions in a larger district. As one principal, who also leads another school, noted while speaking about assisting janitorial and maintenance work, "In a small school, I have to do a lot more things. I don't have the personnel." Administrators assume additional duties out of necessity but also as a conscious decision to buffer noninstructional requests of teachers' time, thereby protecting finite instructional resources. Examples include principals creating instructional materials, superintendents and principals facilitating routine family contact, and principals assuming functions that typically provide release time for teachers in other schools, such as testing coordinator duties. The majority of districts do not employ content coaches, so principals are largely responsible for providing all job-embedded supports to teachers. Despite principals' deep involvement in instructional mechanics, teacher leader duties are critical to school operations and are distributed widely across staff in these schools.

The principals discussed the many efforts of teachers to prepare for Common Core State Standards integration, administration of new student assessments, and new teacher evaluation frameworks. Therefore, in light of these increasing demands on teachers, principals felt that it was necessary to ease the burden on teachers by sharing in instructional activities. The work of completing additional tasks to free teachers' time is another duty administrators must assume in addition to the multitasking required of rural administrators noted in previous scholarship (Jacobson, 1988; Jones & Howley, 2009; Lamkin, 2006; Renihan & Noonan, 2012).

All principals discussed their work to lead professional development in their schools, and all administrators discussed the challenges that remoteness posed in building school and district-wide capacity for improving instruction. In particular, being so far removed from professional development offerings limited the ability of teachers and administrators to seek outside professional development, and this is typical for rural educators (Reaves & Larmer, 1996). Therefore, administrators emphasize the resources available to their schools at varying expenses, including ESA-employed regional content workshops, summer seminars for teachers, and principal-led professional development.

Due to substitute shortages across the three ESA regions, several administrators discussed their general inability to encourage, or even allow, teachers to travel for professional development during the school year. Yet, principals are seeking

opportunities to provide teachers with release time. For example, one principal has emphasized collegial teaching observations across the staff and spends her time teaching in classrooms so teachers can observe one another's instruction. In these cases, the administrators are working to build their expertise as they provide much of the professional development that content coaches or assessment coordinators might provide in larger districts. This allows the administrators to buffer external requests of teachers' time and to keep their staff up-to-date with shifting professional expectations and promising practices. This requires administrators to negotiate the internal and external demands on teachers as they plan for strategic resource use that prioritizes professional learning for teachers.

One small, remote school has reorganized staff to better utilize existing resources (Miles & Ferris, 2015). In doing so, they have created opportunities for teachers to collaborate in professional learning communities across grades and content areas with an emphasis on addressing school-wide learning priorities, such as Common Core reading strategies. In one example, specialty area teachers (e.g., physical education, shop, business) initially engaged their students in text analysis lessons along with their core-content colleagues, but teachers and administration worked to find a more meaningful way to support students' learning. In this case, they identified a group of 20 juniors and seniors in need of additional assistance and spent professional learning community time providing academic and social supports for students instead of spending time on instructional strategies with limited relevance to their instruction. The administrators stressed that the teachers did implement the reading strategies in their classrooms, but their dean of students (a former PE teacher) developed the idea because he recognized a need to use existing resources in a more meaningful way. As the principal/superintendent explained,

It is really about empowering: Adults helping kids become empowered to control their own academic success, their behavior, their personal success, and somehow trying to figure out how to integrate that all into the work that we have to do which is the teaching and learning stuff.

Similar to this system, another high school reallocated funds to create two teacher positions that act as full-time liaisons connecting students and families with academic, social, and material supports. Creating these positions was an outcome of a visioning process that encouraged deeper ties between school and community, and as the principal reported, "We've found then if our attitude is: 'What barriers can we remove?' More and more kids are successful." In both cases, the administrators described the educators engaging in these supports as *learning teams* and reported that these extra supports have had a significant positive impact for students who were previously at risk of failing courses or dropping out of school. These structures have also resulted in opportunities for more targeted communication with and, in some cases, assistance for families; this underscores the role of rural schools as frequent social service providers (Browne-Ferrigno & Allen, 2006).

