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Wesley L. C. Henry

Leveraging Resources for Learning Improvement Agendas:
The Role of Educational Service Agencies and Local Communities

Wesley L. C. Henry

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Reading Committee:

Bradley Portin, Chair

Margaret Plecki

Stephen Kerr

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Abstract

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Wesley L. C. Henry

Chair of the Supervisory Committee:
Bradley Portin, D. Phil.
Professor
College of Education

Rural America is rapidly becoming more diverse, yet rural communities remain different from their urban and suburban counterparts. Despite several decades of economic hardship in rural areas, rural schools are under researched by scholars and under prioritized by policymakers. Therefore, this study was designed to better understand how school and district leaders in rural contexts are meeting contemporary challenges while strengthening equitable teaching and learning opportunities for rural students. While exploring learning-focused leadership at the local level, this study also investigates the relationship between regional agencies and local districts to better understand the role of educational service agencies in regional learning improvement efforts and the role of the state in supporting a network of educational service agencies.

This study draws upon interviews with 16 educational service agency administrators from across three of Washington state's nine regions and interviews with 15 principals and superintendents leading eight schools across seven districts in these regions. Policy coherence and leadership for learning improvement frameworks are employed to investigate the development of regional learning improvement agendas within the educational service agency regions and the learning improvement and resource allocation practices of local school and district leaders.

This study contributes to two areas of research. First, findings suggest that, in addition to creating economies of scale by coordinating supports for rural districts, educational service agencies can also play a pivotal role in fostering policy coherence for teaching and learning priorities and the development of regional learning improvement agendas. Additionally, this study explores the dimensions of learning improvement work in rural schools demonstrating a general upward trend in standardized test scores. The findings explore the ways in which rural school and district leaders engage communities in teaching and learning efforts. In doing so, rural school and district leaders leverage their highly visible roles as community leaders and the important roles students play in rural communities to establish formal and informal resource pathways that support student learning.

Nested within these contexts are the political implications school and district leaders face when pursuing equity-focused learning improvement agendas in tight-knit communities, and this study explores school and district leaders' use of partnerships and community engagement to navigate these dynamics. Study findings lead to several policy considerations for investing in local and state-supported infrastructure that empowers learning-focused leadership in rural schools.

Additionally, this study signals implications for differentiated educational leadership preparation programs that prepare rural school and district leaders for careers in rural contexts.

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DEDICATION

I dedicate this dissertation to my elementary school principal.

She spent her career in urban, suburban, and rural settings acting as an advocate for students. During her 14 years at Woodland Elementary, I closely followed her efforts as she ensured that all students had the opportunity to access an excellent education and that all families were welcomed into the life of the school.

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Chapter 1

The Importance of Equity for Rural Communities

Conversations about educational equity are often driven by rhetoric focusing on the injustices shaping the American education experience in the nation's urban areas. These images and statistics share an unfortunate but compelling story, and the notion that a child's earliest zip code can predict their future with alarming accuracy has enraged citizens and advocates inside education circles and far beyond. Indeed, urban schools have higher-than-average rates of poverty in their classrooms, but urban areas are not alone, as rural schools also educate students where high rates of poverty and difficult financial situations impact both educational offerings and the outcomes of students (Bouck, 2004). As Corbett (2007) notes, the majority of the discourse about educational equity "seems to ignore the fact that not all places are urban" (p. 143).

An analysis completed on behalf of the Rural School and Community Trust found that 32.9% of the nation's schools were located in rural districts during the 2010-2011 school year. This accounted for 49.9% of districts, nationally, and 20.4% of the nation's students. According to this analysis, 26.4% of Washington's schools are rural and provide an education for 105,104 students, approximately 10% of Washington's student population. Additionally, 29% of Washington's students in rural districts are minority students, comparable to the national percentage of 26.7%, and 8% of students in rural districts in Washington state are English Learners (EL) which, in 2010-2011, gave Washington the third highest percentage of EL students. Finally, 47.7% of students in Washington's rural districts qualify for free or reduced priced lunches. This number is slightly higher than the national average of 46.6%, as is Washington's rural adult unemployment rate of 7.6% to the national average of 6.6% (Johnson,

Showalter, Klein, & Lester, 2014). Further, according to the United States Department of Agriculture, in mid-2015, nationwide rural employment lagged 3.2% below the pre-recession peak while urban employment within the same timeframe was well above the pre-recession peak (2016).

Educational attainment beyond high school also provides a challenge for rural populations. According to an analysis of the 2014 American Community Survey, 15% of the nonmetropolitan population has less than a high school diploma (vs. 13% for metropolitan populations); 36% of nonmetropolitan populations have only a high school diploma (vs. 26% in metropolitan areas); 30% of nonmetropolitan populations have some college or an Associate's Degree (vs. 29% of metropolitan populations); but, only 19% of nonmetropolitan populations have a Bachelor's Degree or higher while 32% of metropolitan populations have at least a Bachelor's Degree. Educational attainment is significant for a number of reasons, but in particular, the unemployment rates for adults in rural America are much higher for those with the least education (United States Department of Agriculture, 2016).

Due to the inordinate political and media attention spotlighting poverty in urban areas, many people are unaware of the relative nature of shared challenges among urban areas and rural communities (Dayton, 1999). Additionally, Dayton continues, because wealth and votes are concentrated in metropolitan areas, poor rural areas are at a political disadvantage. The nature of this dynamic also impacts what transpires in rural communities since rural schools are often entangled between the values of local traditions and state and federal policies (Howley, Pendarvis, & Woodrum, 2005). For example, unrealistic federal expectations are among the top challenges articulated by rural school district personnel (Morton & Harmon, 2011). As Alsbury

and Whitaker (2015) note, many superintendents from small districts struggle to find harmony between local priorities for education and mandates from state and federal agencies.

In a review of the literature on rural culture, Budge (2006) found scholars have noted that the dominant culture does not value rurality and, in fact, encourages prejudices against, and stereotypes of, rural people. As Herzog & Pittman (1999) explain, in times of heightened political correctness, it is still acceptable to describe rural populations with terms such as “‘rednecks,’ ‘hillbillies,’ and ‘hicks’” (p. 14). Rural communities are portrayed in dominant culture as less formal, less modern, and more traditional than more urban areas (Howley, Howley & Larson, 1999). Rural populations have been in decline in many areas, and along with dwindling numbers, rural influence in public policy has diminished, and ultimately, this dynamic disempowers rural people (Nachtigal, 1995). The result is that policymakers misunderstand rural culture, for example how important rural schools are to local communities (Morton & Harmon, 2011). While each rural community is unique, Budge’s literature review identified shared strengths and challenges of rural communities, such as (a) low population density and isolation; (b) school and community interdependence; (c) oppression as a lived experience; (d) a history of conflict regarding purposes of schooling; (e) an “out migration” of young talent; and (f) a salient attachment to place. While rural communities throughout America share these similarities, rural communities are also changing at a rapid rate.

Rural America is also becoming much more diverse. Racial and ethnic minorities comprise only 21% of the overall nonmetropolitan population but also represented 83% of the population growth in these counties between the 2000 and 2010 census. In particular, the Hispanic population accounted for more than half of the overall rural population gain during the last decade (Johnson, 2012). In addition to becoming a more diverse place, results from the

National Survey of Children's Health, supported by the United States Department of Health and Human Services (2015), suggest that rural students across the country have unique learning needs. For example, 12.1% of students in large rural areas of 10,000 – 49,999 residents and 14% of students in small rural areas of 2,500 – 9,999 residents were more likely to repeat a grade than the 8.2% of students in urban areas comprised of cities, towns, and suburbs. Additionally, children living in large rural (54.8%) and small rural (53%) areas were more likely to have adverse childhood experiences than those in urban areas (46.6%).

Research Focus and Questions

This dissertation attempts to better understand educational priorities and community aspirations for young people living in rural communities across Washington state, which, like the rest of the country, are set against the backdrop of a changing rural American economy and population. Additionally, this study seeks to develop an understanding of how rural education leaders work to develop school improvement priorities and plans and, given the constraints of their rural context, gather and marshal resources that will support sustainable, high-quality learning opportunities for students.

The research questions developed to support this inquiry are:

- 1) How do rural education leaders characterize high-quality learning opportunities for the students in their schools and the challenges for students to obtain such educational opportunities?
- 2) How do education leaders in rural settings approach developing an organizational agenda for system wide priorities that recognize their rural context?
- 3) How do rural education leaders identify, leverage, and allocate supports and resources available to meet the needs of their staff and students?

These questions allow for capturing the unique context of each school and community. In addition, the research questions provide the opportunity to examine educational experiences and school and learning improvement agendas across a diverse range of schools in rural communities that are demonstrating continuous improvement in students' standardized test scores.

Communities throughout rural America have experienced significant change during the last seventy-five years. Not only have the demographics of rural areas shifted, the industries supporting local economies in many rural areas have declined. As explored below, these dynamics have had significant impacts on rural communities and residents. As a result, successful rural leaders and educational support organizations must develop context-specific skill sets to support educational opportunities within these communities.

Change in Rural America

Rural communities are experiencing significant change and challenges in modern America (Harmon & Schafft, 2009). Employment opportunities are limited in many rural areas, as is the infrastructure to address the challenges that many rural populations are experiencing (Dayton, 1999). Widespread underemployment in low-wage positions defines the vocations available throughout many rural communities (Howley et al., 2005). Given these challenges, 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. As Bouck posits, students' education outcomes are impacted where entire communities of families living in poverty ultimately lead to schools in poverty (2004). Educational opportunities and the relative economic health of communities are inextricably linked.

During the last part of the twentieth century and the first part of the twenty-first century, the economy in rural America has experienced steady decline and, at the same time, greater reliance on the overall health of the larger economy (Howley et al., 2005). Rural communities across the country comprise a broad diversity of local industries, but they are all subject to the same sweeping socioeconomic forces and are experiencing similar economic hardship (Budge, 2006; Mathis, 2003; McGranahan, 1994). As Budge 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. When compared to their college-bound peers, work-bound rural youth reported greater economic hardship and lower educational expectations within their family, as well as more negative experiences during their schooling (Hutchins, Meece, Byun, & Farmer, 2013). Such results, coupled with the bleak economic and rural workforce prospects in recent history, suggest that the young residents who are most likely to stay in their rural community will have an increasingly difficult time removing themselves from a strengthening cycle of poverty.

The rural brain drain. Scholars from a number of disciplines have documented the migration of young people from rural communities to more metropolitan areas with more plentiful educational opportunities and more robust and diverse labor markets. Mathis (2003) called this continuous movement of rural America's most promising young people away from their communities an "economic emigration" that has resulted in a "refined distillation of poverty" (p. 127). Researchers have explored this outward migration of young people as the "brain drain" from rural areas where the better educated and most capable young citizens tend to move away to pursue further education and subsequent careers (Dayton, 1999). The young adults who leave rural communities in search of different opportunities are also those who tend to value

schooling the most (McGranahan, 1994), and higher education is the mobile capital required to build a life elsewhere (Corbett, 2007). Sherman and Sage (2011) noted that local schools may have a role in determining who will leave and who will stay in the community based upon a family's social standing or socioeconomic status by encouraging only some students to pursue opportunities outside the community. Morton and Harmon (2011) found that some community members hope their young residents will leave to pursue higher education and return to fill important roles in the community, such as nursing, or to seek education related to modern agricultural practices so they can bring that knowledge back to the community or family farm. Yet, aside from running a family business or pursuing a specific handful of professional opportunities, young people have limited career-oriented opportunities in rural America. As Theobald (1992) posits, the migration of young people to cities is an underlying predicament challenging rural communities. To this end, Corbett (2009) lays out an agenda for attracting talented youth back to their communities, including dynamic schools and maintaining publicly funded infrastructure and services.