Fostering Partnerships to Supplement Educational Offerings

Whenever possible, principals and superintendents forge formal and informal partnerships that result in added capacity for supporting schools and students. This takes the shape of partnerships throughout the region with an emphasis on organizations that can support connections to core content areas, such as partnerships with state parks, fish and wildlife agency outposts, and local historical societies. In these cases, administrators work to connect students with academic and personal supports within the community, such as volunteer tutors or mentors. All but one middle and high school indicated that volunteers from the community are an integral part of their day-to-day work with students. The principal and principal/ superintendent of the outlier schools located within the same district discussed the tension they see between a very engaged community in school events and athletics and limited engagement in the school during the day, a dynamic they attributed to the prevalence of households where both parents work, caregiver grandparents who are less inclined to engage, and some students living in family situations that are extremely dysfunctional. In all other schools and districts, community volunteers are a staple within

schools and engage in activities in which paraprofessionals might engage if budgets provided for them. For example, the elementary administrators discussed the importance of volunteers for activities such as one-on-one reading support, and the secondary administrators discussed the importance of community members in the personal and academic development of their students with a particular emphasis on preparing students for education, career, and life after high school.

Administrators across districts and educational service agencies stressed that partnerships with public agencies and nonprofit organizations provided students with valuable experiences. For example, one high school in the study has forged a water-quality-testing partnership with a regional salmon coalition and uses technology to share the data they collect with students in other states and countries. These opportunities leverage the strong community ties rural schools often enjoy to foster a greater sense of place and to link place-based pedagogies with core content areas (Budge, 2006). Many district and ESA administrators discussed the challenge of broadening horizons for young rural students, and a key function of these partnerships is exposing students to new ideas and experiences. Administrators create links with the local community and the world beyond their remote area to support learning improvement efforts (Masumoto & Brown-Welty, 2009) and to create pathways for exposing students to life outside of their communities (Budge, 2006).

More remote schools discussed the difficulty of exposing students to opportunities in the world beyond their community. In particular, high school administrators discussed the challenges many graduates had when they left to attend large universities. In particular, they saw some students floundering at college and attributed it to the wraparound supports they had come to know in their small district and community. One district even urged the creation of an ad hoc social and academic support group at a state university to connect college students with people originally from the community. The superintendent explained that this support was designed to help students from the community make the "transition from this little community that protected them and helped and supported them to the city where you just don't have that until you build your own support system." She continued, "We're doing a great job getting them there, but now we want them to be able to graduate from college … and feel comfortable with whatever career choice they made." Specifically related to career readiness preparation within local communities, two remote administrators discussed the challenges of accessing the local vocational school because it is over 30 minutes away and no public or school transportation is available. Finally, in the cases of the two high schools with career and technical education (CTE) programs, principals discussed the ways in which they engage the community at large in CTE courses by relying on the expertise of community members. This helps ensure that their CTE courses include curriculum consistent with recent developments in professional fields. In all cases, administrators emphasized the urgency of connecting students to higher education and career credentials due to declining local economies and/or limited employment opportunities in traditional fields.

One superintendent, whose district had a 5-year graduation rate of over 90% for all years included in the study (compared to a state average of 78.8%), described his efforts to ensure that students had options upon graduation by changing the

> culture of thinking that "okay, I'm graduating, I'm going to go work up in the woods." [Because] that's pretty dangerous work and there's not a lot of work so if that doesn't work for you, what else do you have?

In response to the declining logging industry, he is working in schools and in the community to share the message that "not everybody may … want to go to a 4-year college, but everybody should be going to some sort of career-technical program or apprenticeship program and you have to be successful in those programs."

Principals, and sometimes superintendents, serve as the point people for coordinating opportunities that support student learning, and they indicated doing so because they see the academic and personal benefits for students. These partnerships require an entrepreneurial skill set to

build, sustain, and integrate into the life of the school. Yet, connecting students with the people and public infrastructure in their communities and region serves two key purposes. First, these opportunities expose students to cultural and professional experiences that stretch beyond the confines of their community. Second, these partnerships help prepare students to enter emerging and growing sectors of the local economy in areas where traditional employment opportunities, such as logging, have been in decline.

Investing the Community in Schools

Rural administrators actively engage the community in the life of the school with an emphasis on building investment in students' academic success. This involvement is particularly important because it honors the school as the social hub of rural communities (Abshier et al., 2011; Lyson, 2002). Examples of these social events include carnivals, holiday programs, and parades. In many cases, the event is a time for the community to gather at the school, and in all cases, administrators classified these school events as opportunities to engage families.

The impetuous for an event might be social or celebratory, but administrators stressed that this is a way to get families into schools and provides an opportunity to talk with families about their child's education. These opportunities can facilitate a sense of investment within community members that often nets tangible resources for schools. A variety of examples across sites range from materials and labor for an outdoor ecology lab to language and cultural programs that celebrate students' Native heritage. The majority of examples administrators shared come at little or no financial cost but do require investment of time and energy. These resources, rooted in the community, bring student development and learning into alignment with community identity.

Administrators from across the districts also secure local financial and political support to make their schools more conducive to learning and to liberate precious resources for instructionally focused spending. Close engagement with official and unofficial civic leaders also helps administrators manage local politics when resources need to be redirected for equitable instruction (e.g., resources for English language learners or special education services). Due to dwindling enrollments, some districts have had to prioritize resources by making politically contentious decisions, and one superintendent discussed the process of closing a school. She reported that even with a long and transparent process, the public outcry was substantial. Regarding the same superintendent's decision to eliminate librarians so the district could offer full-day kindergarten for all students, she said, "I've made some decisions that aren't particularly popular, but I believe they're in the service of student learning."

Rural districts tend to be tight-knit, and this superintendent struggled with the need to politic in the community daily, something verified by the same principal in this district. The principal emphasized the importance of stopping at the local coffee shop in the morning to discuss positive things that are happening in schools, but the superintendent relied on implementing formal advisory councils and working groups to engage and inform the community. Even though she has a clear rationale for resource allocation decisions (Plecki et al., 2006), she met great resistance when defying local tradition (City, 2008; Miles & Darling-Hammond, 1998) to close the school and to reallocate resources to target supports for achievement gaps. Nearly all of the district and school administrators emphasized the importance of being in the community to serve as an ambassador for the schools. Active engagement in the community at large helps administrators secure modest local philanthropic support, and this fills gaps that would otherwise go without resources.

Several administrators discussed the lack of large-scale philanthropy available to rural districts. It was clear across districts that small-scale local philanthropy does provide assistance that is essential for rural schools' ability to provide students with educational opportunities and, in particular, opportunities that extend learning and broaden horizons. The principal whose school benefited from the outdoor ecology lab classified the support as important "frosting" that benefits students' learning. Multiple principals across elementary and

secondary schools credited the parent teacher association with providing funds that support after-school activities and, in particular, enriching their schools with arts. Small grants and minor philanthropic opportunities, such as students volunteering for community organizations at regional events, provide critical supports for students, including small scholarships, but these are generally executed on an ad hoc basis rather than part of a sustained infrastructure. Building and maintaining relationships and securing opportunities take considerable time and energy, but the administrators characterize it as a significant priority for investing their time. Spending time and energy on local efforts that will connect students with real and immediate opportunities was a clearly articulated part of administrators' investment frameworks (Plecki & Knapp, 2014).

Conclusion

Prior resource allocation for school improvement research has primarily focused on urban settings and large districts. This study extends these frameworks by considering administrators' improvement work and resource decisions within rural contexts where schools and communities are tightly coupled but diseconomies of small scale often pose budgetary challenges (Farmer, 2009). We found that rural administrators leverage the interconnectedness of their community to funnel resources directly to student learning, yet administrators must expend significant effort to do this in creative ways.

As the rural administrators work to secure additional resources for students, it is clear that they wear multiple hats. Education leaders from all contexts perform multiple roles and functions on a daily basis (Portin, 2005), but these rural administrators not only serve in dynamic posts but also perform roles that are spread across multiple positions in larger schools and districts. In addition to filling multiple roles, successful rural administrators target achievement gaps and instructional improvement by organizing teachers and staff in ways that will maximize student learning and prioritize teachers' professional growth (Miles & Ferris, 2015). These school leaders make resource decisions with the ultimate intention of positively impacting student learning (Miles & Frank, 2008), and in resource-limited contexts, those decisions pose potentially significant trade-offs. The administrators represented in this study met the challenge of building capacity within their schools and communities in a variety of ways, and they did so with an ultimate goal of increasing broad community investment in schools and directing resources where they most significantly impact student learning.

The identity of rural schools and communities are generally tightly coupled. Yet, while rural family members may be more likely to participate in school events than urban or suburban families, they are less inclined to discuss academics with school personnel (Prater, Bermudez, & Owens, 1997). Therefore, these rural administrators focus significant effort and energy on engaging families and the community in the teaching and learning life of the school and prioritize pursuing resources that will support student learning. These rural administrators leverage their vision for student learning and creative school-community links to identify, build, and sustain partnerships within the community that will support student learning. This is critical as such interventions can mitigate negative influences on learning, including poverty (Kirst & Rhodes, 2010). The community engagement efforts described result in schools that are more closely connected to their communities—which often drives additional resources to schools (Bauch, 2001). Administrators do this by framing student development and learning priorities in ways that are aligned with community identity. For successful administrators in rural contexts, fostering and sustaining internal and external relationships that will result in additional resources, as well as crafting structures that distribute these resources for equitable learning opportunities, are foundational components of their school improvement work.

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