Rural schools as community centers. Schools in small communities may have the ability to perpetuate traditional, local social stratification (Sherman & Sage, 2011). Yet, rural schools can also leverage the tight-knit nature of cohesive communities to build the social capital that promotes student success in school (Bauch, 2001). In many rural areas, districts and schools are the providers of local social services (Browne-Ferrigno & Allen, 2006). However, 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, and the social and economic welfare of communities with schools tends to be better than in communities without schools (Lyson, 2002). Given the long history of rural school consolidation in the late twentieth century, the physical

presence of schools has become increasingly important to local communities. Residents see individual schools as a critical part of their local infrastructure and as something that gives them a sense of community and identity (Abshier, Harris, & Hopson, 2011). The nature of schools and schooling in rural America casts the school building as a valuable local commodity and as the center of the rural community's civic life.

Rural Education in America

Just as conversations about equity in American society have focused on urban areas, research on improving educational outcomes for students has also been conducted with a strong focus on urban areas (Horst & Martin, 2007). The resources and attention policymakers devote to rural education are finite. Yet, 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. An additional strategic advantage enjoyed by urban districts is their ability to form financial partnerships with the private sector (Farmer, 2009). Indeed, rural areas simply do not benefit from the same variety of philanthropic safety nets that are common in many urban areas. This dynamic challenging rural areas is a reality layered amid tightening regulations and increased accountability for schools in all communities: urban, suburban, and rural.

Urban-Centric Education Policy

Researchers have noted a bias against rural schools in federal education policies, such as No Child Left Behind, due to the unique challenges rural schools face. Urban and rural communities, alike, have suffered from the devastating effects of poverty, but as more upwardly mobile residents move away from rural communities, the remaining demographic is poorer and

less educated which makes complying with federal mandates and meeting targets increasingly difficult (Jimerson, 2005). Due to a changing economy and increasingly complex demographics, state and federal regulations now compare rural schools with their more metropolitan counterparts who tend to have more resources thereby increasing pressure on rural school leaders (Lamkin, 2006). Lamkin also contends that while some challenges are shared between small rural and small non-rural districts, the challenges facing rural schools and small schools are not simply interchangeable.

Rural diseconomies of scale. One of the key advantages urban districts have over their rural counterparts are economies of scale (Farmer, 2009). Scholars have found that per pupil costs are higher in small schools (Thorson & Edmondson, 2000). Higher per pupil expenditures are associated with expenses including instruction, administration, student support, and transportation (Levin, Manship, Chambers, Johnson, & Blankenship, 2011). Levin et al. also found that overhead ratios of district to school-level expenses were higher in small districts with less dense populations and located farther from urban areas. Transportation costs are an example of necessary but excessive operating expenses that create major fiscal challenges for rural districts. Rural schools spend a considerably higher proportion of their budgets on transportation than their non-rural counterparts (Lindhahl, 2012). In fact, one study estimated that rural districts spend up to 8% of their budgets on transporting students while their non-rural counterparts spend only 4% (Reeves, 2003). Not only is the cost of transportation disproportionately impacting rural school districts, student achievement is also related. Reeves also found that students whose living and schooling arrangements necessitated long bus rides reported being fatigued and under stress, having declining grades, participating in fewer after-school activities, and engaging in less family time. One analysis goes as far as asserting that in poor rural areas, the constraints of the

daily commute to and from school could make the difference between a student continuing in school or dropping out to find employment (Khattari, Riley, & Kane, 1997).

Rural resource gap. While urban schools may face issues regarding poverty, inadequate funding, and even issues with small schools struggling to meet state and federal mandates, their rural counterparts face the same issues and may spend more, proportionally, to educate students. These 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). Indeed, due to geographic isolation and low revenue, rural districts struggle to provide some of the basic services expected of schools. Some states, however, do recognize this challenge and have developed different funding allocations for schools that are small but necessary, typically in very isolated areas with student populations of under one hundred. For example, in Washington state, “remote and necessarily small” schools must have a K-6 enrollment of less than 60 students and less than 20 students in grades seven and eight.

Sparse populations and rural isolation increase the cost of providing public services such as education (Howley et al., 2005). At the same time, rural America is experiencing social change without the resources to address such challenges (Hardre, 2007). 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). At the same time, sparse populations can lead to decreased predictability in budget forecasts, and this can impact district operations ranging from recruiting and retaining staff to maintaining facilities (Williams & Nierengarten, 2011). Lack of financial resources poses a significant challenge for rural school and district leaders (Masumoto & Brown-Welty, 2009; Morton & Harmon, 2011). Unpredictable and strained finances result in limited educational offerings by rural districts and increased

pressure on district and school leaders to ensure student achievement and to produce educational offerings.

Rural technology resource gap. Ensuring adequate facilities is an ongoing and pressing concern for rural education leaders (Mathis, 2003). In addition to buildings, rural education leaders must now find ways to secure, maintain, and update technology in remote and underfunded districts. Due to limited technology in many rural schools, rural students tend to have less sophisticated technological skills (Bouck, 2004). The ability of many rural districts to purchase hardware and software is limited, as is access to high-speed Internet in many rural areas (Mathis, 2003). Further, in responses to the Consortium for School Networking's 2015 annual survey investigating technology infrastructure in schools, over a third of participating school district leaders cited the upfront expense of increasing Internet connectivity in schools as a key barrier to expanding Internet service, and nearly half of the respondents cited the cost of monthly ongoing expenses as a key barrier. In both cases, rural respondents cited these costs as significant barriers slightly more frequently than their urban and suburban counterparts. The results of this survey also report that rural school systems have slower connections, less access to broadband connectivity, and fewer options due to less competition between Internet providers in rural areas (Consortium for School Networking, 2015). Such studies suggest that many rural students lack equal opportunity to build technological skills and, as a result, are left behind in an economy that is increasingly reliant on high-tech skills for employment in positions across fields and occupations.

Educating and serving populations with special needs. The remote nature of many rural communities impacts the services that are available to residents and students alike. Outlying areas see limited availability of social programs (Mathis, 2003). In schools, participation rates in

supplemental education services are limited, particularly in the northwest region of the United States, due to the rural nature of the region and the lack of personnel and funds to support the services (Saifer & Speth, 2007). Rural teachers and administrators express concerns about educational issues relating to the budget, including curriculum offerings (Morton & Harmon, 2011). In light of these perennial concerns, rural administrators have reported difficulty in balancing offerings for a diverse groups of students, such as students who are college-bound, at-risk, or with specialized interests, and, in light of budget constraints, administrators have been forced to accommodate one group at the detriment of another (Williams & Nierengarten, 2011). In addition to educational opportunities for various student populations, essential special services are also in competition for limited resources. Costly interventions and the lack of special services and credentialed educators to support students with low-incidence handicaps pose a particularly difficult challenge for rural districts (Mathis, 2003). Likewise, Mathis also notes that the number of students who are English Learners is increasing in rural areas as their parents move to rural areas in search of low-skill work. Rural administrators must navigate these challenging budgetary and educational dynamics to provide required education services to special student populations and the best possible educational opportunities to all students.

Rural District Leadership

Financial strain in rural districts materializes in additional ways that are perhaps less obvious, but quite significant. For example, because school funding is based on enrollment, small rural schools receive less staff development funding than their non-rural counterparts (Eady & Zepeda, 2008). The lack of resources in small rural schools requires administrators to prioritize and stretch all capital as far as possible. In some cases, 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). Many rural communities have few resources of their own which requires educators to build partnerships with non-local institutions, such as colleges, but these resources are not always applied across the broad spectrum of need in rural communities nor do some rural communities have their own philanthropic infrastructure to support diverse student or educator needs and interests (Masumoto & Brown-Welty, 2009).

Staff retention. Just as the local histories and cultures of rural communities are varied and distinct (McGranahan, 1994), the educator culture in rural schools tends to take on the social and cultural norms of local communities (Howley et al. 2005). This dynamic, as Howley et al. explain, sometimes isolates teachers new to the community, particularly those new to the profession, as their professional values were developed elsewhere and “tend to align with a secular, cosmopolitan, and professional paradigm” (p. 17). Recruiting and retaining teachers and administrators is a challenge for rural education leaders (Lamkin, 2006; Morton & Harmon, 2011). In addition to professional isolation, the salaries rural districts offer are not competitive with urban school systems (Nichols, 2004). As a result, school districts with the fewest administrative applicants tend to have higher rates of poverty, more minority students, lower per-pupil expenditures, and lower principal salaries (Roza, Celio, Harvey, & Wishon, 2003).

Rural staff development and community partnerships. Distance from urban centers complicates professional development opportunities available to rural educators. Typically, professional development offerings focused on student achievement are more robust and common in urban and suburban areas (Williams & Nierengarten, 2011). The limited nature of resources in rural areas restricts professional development opportunities available to educators, yet rural principals are still expected to provide professional guidance and professional

development opportunities for teachers (Renihan & Noonan, 2012). The work of rural school and district leaders, particularly those who are further from metropolitan areas, is complicated by the isolation of their communities, the lack of resources they can pass along to local educators, and the time they must spend to mitigate or work around these complicating factors.

Due to the complex nature of providing high-quality professional learning in remote locations, several scholars have noted the importance of unique collaborations to create cross-district partnership networks. Based on their review of relevant literature, Howley, and Hambrick (2011) call for the creation of inter-district cooperatives, separate from intermediate education agencies, such as educational service agencies, to increase efficiencies and pool resources while ensuring continued autonomy. Despite the documented challenges remoteness plays in ensuring collaboration with universities, Clarke and Hood (1986) highlighted The University of Vermont's efforts to collaborate with local districts to offer master's degrees across several off-campus sites. Two degrees, administration and planning and curriculum and instruction, were offered with an emphasis on building improvement projects specific to district-level change efforts. More recently, Mollenkopf (2009) highlighted the work of The University of Nebraska at Kearney to offer a hybrid program for certification and highly-qualified status to teachers in rural areas. Students engaged in a combination of online learning and job-embedded field experiences to complete their coursework and certification requirements. In addition, the university was able to leverage local networks of alumni to act as mentors for others in their region. These examples speak to the entrepreneurial and nimble nature of successful partnerships that stretch across districts and institutions to serve demonstrated needs, such as graduate education and certification, and to support local, school improvement efforts.

Rural students. Rural students also experience the impact of rural isolation. Dropout rates are comparable throughout the urban - rural continuum, and students' family attributes are more predictive of determining graduation than their location. However, though a small population, researchers found that rural Black and Hispanic males are more likely to graduate from high school than their urban counterparts (Jordan, Kostandini, & Mykerezi, 2012). Yet, generally, many rural students may be at a disadvantage when deciding if they will go to college because rural community members tend to have low levels of education (King, 2012). The values held by families, the community, and local institutions inform the values and practices of local educators (Hardre, 2007). As a result, rural schools must work to be responsive to both their communities and expectations for education in a changing world. King found that college campus visits and college admissions test workshops were valuable in increasing the college-going rate in rural communities. Providing their students with these opportunities requires additional work of rural education leaders, as students in more urban areas may have easier access to local campuses. In addition, more urban areas with large school districts, library systems, nonprofits, and private sector philanthropy may support test preparation workshops and other academic services.

Rural students and family engagement. The importance of community and family engagement are noted throughout education improvement literature, and the rural education literature addresses the unique relationship between community and schools. Yet, as Rosenberg, Christianson, Angus, and Rosenthal (2014) found, parent involvement across nine low-performing, rural schools receiving School Improvement Grants was impacted by parents' work schedules, low value placed on education in students' homes, lack of parental access to transportation, the belief that education is simply the schools' responsibility, and distance

between the home and school. Several of these challenges might be shared across contexts, but access to reliable transportation and, in particular, significant distance between home and school are more likely to be unique to rural settings. Seltzer and Himley (1995) noted the Iowa Rural Improvement Special Effort (I-RISE) program as successful in engaging historically difficult to involve parents and families in their students' education. The I-RISE program provided take home backpacks to teachers with activities designed for families to complete with their students at home, and the positive reaction to these resources led to an evening workshop on promoting self-esteem and a positive home environment to sustain parental engagement. This example suggests that efforts crafted to mobilize students' learning between school and home might successfully engage parents and families in rural schools.

Schools and school systems are important to the tapestry of rural communities. As the economy continues to change, rural school systems can play a significant role in moving local specializations away from low-skill, low-wage work to higher-skill industries (McGranahan, 1994). The role of arbiter between local expectations and the changing world and economy places rural schools in a precarious position. Local citizens may understand that innovations within agriculture and other industries, locally and beyond, require education, but they may also demand schools to support traditional expectations for students to pursue agricultural or other time-honored local occupations (Morton & Harmon, 2011). Rural schools are often viewed as the center of their local community, and the community is recognized as providing formal and informal supports for schools (Masumoto & Brown-Welty, 2009). While some scholars argue that public schooling in America is moving away from the aegis of local communities (Harmon & Schafft, 2009), families and communities remain an integral part of learning in rural communities (Mathis, 2003).

Rural Community Politics

The politics within local communities can have a profound impact on their local schools. In rural areas, where the community identity is so closely linked with its school(s), education can be a source of local tension. Local school boards may be more invested in coordinating local efforts, including helpful collaboration with businesses, than in tackling issues mandated by national and state reforms (Van & Schmidt, 2007). In that light, educational values and visions are often closely tied to individual communities (Hardre, 2007). Furthermore, special interest groups at the local level can be particularly acute in rural settings. This dynamic displays the political power of civic organizations and clubs, such as athletic boosters, and small but vocal groups, such as cheerleader moms, within rural communities (Farmer, 2009). These individuals and special interest groups tend to bring a circumscribed perspective and are sometimes adversarial (Kersten & Ballenger, 2012). As a result, rural schools play an important role in the community as they engage all families and care for all children, but they can also perpetuate structures that include or exclude populations from the resources and social supports within the community (Sherman & Sage, 2011). The close-knit nature of these communities has led some rural superintendents to protest that the districts “operated on emotionalism and gossip” (Lamkin, 2006, p. 22).

While the unique chronicle of rural communities creates challenges for rural education leaders, it is also common for rural communities to share a deep investment in their schools. Rural education leaders can leverage this investment to serve as a valuable resource. For example, broad participation from local communities can inform schools’ strategic plans, and community insight may add important goals that would not have been included without their input (Winand & Edlefson, 2008). In addition, knowledge of local politics can help leaders

understand how community resources are allocated and inform efforts to build unity for implementing learning reforms (Howley et al., 2005). Rural educators are expected to blend into their local communities and to share the same values as their neighbors, and this lack of privacy can lead to feelings of professional and cultural isolation (Bryant, 2007). School leaders in rural communities are highly visible and susceptible to scrutiny by the community (Masumoto & Brown-Welty, 2009). Studies have noted the importance of rural education leaders being a part of their community and communicating regularly with community members (Fredrickson, 2002; Masumoto & Brown-Welty, 2009). Yet, rural schools often lack sufficient communication mechanisms (Winand & Edlefson, 2008). Touchton, Taylor, and Acker-Hocevar found that superintendents from small districts, and principals from small schools, were more likely to use informal, interpersonal networks to communicate and to receive feedback from stakeholders while superintendents from medium-sized districts were more likely to utilize more formal or far reaching tools, such as social networks and listservs (2012). Residents within small communities may know each other well, but distributing knowledge in a systematic way can still be a significant challenge for small district leaders. This suggests that rural education leaders must rely upon informal networks to communicate with the public-at-large in their communities. Unfortunately, this dynamic has several significant consequences, notably: (a) the education leaders have little control over their message or any pertinent details; (b) there are few opportunities to ensure that important information has traveled to all cross-sections of a community, and; (c) without formal systems to convey information, there are no opportunities to collect feedback and questions or to follow-up with clarification.

The relative isolation of many rural communities charges rural education leaders with a wide variety of responsibilities including instructional improvement, engaging the community in

schools, and locating resources. Due to the geographic isolation common to rural schools, traveling long distances to professional conferences and workshops, at great expense, limits rural educators' staff development which in turn limits long-term school improvement efforts (Reaves & Larmer, 1996). Successful rural education leaders must be talented at a variety of duties to facilitate change and improvement efforts in their schools. For example, they must ensure that instructional improvement is focused on all students by stretching resources, despite their limited nature, and create links with the local community and the world beyond their remote area to bolster their improvement efforts (Masumoto & Brown-Welty, 2009). In addition to locating resources and building bridges that can benefit students, rural administrators, teachers and parents must also find both the voice and opportunity, like their urban counterparts, to advocate for their unique needs in the policy arena (Jennings, 1999). Ultimately, as Stephens (1986) reminds us, "one must view rural education as an inseparable part of the infrastructure of rural life" (p. 33).

Educational Service Agencies

Due to the challenges that geographic isolation and constrained resources pose for rural educators, professional development opportunities, particularly those embedded in their local context, are scant. In 45 states throughout the country, over 550 educational service agencies (ESAs) provide professional learning opportunities to educators in offices that adopt a variety of forms, such as regional and county offices (Association of Educational Service Agencies, 2017). In addition to professional development and support for teachers and administrators, ESAs may provide assistance with facilities or technology needs, district management and operations assistance, such as a centralized human resources staff, and opportunities for statewide collaboration (Stephens & Keane, 2005). According to Stephens and Keane, the critical impact

that ESAs have on school improvement is through saving school districts time and money. ESAs employ staff who concentrate on acquiring expertise in new and necessary curriculum developments and, in turn, working with educators to deliver that training locally. Stephens and Keane posit that this system makes it possible for staff to attend these trainings. The authors also note ESAs typically support districts in educating students with special needs by hiring teachers with special training who provide support or teach in the local schools and by operating programs for students with low incidence handicaps.

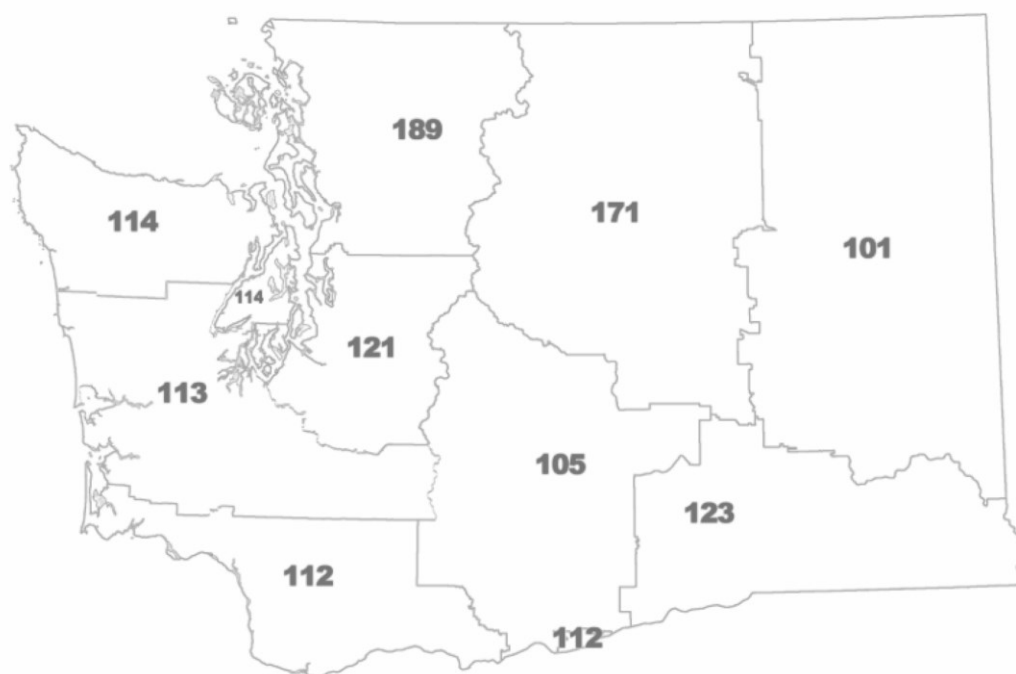
While ESAs offer many services possible throughout the country by coordinating economies of scale for school districts, Stephens and Keane (2005) note limitations of services, particularly ESA programming for teachers. For example, in addition to the costs associated with a professional learning opportunity, often shouldered by the local district, rural educators in ESAs covering great geography must travel long distances and often seek overnight lodging. This structure disadvantages educators working in poor districts that are reluctant to send representatives for advanced training. In addition, teachers who are out of the classroom require substitute coverage, and if a substitute can be secured, the coverage comes at a cost, in addition to the professional development fee. Finally, as Stephens and Keane signal, most administrators are cautious of leaving their buildings for part or all of the school day, and this serves as a disincentive for administrators to engage in professional development.

Washington's Educational Service Districts

In 1969, the legislature in Washington state formalized legislation that led to the establishment of nine educational service districts as regional agencies that should (a) provide cooperative and informational services to school districts; (b) assist the state education agency (the Office of the Superintendent of Public Instruction and the State Board of Education) in

carrying out their duties; and (c) provide services to school districts and special centers, for deaf and blind students, to “assure equal educational opportunities” (Revised Code of Washington 28A.310.010). In Washington state, the educational service districts (ESDs) collaborate to offer the Washington School Information Processing Cooperative, a statewide nonprofit that offers student data systems, online hosting services, technology services, and a purchasing program for bulk purchases of hardware, software, and technology services.

Figure 1-1: Map of Washington State Educational Service Districts



(Office of the Superintendent of Public Instruction, 2016)

Washington state’s educational service districts provide pathways for educators to develop greater expertise and for schools to obtain targeted services. Yet, while the ESDs make some training possible, the nature of their regionally centered structure and service could limit the impact they have in school improvement because ESD regional headquarters are several hours from some of the districts they serve. In their review of the professional development factors likely to improve student performance, Miles and Frank (2008) argue that professional

development is most likely to improve student performance when it (a) evolves out of the analysis of student performance; (b) is organized as school-based, collaborative problem solving; (c) focuses on the implementation of specific content-based curriculum and instructional practices; (d) is scheduled as part of the everyday work of teaching; (e) includes follow-up and coaching; (f) promotes coherent, school wide design; and (g) promotes accountability for improved practice and student performance (p. 29). Additionally, City (2008) wonders what learning agenda a coach employs when embedded in a school but working for the district. This question extends to the work of ESD content specialists working across and within schools as they align agendas and calibrate priorities for coherence.

Though accessibility and cost may be a barrier for some local districts, educational service districts are a more localized support for rural educators. As Williams and Nierengarten note, rural educators typically travel great distances to obtain professional training (2011). Additionally, geographic isolation, long distances to professional training opportunities, and the expense of professional travel limit rural administrators' opportunities to offer relevant and ongoing staff development, and this challenge ultimately limits rural schools' ability to engage in long-term school improvement work (Reaves & Larmer, 1996). Eady and Zepeda note that, due to rural schools' distance from academic communities, rural districts assume significant expense when providing expert consultation and funding staff travel to professional development (2008). The regional professional development opportunities and periodic embedded expertise provided by ESDs may fill a portion of the professional learning gap that rural educators experience. Yet, the school-improvement and professional learning literature suggest that the most valuable professional learning opportunities for educators are ongoing and embedded in the school context.

Chapter 2

The Dimensions of Rural School Leadership and System Leadership for Learning Improvement

Administrators in rural contexts navigate complex social, historical, and system dynamics while living and working in these communities. This chapter explores the dimensions of educational leadership in rural settings and the role that tight-knit rural communities play in schooling and in local school improvement efforts. Additionally, this chapter explores the literature informing the research and conceptual frameworks used for sensemaking in this study. Frameworks informing the development and implementation of learning improvement agendas at the school, local district, and educational service district levels were influential in the design of this study. These frameworks were informed by literature addressing organizational learning in school and district settings, learning-focused leadership, coherence in system-wide learning improvement, and the critical functions of leadership. Finally, literature regarding the identification and distribution of resources informed this study's investigation of the alignment of resources and agendas in rural school and district settings.

The Many Responsibilities of Rural Administrators

Rural districts are generally smaller than their urban and suburban counterparts, and this requires each administrator, particularly rural superintendents, to be a “jack of all trades” (Jacobson, 1988). The duties of rural administrators stretch beyond the portfolio of responsibilities covered by urban leaders and often range from teaching to coaching to custodial duties (Jenkins, 2007). Ultimately, rural superintendents must assume increased personal responsibility to work as jacks of all trades by leading operations within districts and by

representing the schools effectively within the community. As a result, not only are rural superintendents the head of their local schools, they are often the only chief executive in the community and are much more susceptible than non-rural administrators to a lack of privacy and criticism of professional and personal decisions leading to greater stress (Lamkin, 2006). A specific challenge that successful rural administrators navigate is the ability to balance a variety of special interest groups (Farmer, 2009). To do so, rural superintendents must involve stakeholders including board members, other educators, parents, and community members in operating the district (Abshier et al., 2011). According to Jenkins, a rural superintendent who does not seriously consider how the community will react to a decision is an administrator destined for a limited tenure.

The Dimensions of Rural District Leadership

As superintendents build relationships with community members, they also have the opportunity to share their vision for the district and to advocate for any changes that might improve education in the local schools. Because most rural communities have limited resources for education and traditional expectations of their schools, rural superintendents who seek to engage in educational improvement should be adept at crafting public relations strategies to push change in schools (Jacobson, 1988; Lamkin, 2006). Because superintendents are the chief spokesperson for each district's vision (Alford & Ballenger, 2012), successful rural superintendents build positive relationships with the community-at-large by leveraging local media and utilizing additional formal avenues available to them to communicate positive district updates as well as to engage in damage control when necessary (Jenkins, 2007). Education leaders are competing with other local entities for valuable resources, and to do so successfully, they must build partnerships with stakeholders that will support the district's goals because

resources are limited in rural communities (Farmer, 2009). As a result, successful rural superintendents must be outgoing in their approach to community relations, human relations, and in particular, their relations with the local board of education (Cooper & Fusarelli, 2000). Indeed, crafting relationships with the local boards of education, whose members are increasingly engaging in shared decision making and expect constant communication, is one of the local political challenges confronting rural superintendents (Lamkin, 2006). As Jenkins (2007) posits, the visibility of the superintendent to the community is the biggest difference between leading a rural district and the more veiled leadership experienced in urban district leadership. Given the nature of research exploring the rural superintendency, it is evident that there is a pronounced need for rural administrators interested in pursuing improvement agendas to curate a compelling, locally focused narrative with the power to articulate why change is beneficial to the community's students and the community-at-large.

As rural superintendents focus on the challenge of developing and articulating their educational agenda with an emphasis on securing community support, they must also manage district operations, which in many cases are small in scale but complex in nature. For example, rural districts have the same reporting requirements as their larger counterparts, but rural superintendents may be the only administrator in their district who can handle compliance matters. Many rural superintendents, particularly those of smaller districts, spend more time than their peers on managerial duties (Jones & Howley, 2009). Due to limited enrollment and financial resources, rural districts often have less central office staff and limited support in the schools. As one study notes, if rural superintendents didn't complete an undertaking, then students went without something (Lamkin, 2006). According to Lamkin, while urban superintendents have a buffer from the community and layers of administrative support, the

experience of rural superintendents is distinctly different. The lack of administrative layers in rural districts places superintendents in closer contact with the spectrum of district employees, classrooms, and the community.

Rural superintendents are responsible for an increasingly wide range of duties, and additional training may be helpful as administrators lead negotiations with their employees' labor representatives or navigate human resources challenges (Lamkin, 2006). Lamkin also explored the challenge that rural superintendents have in meeting state and federal paperwork obligations which sometimes change with little notice. To that end, researchers have called for rural superintendents to be active in advocacy efforts supporting rural education and to encourage local stakeholders to do the same on their behalf (Abshier et al., 2011). Given the jack of all trades skill set that rural districts require of superintendents and the lack of qualified candidates for administrative positions, rural districts experience difficulty recruiting and retaining administrators (Lamkin, 2006). Additionally, as the rural superintendency is a position that presents administrators with the opportunity to build a broad skill set, it is also an ideal platform from which rural administrators can move to larger, more urban districts (Jacobson, 1988). Despite the difficulties associated with retention, opportunities to support and develop rural superintendents in their leadership work include seeking a mentor who can offer insight on the nuances of rural school leadership (Jenkins, 2007) and tapping into colleague networks that facilitate sharing best practices (Cooper & Fusarelli, 2000). These opportunities for local and non-local mentorship may engage rural superintendents in collegueship focused on the nuanced challenges and successes shared by other rural leaders.

The Dimensions of Rural School Leadership

Similar to the portfolio of copious demands that compete for rural superintendents' time, rural principals also find themselves responsible for the duties associated with school leadership, often with little or no help, and with the heavy responsibility that accompanies being a visible leader in the local community. At the school level, a single principal is often responsible for supervising, evaluating and providing professional development to the entire school staff (Eady & Zepeda, 2008). Rural administrators find themselves at the “demographic, geographic, financial, and perhaps even philosophic intersection of a rural community,” and as a result, they are charged with considering the needs of students while heeding legislative mandates (Williams & Nierengarten, 2011, p. 17). Rural schools are often the institution most tightly coupled with community identity, and as a result, rural principals are public figures with responsibilities that extend beyond normal school operations (Howley et al., 2005). Rural principals can leverage local formal and informal networks to accomplish their work, but as Starr and White caution, they must be diplomatic in doing so (2008). In matters related to local schools, significant value is placed on rural principals' ability to work with their schools and local communities, particularly in light of external mandates (Renihan & Noonan, 2012). This places rural principals in the delicate position of cushioning the impact of outside influence on their local operations while implementing those policy reforms and advancing their own learning improvement agendas. Ultimately, rural principals attending to the collision of bureaucratic systems and colloquial tradition find themselves on the front lines of education's local-control debate.

Beyond engaging and buffering the community perspective, rural principals also serve as a chief intermediary between the school and social and health services (Howley et al., 2005). While principals across contexts are responsible to some degree for this type of outreach and

oversight, Howley et al. contend that given the responsibilities and context of the rural principalship this places rural principals in a unique position. Unique features of rural schools, such as grade patterns and community expectations, require rural principals to spend considerable time on administrative functions to the detriment of school and staff leadership functions (Renihan & Noonan, 2012). This, as Renihan and Noonan offer, stands in conflict with the increasingly popular notion that the role of principals is to support teachers in their professional learning. Yet, rural principals must do it all to the best of their ability. As national expectations for school leaders grow, principals face a consistently expanding role (Cray & Millen, 2010). Much of the responsibility that school leaders assume requires them to engage stakeholders in complex work within a changing landscape, and this requires opportunities for school leaders to continually hone their skills through professional learning tailored to their roles (Salazar, 2007). The nature of their work may necessitate that rural education leaders become jacks of all trades, but to fill that difficult role effectively, they need opportunities to develop their professional skill sets within the parameters of schedules that are already overextended.

While noting that rural principals may have more pronounced professional development needs than their urban and suburban counterparts, Howley, Chadwick, and Howley (2002) report that rather than professional resources specifically tailored to the rural context, rural principals appreciate opportunities that are responsive to their rural needs, such as accommodation of their geographic isolation. Given the unique position of rural schools within their communities, rural principals benefit from opportunities to learn about engaging students, teachers, and the community in the shared mission of excellent education for all students (Masumoto & Brown-Welty, 2009). In addition, rural principals have expressed that professional learning opportunities facilitating collaboration with mentors and peers are of particular value (Howley et al., 2002).

Rural principals often turn to each other for guidance in executing their complex roles (Starr & White, 2008), but these support networks are often loosely organized, and it is even less likely that peer support structures are available to new administrators (Cray & Millen, 2010).

Inevitably, rural isolation will leave some administrators without formal or informal peer networks, and researchers have called for the formulation of stronger and more purposeful support systems to provide rural principals with access to stronger systems of support (Renihan & Noonan, 2012). At the same time, Cray and Millen caution that regional networks and those driven through online platforms must remain purposefully organized to facilitate prompt communication with peers while also recognizing that new administrators will have a number of duties vying for their attention. Dayton (1999) calls for enhanced communication between rural schools and coalition building to share successful practices in addition to legislative advocacy for rural schools' needs. As such, collegial networks and professional learning opportunities for rural administrators must provide timely information through convenient mechanisms. Furthermore, research demonstrates that, while nimble, successful professional learning must also be shepherded by an entity that seeks to support rural leaders.

Learning Improvement in Rural Schools

Much of the literature featuring successful school leadership characteristics is rooted in the urban context (Horst & Martin, 2007). Additionally, some studies of teaching and learning improvement efforts in rural schools are based on initiatives funded by significant grants that allow for building instructional capacity. Examples of such resource infusions across rural districts include National Science Foundation grants to improve math and science instruction including a five-year, \$3.5 million grant across ten rural districts in Missouri (Harmon, Gordanier, Henry, & George, 2007) and a five-year, \$6 million grant across 47 rural, high-

poverty districts along the Atlantic coast (Blanton & Harmon, 2005). Blanton & Harmon explore the role that continuous improvement teams have in including teacher voices in system change for instructional improvement, and Harmon et al. noted content-specific professional development with a regional focus and leveraging community partners, such as park rangers, to support teaching and learning-extension opportunities. These studies make interesting contributions regarding engaging teachers as professionals in decision making and through connected regional networks, but the resources invested in these efforts make them difficult to replicate on a large scale without a similar influx of capital or entity to marshal coordinated efforts. For example, Seltzer & Himley noted the success of educators networking across school and district boundaries to enhance the exchange of ideas and collegiality as well as to share professional development and classroom observations with educators from similar rural contexts (1995). These studies suggest the value educators in a rural context place on opportunities to collaborate with colleagues from across district boundaries and to work with community partners. These opportunities can be of particular usefulness to educators in small or remote locations and provide, perhaps the only, opportunities for collegiality.

Rural School-Community Relationships

While a number of practices supporting high student achievement may be shared across the urban - rural continuum, the importance of some aspects of schooling are amplified for successful rural school and district leaders due to the unique nature of leading rural schools. Based on their case study of a rural K-8 school in Missouri with consistently high standardized test results and with a high number of students living in poverty, Horst and Martin (2007) found that the characteristics of the principal/superintendent leading the school included: developing a focus and vision, setting expectations, serving as a role model, conducting evaluations, analyzing

data, providing resources, building collaboration, empowering the staff, building community relationships, and maintaining integrity. Masumoto and Brown-Welty (2009) found that common contributors to success across three high-poverty, high-performing high schools in rural California included: (a) contemporary leadership practices, such as distributed leadership, instructional leadership and transformative leadership; (b) formal and informal school community linkages to bolster the schools' missions and the student outcomes; and (c) contributors to school success, such as focus on instruction, standards and expectations, strong teachers, and supports for students with unique needs. These school leadership frameworks reinforce the importance for rural district leaders to develop strong relationships within the district and across the community. In addition, these frameworks echo the sense of pressure that district leaders feel as they attempt to do more with less (Lamkin, 2006).

Community and family engagement. Chance and Segura (2009) emphasized the importance of community and family engagement in a rural high school's approach to school improvement and highlighted the necessity of the principal's efforts to build relationships across the teaching and student populations. The authors note that while rural communities might be predisposed to tight-knit relationships, a cohesive school culture is not guaranteed. To build a trusting environment, the school leveraged the small population and dense relationship network within the community, the knowledge of the resources available within the community that was shared across the school, and the common values and interests of those within the community. In the context of leveraging these characteristics for a cohesive community, efforts to foster and support collaboration included scheduled time for collaboration structured around improving instruction and student achievement and leadership behaviors that focused on student-centered

planning. These deliberate choices bolstered the school's ability to leverage the cohesive culture of the community for school improvement.

The importance of connecting schools with their communities is present throughout the rural education literature, and Bauch's (2001) review of the literature identifies six types of family-school-community connections that support student success in rural communities: (a) the **social capital** that creates bonds within tight-knit communities that might not benefit from other types of capital, such as human capital and economic capital; (b) the **sense of place** that provides a feeling of belonging to rural residents who are less likely to be mobile than their urban counterparts; (c) the **potential for parent involvement** that comes with a tight-knit community; (d) **church ties** that might provide additional supports to the schools within a rural community, particularly in religiously homogeneous communities; (e) **school-business-agency relationships** that can leverage the resources within a community for the support of local schools; and (f) using the **community as a curricular resource** to extend formal education and to invest rural students within their communities. Bauch notes that this could slow out-migration, and, facilitated purposefully, it might also expose a wide audience of students to a broad range of professional and civic opportunities that would otherwise not be available to them. With an emphasis on building and sustaining these connections to the community, rural education leaders will foster the community-wide visibility and rapport necessary for rural school leadership (Ashton & Duncan, 2012).

Finally, Haas and Lambert explore a number of projects that link schools with communities across rural America (1995). In their assessment of the many programs, Haas and Lambert conclude that these opportunities have shared characteristics making them particularly successful in the various rural contexts. To summarize, the projects (a) are rooted in a sense of

place; (b) value evolving outcomes rather than fixed, predetermined goals; (c) support broad engagement from the community, particularly those who are typically marginalized in community development and school reform efforts; (d) are long-term, multifaceted, and comprehensive; and (e) are rooted in a moral stance that supports the belief that participants are engaging in good, important work. The vast array of student-centered partnership projects, from running local businesses to conducting water quality tests, serve a need in local communities and provide opportunities for students to acquire and demonstrate valuable skills. The connection between local communities and student learning extends across the urban, suburban, rural spectrum, yet as Budge (2006) explored, the interdependence between schools and communities is particularly strong in rural areas.

A set of themes is apparent in the rural school leadership literature as well as in the context of schools, districts, and initiatives focused on learning improvement, and the distilled collection in [Table 2-1](#) is presented in an effort to articulate a cohesive set of themes for rural schools successfully engaging in school improvement efforts.

Table 2-1: Framework of Practices for Rural Schools Successfully Engaging in School Improvement Efforts

Framework of Practices for Rural Schools Successfully Engaging in School Improvement Efforts
Rural educators in successful rural schools have duties expanded beyond a traditional core of responsibilities
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Superintendents straddle, in an amplified way, their very public role in the community and must perform a variety of central office related tasks • Principals perform a myriad of duties within their buildings and, in many cases, across their district • Teachers, as well, may be leaned upon to assume expanded leadership roles in expanding the instructional capacity of the building without teacher coach models and support found in larger, more urban districts
Successful rural schools support solid instructional programs in creative ways
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Respond to state and federal requirements • Provide professional development, often in creative ways or at great cost • Connect curriculum to local context
Successful rural schools leverage resources by working closely with their local community
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Honor schools as the center of rural communities • Facilitate connections and resources from local agencies, nonprofits and businesses • Foster the goodwill necessary to secure voter-approved support
Successful rural schools look beyond their geographic boundaries to grow capacity for learning improvement
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Leverage regional networks for professional development opportunities, shared resources, and collegueship • Locate content support through regional partnerships specific to the local context

In addition to the jack of all trades dynamic that has long been documented for rural educators, these themes acknowledge that rural schools are tightly coupled with their local civic community and that each community, and region, has valuable public and private resources and partnerships that can support students in the local schools. Yet, the literature also acknowledges that, particularly in the current education reform landscape, rural education leaders must look

beyond their local communities to identify resources, including supports and tools, to grow the learning improvement capacity of their schools.

Learning Improvement Agendas

Alford and Ballenger found that superintendents and principals see an essential function of the school as facilitating the improvement of student learning (2012). In this context, superintendents, in particular, act as public stewards of important resources and as instructional leaders (Lochmiller, 2015). Therefore, it is important for leaders to develop, articulate and share widely their learning improvement agendas. As City notes, leaders' efforts to shift instructional practice without a clearly articulated set of priorities specific to their local context are likely to meet resistance from teachers who are unlikely to change the one thing over which they have control, how they teach (2008). Therefore, it is crucial for leaders to develop, articulate, and develop capacity for a learning improvement agenda that is tailored to their context. Successful implementation of a learning improvement agenda requires thoughtful alignment among personal and public goals for the various stakeholders involved in district and school operations (Adams, 2010a). These operations encompass a number of initiatives and priorities from facility maintenance to developing an instructional vision, and a clear agenda for learning improvement must nest those key priorities within the context of all other district and school operations.

Agenda Setting

Sorka contends that the study of agenda setting helps us understand the issues of importance on actors' agendas over time and the relationship between priorities on actors' agendas (2002). Cobb and Elder (1983) classify an issue as a conflict between identifiable groups over the distribution of positions or resources. This definition is particularly salient for

this work encompassing rural issues as these challenges include the importance of the distribution of resources to schools and the distribution of agency to federal, state, and local officials to make resource decisions. Lang and Lang (1981) define issues more broadly as “whatever is in contention among a relevant public” (p. 451). This broad definition is important since learning improvement, though at the center of education leaders’ work, is one of many topics that require their attention. To that end, Ripley and Franklin (1991) explain, “the agenda of the government can be thought of as the sum of all the issues and problems that the government is addressing at any specific time” (p. 1). Kingdon indicates that this comprehensive agenda is a “list of subjects” to which officials and their close associates “are paying some serious attention” (2003, p. 3). That attention, notes Kingdon when addressing policy development, typically comes from a crisis event, a gradual shift where experts gain new knowledge or perspectives, or political processes that represent shifts in public perception or leadership transitions. This underscores the key role district and school leaders play in establishing and enacting an educational agenda that informs their work and that of their colleagues. An improvement agenda addresses the equitable distribution of resources and the work of internal and external stakeholders to enact a cohesive reform within the district and school contexts. Sustaining this reform entails identifying opportunities to refine and improve that agenda in the context of the local environment and keeping stakeholders focused on what they have achieved and the work ahead (Supovitz, 2006). Education leaders may not refer to their role in this work as “agenda setting,” but they use these principles and navigate these competing interests to set a direction for their colleagues and students.

Organizational Learning in District Settings

Honig (2008) provides a framework for investigating district central offices as learning organizations and provides specific activities of assistance relationships between districts and schools. These sustained activities are: modeling, valuing and legitimizing “peripheral participation,” creating and sustaining local engagement, developing tools, brokering/boundary spanning, and supporting engagement in “joint work.” The intended outcome of these functions is building sustained, engaged relationships whereby central office leaders provide opportunities for collaborative leadership with school-level staff. The transformation to this dynamic typically requires a significant shift within district culture (Supovitz, 2006).

Supovitz (2006) notes that “organizational learning is the engine of sustainability” (p. 160) and provides three ways in which organizational learning is typically manifested: “(1) fostering individual learning for the purposes of the organization; (2) using social interactions as a means of fostering and sharing learning across individuals and groups; and (3) embedding learning in the rules and routines of the organization” (p. 161). In the case of Supovitz’s research on the reform efforts in Florida’s Duval County, an example of such embedded organizational learning included creating professional learning communities across the district for educators working at multiple levels.

Education leaders are tasked with identifying the need for reform and for creating specific improvement points for reform efforts. In addition to setting their agenda through creating, or engaging in, a vision and building, or contributing to, a plan for cohesive reform, leaders must also build instructional and political capacity for reform, and ultimately, maintain human, capital, and political resources to sustain and refine reform efforts. In his 1988 investigation of the structures governing school districts, Larry Cuban provides the key roles of

principaling and superintending: instructional, managerial, and political. The day-to-day manifestation of these duties is an ever evolving dynamic in response to national, state, and local mandates and internal and external stakeholders. Yet, Cuban's characterization of key functions speaks to the constant negotiation that all education leaders must undertake with their stakeholders.

Creating Coherence for Learning-Focused Leadership

A review of the literature addressing challenges faced by rural schools and communities describes the dynamics that rural education leaders must often navigate to bring about the change and/or resources necessary to provide all students with a high-quality education. Yet, the literature addressing rural education focuses primarily on the topics previously addressed and is rooted in the challenges of educating students in rural communities and of complying with external mandates, such as state and federal education policy. That noted, contemporary directions in education reform charge central office administrators with increasing individual schools' capacity for teaching and learning and to include school level administrators in developing those policies (Honig, 2008). Much of the literature documenting this shift was developed from research in urban school districts. Yet, shifts in expectations related to education, including a greater focus on student outcomes, teacher and leader accountability, and closing persistent achievement gaps are happening in all district contexts. This study seeks to better understand how school and district level administrators work together to craft local policies that support learning opportunities for all students, regardless of the challenges students and schools may face.

Situating Districts in Learning Improvement Efforts

Much scholarship has been produced to situate the role of the central office, or more broadly the district, in the context of learning improvement efforts. Knapp (2008) reminds us that the work of instructional reform is embedded in the daily routines and practices of employees working across the district. Spillane and Thompson (1997) note that their work to understand this context extends beyond considering only the central office headquarters to include individuals who, through formal or informal roles, help develop instructional policy. Spillane and Thompson consider this collection of individuals to be the local education agency (LEA), and they found that LEA capacity to support ambitious instructional reform consists of “human capital (knowledge, skills, and dispositions of leaders within the district), social capital (social links within and outside of the district, together with the norms and trust to support open communication via these links), and financial resources (as allocated to staffing, time, and materials)” (p. 199). Rorrer, Skrla and Scheurich investigated the roles of districts in educational reform as it was defined in previous research and found that district work was generally considered to include “(a) establishing instructional leadership, (b) reorienting the organization, (c) establishing policy coherence, and (d) maintaining an equity focus” (2008, p. 307). Rorrer et al. posit that district change is a complex, nonlinear process and that the work of these four roles might be tightly or loosely coupled depending on the context of specific districts.

As districts engage in the roles noted by Rorrer et al. (2008) and leverage the various forms of capital noted by Spillane and Thompson (1997), the district, itself, is simultaneously composed of three specific, interconnected systems: a political system, an administrative system (including executive management, instructional guidance, human resource development, and operations duties), and a professional system of educator networks (Thompson, Sykes, & Skrla,

2008). Successful districts will marshal these systems and resources towards a plan for student learning and connect the work of instructional, support, and administrative staff to the learning agenda by appropriately aligning, coupling, and adjusting the four roles of the district to meet the unique needs of the district context.

Educational Improvement Frameworks

A framework for approaching educational reform, *Leading for Learning* (Knapp et al., 2003a; Knapp, Copland, & Talbert, 2003b; Copland & Knapp, 2006) and, later, *Learning-Focused Leadership* (Knapp, Honig, Plecki, Portin, & Copland, 2014) was developed by considering “instructional leadership, school reform and renewal, teacher learning and professional community, teacher leadership, organizational learning, policy-practice connections, and education in high-poverty, high-diversity settings” (Knapp et al., 2003a, p. 5). The *Leading for Learning* framework (Knapp et al., 2003b) emphasizes:

- Establishing a focus on learning: leaders focus their own and others’ attention persistently and publicly on learning and teaching (p. 14)
- Building professional communities that value learning: leaders nurture work cultures that value and support their members’ learning (p. 16)
- Engaging external environments that matter for learning: leaders build relationships with, and secure resources from, groups outside the school or district that can foster students’ and teachers’ learning (p. 19)
- Acting strategically and sharing leadership: leaders mobilize activity along pathways leading to student, professional, and system learning. In the process, they distribute leadership across levels and among individuals operating from different vantage points (p. 22)
- Creating coherence: leaders bring student, professional, and system learning into relationship with one another and with learning goals (p. 26)

This framework provides a lens through which school and district leaders’ efforts can be evaluated. The final component, addressing coherence, is a critical layer in complex education initiatives. Leaders must connect actions across reform pathways for improvement to one another

and to the activities embedded in student, professional, and system learning (Knapp et al., 2003a; Knapp et al., 2003b; Copland & Knapp, 2006). Without connections between new initiatives, policies become disconnected leading to silos across districts (City, 2008).

Coherence in learning improvement frameworks. To create policy coherence for educational reform, leaders must “(1) use pathways that intentionally address student, professional, and system learning; (2) align activities with one another, their respective resources, and compelling visions of learning and teaching; and (3) create structures and incentives for system learning that are mutually supportive of student and professional learning” (Copland & Knapp, 2006, p. 90 - 91). Knapp et al. (2003b) identify four broad pathway categories that engage the state and federal, district, and school levels to influence student, professional, and system learning:

- Pathways focused on **content, assessment, and accountability**, including curriculum, student learning standards, and assessment and accountability systems
- Pathways focused on **learners and learner support**, including support for special learning needs and non-instructional needs, student assignment, behavioral support and management, and parent and family engagement
- Pathways focused on the **workplace and system**, including planning, system development, and human resources decisions and actions
- Pathways focused on **professionals and their practice**, including professional development, mentoring, professional standards, evaluation, and compensation

Ensuring that pathways are identified and leveraged across levels within and beyond the district requires engaging and mobilizing multiple stakeholders across contexts.

Creating coherence across multiple levels within a district requires collaboration between district leaders and school leaders (Honig, 2003; Honig & Hatch, 2004), yet enacting a coherent agenda requires different actions of leaders at various levels within a district. It is essential that such actions are rooted in clear expectations that prioritize learning improvement (Plecki &

Knapp, 2014). Copland and Knapp (2006) provide a framework for investigating how coherence is supported in individual schools and district offices:

Table 2-2: Creating Coherence in Schools and Districts

What creating coherence looks like in...	
Schools	School Districts
1) Develop coherent school structures that support teachers' learning	1) Create structures that encourage and support new avenues of communication between central office leaders and school leaders
2) Develop strategies for improving learning that give teachers opportunities to lead and to analyze hierarchical school role boundaries	2) Focus ongoing professional learning for principals on improving instruction
3) Work from a clear theory of action that is focused on improving instruction and is reinforced through supervision and evaluation	3) Use external experts to help teachers and leaders build capacity in particular content areas, and link professional efforts to ongoing assessments
	4) Restructure central office leadership responsibilities to serve learning-related goals

(Copland & Knapp, 2006, p. 91-95)

Coherent learning improvement frameworks in practice. Knapp et al. (2014) build upon this work to elaborate on what learning-focused leadership means in practice by considering, in particular:

- Leadership roles, structures, and arrangements in schools, district central offices, and how the two are connected
- Leadership practices supporting those roles, structures, and arrangements
- Data, evidence, and feedback on professional work, as part of leadership practice
- Equitable allocation and use of resources for learning improvement
- Leaders' own learning and development
- A support system for learning-focused leadership work

These components provide a system for investigating leadership practices and structural supports connected to school and district reform. Analysis of the district's structural efforts is supported by Supovitz's (2006) components crucial to a district's theory of action for improving teaching and learning across the system:

- Developing a specific vision of what high-quality instruction should look like inside classrooms
- Building both the commitment and the capacity of employees across the system to enact and support the instructional vision
- Constructing mechanisms to provide data at all levels of the system that will be used both to provide people with information that informs their practices and to monitor the implementation of their instructional vision
- Developing a means to help people continually deepen their implementation and to help the district continually refine this vision and understand its implications (p. 5)

Taken together, Knapp et al. (2014) and Supovitz (2006) provide a multi-layered framework for investigating leadership practices that support high-quality learning opportunities for all students and the ways in which the district must foster those leadership practices through systemic supports that enable leaders to undertake this work at all local levels.

Developing System-Wide Learning Frameworks

School system leaders can improve learning opportunities for all students through implementing structures that improve instruction, and they can engage in this system-wide instructional improvement by articulating and implementing “a unifying vision of instructional quality while maintaining some level of local flexibility” (Supovitz, 2006, p. 3). Supovitz contends that districts can bolster system-wide teaching and learning practice by engaging in the systemic exploration of instructional challenges.

Without presenting a coherent vision of solid instruction, district leaders are relinquishing their instructional leadership to individual schools or the outside supports that schools receive, if they are received. This vision of powerful teaching and learning practice must be central to the core mission of educational organizations as it provides members of that organization with the opportunity to focus on enacting that vision (Supovitz, 2006). The vision, Supovitz notes, must also be developed through considering the local context present in any place, thereby allowing

the vision to be dynamic and constantly refined. Because instructional reform efforts can become much less clear as they are received by schools and individual teachers, education leaders must ensure that they “develop, communicate, and support a coherent vision of excellent instruction” across multiple levels (Supovitz, 2006, p. 28). A system of supporting instructional leadership across levels can bolster the capacity of school leaders in their local instructional leadership efforts (Plecki & Knapp, 2014).

Collaborating for coherence in improvement frameworks. Honig and Hatch (2004) define policy coherence as “an ongoing process whereby schools and school district central offices work together to help schools manage external demands” (p. 26). They term this process “crafting coherence” and present the three activities that this process entails.

- First, schools establish goals and strategies, including those that are specific, open-ended and adaptable, which are established and maintained through school-based processes that engage school-level staff.
- Second, schools determine whether to bridge or buffer external demands based on these goals.
- Third, “district central offices support these decision-making processes by continually searching for and using information about schools’ goals, strategies, and experiences to inform their own operations” (p. 26).

Honig and Hatch note that this definition of policy coherence articulates a more complex process beyond the simple alignment of curriculum, assessment, and instructional practices; rather, this process mirrors policy development in other sectors and allows for the dynamic, sustained structures necessary for the ongoing management of opportunity and resources. This dynamic role for local education policy makers at the district level places them in a post that is refashioned from offering top-down mandates to a role that requires them to support operations based on the decisions of school-level stakeholders (Honig, 2003; Honig & Hatch, 2004).

While these frameworks suggest greater collaboration between districts and schools, education leaders are still charged with creating an agenda for leadership within their context to enable prioritization of improvement efforts. The agenda setting literature provides a lens for better understanding how leaders position themselves and their colleagues to engage in the work necessary to create and sustain high-quality educational opportunities for all students. This includes building a framework for understanding how leaders approach crafting their agendas for learning improvement and how such agendas relate to the overall structure leaders build within their school or district. Education leaders face many professional demands, and better understanding how leaders determine their priorities is a key component of understanding how system-wide change in teaching and learning can be implemented and sustained.

Critical Functions of Leadership

Understanding how the daily duties of education leaders can contribute to, or disrupt, learning improvement within schools and across districts is a key component of investigating leadership practices. Leithwood, Louis, Anderson, and Wahlstrom (2004) conducted an analysis of literature to better understand how leadership influences student learning, and they found that the basics of successful leadership included setting directions, developing people, and redesigning the organization. In a similar study of the leadership practices that support the leadership for learning frameworks, Murphy, Elliott, Goldring, and Porter (2007) emphasize that leaders must stay focused on the “core technology of schooling,” including learning, teaching, curriculum, and assessment and to ensure that administrative duties support the work of strengthening the core (p. 179).

Portin (2005) outlines the critical functions of school leadership and their characteristics in practice (also see Portin, Schneider, DeArmond, & Gundlach, 2003). While presented as areas

of common leadership practices across public, independent, and charter schools, these characteristics are transferable to conceptualizing the essential functions of district leadership as those administrators provide clear, actionable pathways for supporting student learning.

- Instructional Leadership: Assuring quality of instruction, modeling teaching practice, supervising curriculum, and assuring teaching resources
- Cultural Leadership: Tending to the symbolic resources of the school (for example, its traditions, climate, and history)
- Managerial Leadership: Tending to the operations of the school (for example its budget, schedule, facilities, and transportation)
- Strategic Leadership: Promoting a vision, mission, goals, and developing a means to reach them
- Human Resource Leadership: Recruiting, hiring, firing, inducting, and mentoring teachers and administrators; developing leadership capacity and professional development opportunities
- External Development and Political Leadership: Representing the school in the community, developing capital, public relations, recruiting students, buffering and mediating external interests, and advocating for the school's interests
- Micropolitical Leadership: Buffering and mediating internal interests, maximizing resources (financial and human) (p. 16)

Using these critical functions and characteristics of leadership, Portin (2005) provides a cross analysis of leadership actions including Leithwood and Jantzi's (2005) review of research investigating Transformational Leadership Behaviors and the Leading for Learning framework (Knapp et al., 2003b).

Table 2-3: Cross Analysis of School Leadership Actions

Leithwood and Jantzi (2005)	Portin, Schneider, DeArmond, and Gundach (2003)	Knapp, Copland, and Talbert (2003b)
- Setting directions	- Strategic leadership - Cultural leadership	- Establishing a focus on learning - Acting strategically and sharing leadership - Creating coherence
- Helping people	- Instructional leadership - Human resource leadership	- Building professional communities
- Redesigning the organization	- Managerial leadership - External development leadership - Micropolitical leadership	- Engaging external environments

(Portin, 2005, p. 20)

As evidenced by the figure above, Cuban's (1988) instructional, managerial, and political leadership roles have become increasingly intertwined with one another as leadership related to instruction, management, and the political dynamics of schools and districts can no longer easily be siloed into separate categories of responsibility. Not only do school leaders face demands to improve teaching and learning within their context, district administrators face demands to have increased roles in improving instruction (Honig, 2008).

Constantly working to shepherd these competing demands for time, energy, and resources into a cohesive, sustainable, and actionable agenda for leadership and school or district-wide reform is a challenge that all education leaders face. These leaders are charged with meeting this challenge within a rapidly shifting environment of expectations and resources, and better understanding how rural school and district leaders, in particular, approach this will provide policy insight that the literature has largely reserved for the urban context.

Resources and Resource Allocation in Schools

All education leaders must work with an array of stakeholders to marshal sometimes competing interests to support the goals of schools, and rural superintendents, in particular, face

potential political challenges in the light of tight or diminishing resources (Lochmiller, 2015). As Lochmiller notes, the work of rural superintendents is “very much about identifying, managing, and responding to the political forces surrounding their leadership” (p. 132). The work of 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 non-fiscal resources to achieve those goals (Pan, Rudo, Schneider, & Smith-Hansen, 2003). 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 et al., 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) 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 (p. 154). As City posits, resource use and school improvement drive each other, therefore, demands on schools and districts must be aligned with support and accountability to measure progress toward meeting those demands.

Identifying Resources in Schools

Plecki, Alejano, Knapp, & Lochmiller (2006) identify the three basic categories of resources: money, human capital, and time, and the authors 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 that target and support student learning. In addition to (a) money; (b) staff; and (c) time, additional resources include (d) physical resources; and (e) parents and the community. These additional resource typologies are

of particular importance to this study because many rural districts face a gap of physical resources, such as educational technology equipment. 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, is a key component of rural school improvement work.

Identifying staff as a critical resource and ensuring that the staff has the capacity (knowledge and skills) and support necessary to willingly engage in the work of school improvement are key strategies for successfully improving student performance (Pan et al., 2003). Therefore, employee attitude and capacity are central to building and sustaining improvement efforts within schools and districts. The importance of relationships is a key strand of the theory for improved student outcomes in small schools (City, 2008). As a result, the necessity for cohesive, interdependent teams of educators is compounded in small schools and districts. As City (2008) emphasizes, resourcefulness within schools is not a result of having a multitude of resources; instead, resourcefulness addresses how resources are deployed and if they are deployed in creative ways to address specific challenges.

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, 2010a). Decisions about resources occur at multiple levels in addition to the school, such as the “policy, organizational, and community contexts” in which schools are nested (Adams, 2010b, p. 42). 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 (2000) outlines the four perspectives through which school leaders may approach financial decision making: (a) the *technical perspective* emphasizing the principles of sound fiscal management; (b) the *organizational perspective* considering structures and practices in place to support fiscal leadership; (c) the *political perspective* through which the power dynamics of allocating finite resources are considered; and (d) the *ethical perspective* through which the value judgments of distributing the resources are recognized. These four lenses are also generalizable to considering non-fiscal resource allocation decisions in schools.

Plecki et al. (2006) provide a framework for considering key allocation issues in relation to learning improvement. These issues are: (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. The components of a number of other frameworks, derived from scholarly and practitioner literature, bolster these four key issue areas as a mechanism for both leading and investigating learning improvement. 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, 2010a).

Targeting achievement gaps. By targeting achievement gaps, school and district leaders target disparities among groups of students. 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 and circumstances of the school or district, and

sustaining targeted improvement efforts requires the ongoing collection and analysis of student data that tie resources to student performance outcomes (Pan et al., 2003). Targeting equitable learning improvement requires personalizing students' learning and support to best meet their needs. Aligning resources to learning experiences in the school is reliant upon using time strategically through methods such as tailored student groupings and technology use (Miles, 2010; Miles & Ferris, 2015).

Organizing 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 (monetary, staff, physical, time, community, etc.) available to them and identify ways that resources might be better allocated to support priorities for students instead of fulfilling allocation patterns dictated by tradition (Pan et. al., 2003). Resource allocation, or reallocation, strategies to support learning improvement might include: reduction of specialized services, flexible student grouping, structures supporting more personal environments, longer and varied blocks of time, more common planning time for teachers, and creative definitions of staffing roles and time (Miles & Darling-Hammond, 1998). Changing these components requires shifting norms to defy tradition, and tradition is one of the key constraints that leaders face in addition to government mandates and union practices (City, 2008; Miles & Darling-Hammond, 1998). Organizing schools for improvement means organizing teachers and staff in ways that will maximize student learning and support teachers' professional growth (Miles & Ferris, 2015). Supporting this professional growth for teachers requires organizing teams of educators through thoughtful assignment, professional development, and collaborative time tied to priorities for student learning (Miles, 2010). School leaders must also consider options that will positively

impact student learning, such as prioritizing teacher quality over other factors, including class size (Miles & Frank, 2008). Finally, City (2008) stresses the importance of viewing time and students' schedules as a resource. Aligning students' experiences with teachers' coordinated efforts is an important connection that learning improvement agendas should provide.

Political dimensions of learning-focused leadership. The acts of reorganizing school or district structures and reallocating resources are likely to draw the attention and scrutiny of community stakeholders, particularly if resource allocation deviates from traditional patterns. As a result, in addition to cohesive allocation of resources to address targeted needs, it is critical for leaders engaging in learning improvement work to articulate their agenda to colleagues and the community by communicating the “needs, priorities, goals, and strategies” of their plan (Pan et al., 2003, p. 82). The ability to demonstrate a strong rationale for a learning improvement agenda will embolden school and district leaders in the work Plecki et al. (2006) describe as “mediating” political pressures related to resource allocation decisions and can leverage greater authority to act upon a learning improvement agenda. School and district leaders must navigate political dynamics within any community context, but the interconnected nature of many rural districts and communities could add complexity or another layer to the delicate work of reframing the immediate and long-term priorities for students.

Developing human capital as a resource. As schools and districts are reorganized to better orient operations for student learning, instructional and non-instructional staff must also pivot their work and continue to develop skills and deepen expertise. Plecki et al. (2006) stress that neither leadership nor instructional expertise are fixed commodities and must be developed and nurtured. In addition to developing skill sets, leaders must also seek opportunities to expand school or district capacity as a unit. Reorganizing staff with differentiated roles to better support

teaching and learning is a way leaders can leverage their team for maximum impact (Miles & Ferris, 2015). Attempting to implement change can create challenges for leaders in formal ways, such as navigating or negotiating union restrictions (Miles & Darling-Hammond, 1997; Miles & Darling-Hammond, 1998). In addition, some limitations are rooted in individual staff members' capacity to learn, grow, and shift practice (City, 2008). Communication between all teaching and learning stakeholders is critical as resource allocation practices and their impact are evaluated through formal mechanisms, such as standardized formative and summative student assessment, and informal mechanisms, such as informal observations and staff feedback (Pan et al., 2003).

School and District Resource Distribution Strategies

Education researchers provide a number of classifications for determining a 'strategic' school or 'strategic' resource allocation plans. Generally, as Miles & Ferris (2015) note, strategic school design is based upon organizing people, time, money, and technology around a vision for what it will take students and teachers to be successful. That vision, as City (2008) posits, will drive defining an instructional model which will in turn organize people, time, and money in ways that will support it. Miles and Frank (2008) discuss the ways in which schools organize and use resources to (a) invest in human capital and staff capacity building; (b) create personalized learning environments through individual attention; and (c) use time strategically to emphasize core instruction. Across these models for identifying strategic schools and learning organizations, judiciously leveraging resources—including people, time, money, and tools—drives the work of supporting a cohesive and multi-faceted, multi-level learning improvement agenda.

Principals play a unique role in the process of cultivating and allocating resources to support learning improvement in their buildings. As building leaders, they work to curate a

strong team and must work to create shared vision and trust and should generate buy-in for professional development as a foundation for improvement efforts (City, 2008). In addition to leading an instructional staff and making operational decisions, principals are also charged with mediating the expectations of governing policies, the district, and the community-at-large (Adams, 2010b). In their role, the building level leaders make critical resource allocation decisions related to the traditional academic core and other opportunities for student learning, and they also serve as an instructional leader and manager of a team of employees. Additionally, building leaders must serve as a bridge from the school to the district and community while knowing when to buffer by providing some cover for their team from the negotiations that mediate the school's relationship to these outside forces. Executing these duties requires training, expertise, and, as Plecki and Knapp note, support for investing in the development of leaders to translate resources "into the tangible and intangible conditions supporting the learning of students and professionals at all levels of the education system" (2014, p. 127).

In their efforts to support and provide flexibility for building-level leaders, district leaders must determine what is left to schools to decide particularly if school participation will increase buy-in, but this has the potential to decrease short-term efficiency in the decision making process (City, 2008). Transparent systems explaining rationales for learning improvement agendas and identifying who has decision-making authority at each level shape what Plecki and Knapp (2014) refer to as "investment frameworks." City notes that the work of determining how to strike a balance between consistent, district-wide strategy and individualized school support, and when and how to deliver that support (on demand or at scheduled intervals), is an ongoing struggle for districts implementing an improvement agenda. The ongoing support from districts to navigate

these challenges with their schools provides schools with an increased likelihood that meaningful change will sustain over the medium to long-term (Odden & Archibald, 2001).

Resources in Rural Schools

Attracting and retaining qualified teachers is one challenge rural schools experience that no amount of creativity or reorganization will simply fix. This is an ongoing challenge for rural district and school administrators. Rural schools often have staffing challenges that their more urban counterparts don't experience (Brent, Roellke, & Monk, 1997). Additionally, as Brent and colleagues found in small rural and non-rural districts, smaller districts had difficulty allocating staff to meet state guidelines and tended to rely on dual certified staff, teachers working outside of their certification area, and teachers teaching more sections than their counterparts in larger districts. District support is essential in helping schools navigate these difficult dynamics. This is particularly the case in light of City's (2008) observation that precision matters more in small schools because there is less leeway for absorbing changes to budget, staffing, or schedules.

The school improvement and resource allocation literature is generous with suggestions for school and district administrators to seek out external funding or grant support. The theory of action driving these suggestions is varied: City (2008) suggests that external support that is flexible enough to address leader-identified needs is of the utmost importance, Plecki et al. (2006) advocate for directing external support to learning improvement priorities, and Pan et al. (2003) suggest seeking grants that could allow operating funds from new sources to be reallocated to learning improvement needs. Rural schools and districts, however, have far fewer opportunities to benefit from the philanthropic communities that funnel funding from large foundations to urban districts or the local philanthropy that supports many suburban districts. In addition to a lack of widespread interest in supporting research and investment in smaller

districts and rural schools across the country, the resources required to obtain and manage large grants are not feasible investments for most rural districts, particularly smaller rural districts.

This dynamic is not unique to school or district-level capacity, as many states comprised primarily of rural districts did not submit or were not awarded Race to the Top grants.

Advancing school or district-wide practice, however, does not always require large sums of money. In fact, as City found, if leaders have the flexibility to access even small discretionary funds, small investments can have lasting impacts and wide-reaching ripple effects.

Using minimal resources to craft a large scale and sustainable impact requires that leaders utilize both vision and creativity. Identifying, building, and leveraging partnerships within the community is an important component of school and district leaders' work to build effective schools because these interventions can mitigate negative influences on learning, such as poverty and inadequate healthcare (Kirst & Rhodes, 2010). In addition to partnering with agencies and nonprofits, it is important for district leaders to engage families and the business community as partners in their work through effectively communicating their goals and accomplishments, particularly to build good will and avoid adversarial relationships with the public (Pan et al., 2003). In addition, Pan et al. stress the importance of successfully engaging parents and families in the work of schools because, in addition to supporting the success of individual students, "parent and community involvement results in additional funds, materials, equipment, volunteers, and support of school programs and initiatives," and this community support can range from volunteers who tutor or mentor to in-kind services and donations (p. 88). Researchers have noted the role of community partners as potential cost-saving measures by replacing school-based services with high-quality community partners at a lower cost (Miles & Ferris, 2015). For example, some districts are able to partner with community organizations or

businesses to take advantage of grant programs targeting special populations (Pan et al., 2003). As with the majority of school improvement literature, much of this scholarship is derived from research and practice in urban or metropolitan settings. Yet, the importance of engaging families, along with the civic and private sectors, spans all types of schools and districts. Failure to engage the community can lead to negative ramifications while the sustained and transparent engagement of the public-at-large in schools can have tremendous benefits for the systems and opportunities that support student learning.

Not only are school and district leaders charged with making important decisions about allocating the resources available to their context, they must also seek new resource streams and opportunities that will lead to resource-rich partnerships. In this light, not only are leaders 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 skill sets for leading school improvement work (City, 2008). Research has demonstrated that successful school improvement work is circumstance and context specific to each district or school (Miles & Darling-Hammond, 1997; Miles & Frank, 2008; Pan et al., 2003). Therefore, it is critical for successful learning-improvement focused leaders to evaluate progress toward their goal on a regular basis and to adapt their approach within their learning-improvement framework while clearly articulating ongoing efforts and adjustments to a broad audience of stakeholders.

Chapter 3

Research Methodology

This dissertation explores the work of rural education leaders in Washington state who are leading schools and districts with an upward trajectory in student achievement. Due to the nature of the questions to be addressed and the variety of research sites and participants, a case study approach was the appropriate method to investigate this set of research questions. Merriam (2009) broadly defines a case study as “an in-depth description and analysis of a bounded system” (p. 40), while Yin (2008) provides a definition more specific to the research process itself: “A case study is an empirical inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context, especially when the boundaries between phenomenon and context are not clearly evident” (p. 18).

Research Focus, Questions, and Cases

The first research question attempts to better understand the school and community priorities for young people in and across the research sites, to elicit the challenges unique to each setting, and to identify common challenges that are shared across the rural contexts. The second and third questions seek to foster an understanding of how rural education leaders work to develop school improvement priorities and plans and, given the constraints of their setting, gather and marshal resources that will support sustainable, high-quality learning opportunities for students.

1) How do rural education leaders characterize high-quality learning opportunities for the students in their schools and the challenges for students to obtain such educational opportunities?

2) How do education leaders in rural settings approach developing an organizational agenda for system wide priorities that recognize their rural context?

3) How do rural education leaders identify, leverage, and allocate supports and resources available to meet the needs of their staff and students?

To investigate these questions, I designed a qualitative study. Merriam (1998) offers the five characteristics of qualitative research: (a) it is conducted to understand how people make sense of their world; (b) the researcher is the primary instrument for data collection and analysis; (c) it usually involves field work; (d) it primarily employs an inductive research strategy; and (e) the product of qualitative research is richly descriptive. Merriam (2009) further refines the nature of basic qualitative study to note that such researchers are interested in (a) how people interpret their experiences; (b) how they construct their worlds; and (c) what meaning they attribute to their experiences (p. 23). In particular, this study is a collective case study (Stake, 2000) designed to explore how the work of a diverse cross section of rural school administrators and education support providers, across multiple cases, converge and diverge in the pursuit of strengthening rural schools.

Rural Education Research

Engaging in rural education research provides a clear opportunity to contribute to an underdeveloped education literature and to an education policy conversation historically ignored by the United States Department of Education (Arnold, 2005). Yet, honoring calls for a more academically-oriented, quantitative perspective in rural education research (Stapel & DeYoung, 2011) provides a challenge as many of these schools and districts are so small that their standardized test scores and other achievement indicators, such as graduation rates, are suppressed by state education agencies to protect student confidentiality. Additionally, for rural

districts that are large enough to produce public achievement data, this information can vary significantly from year to year as the impact of small portions of grade groups and subgroups “make judgments based on these statistics unreliable” (Jimerson, 2005, p. 214). Thus, a school may have notable fluctuation from one year to the next in terms of standardized testing data because “the smaller the sample size, the more volatility in the results, thus rendering judgments based on these data unreliable and inappropriate” (Jimerson, 2005, p. 214). Yet, No Child Left Behind measures and benchmarks, such as Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) remains “the central measure of success or failure” for schools (Balfanz, Legters, West, & Weber, 2007, p. 560). No Child Left Behind, enacted in 2002, was the federal law governing education for the academic years included in this study. The Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) was signed into law in December 2015 and replaced No Child Left Behind.

Defining Rural

Rural education researchers lack shared agreement on the criteria that should be employed to determine “rural” status (Jordan & Jordan, 2004). The lack of a common definition of “rural” makes comparing results across studies on rural issues exceptionally difficult (Arnold, Newman, Gaddy, & Dean, 2005) thereby increasing the difficulty of conducting the research concentrated on academic performance that Stapel and DeYoung (2011) seek. As explored in chapters one and two, scholars have characterized the unique features of many rural communities. For example, previous work has noted that hard work, a high priority on family, and values characterized as traditional are predominant in rural communities (Kannapel & DeYoung, 1999). These characteristics of rural communities can certainly be found elsewhere but are regarded as enduring characteristics of rural communities.

Regarding simply defining “rural,” Kannapel and DeYoung (1999) indicate “a theme that is prevalent among rural education researchers is the difficulty of defining the concept ‘rural’” (p. 68). This study relies on the 2010 United States Census as the determining mechanism for the rural nature of a school, and the 2010 rural identification criteria differs from previous classifications. The 2000 Census defined “rural” as all populations located outside of urbanized areas or urban clusters. Urbanized areas and urban clusters “encompass densely settled territory” which consists of a core census block with a population density of at least 1,000 people per square mile and surrounding census blocks that have an “overall density of at least 500 people per square mile” (United States Census Bureau, 2002). The 2010 Census identifies two types of urban areas: Urbanized Areas of 50,000 or more people and Urban Clusters of at least 2,500 and less than 50,000 people (United States Census Bureau, 2010). This distinction will allow for a more seamless comparison of geographic areas in future census data. According to 2010 census standards, the label “rural” denotes communities of less than 2,500 people, and this is consistent with the field of research describing rural demographics.

The 2010 census information was used to develop an updated mechanism for the federal government’s determination of a school’s locale. While the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) has used locale codes since the 1980s, the latest iteration provides a school’s proximity to urban areas. According to NCES (United States Department of Education, 2014), using the precise longitude and latitude for school location allows NCES to accurately provide locale information for 91% of schools and only somewhat less precise information for the remaining schools. Urban-centric locale codes are divided into four categories with three subcategories for each: City (large, midsize, small), Suburb (large, midsize, small), Town (fringe, distant, remote), and Rural (fringe, distant, remote). A Rural, Fringe school is typically

located within 5 miles from an urbanized area while a Rural, Remote school is located more than 25 miles from an urbanized area. A district's locale code is determined by the classification of a 50% majority of schools in the district. For example, a district may be classified as being in a town, but that district may include one or more rural schools. Utilizing NCES locale codes as the selection criteria for schools included in this study ensures the transparency of the term "rural" when describing the context of schools included in this study. NCES locale codes provide an objective classification of schools, and given the variability of rural contexts within Washington state, NCES locale codes strengthened comparisons between schools in different regions. Finally, the use of NCES locale codes to classify the rural nature of schools increases generalizability outside of Washington state.

Research Site Selection

This study was designed to conduct research on the practices of school leaders, school principals, district superintendents, and ESD administrators, engaging in work that is improving teaching and learning in their schools, districts, and regions to better understand the teaching and learning policy frameworks that support this work. To identify potential research sites, I analyzed publicly available standardized test scores to isolate rural schools with upward trends in standardized test scores. Therefore, this study is a comparative case study across multiple sites. Designing studies that include multiple cases is a common strategy employed to enhance generalizability of findings (Merriam, 2009).

Specific criteria governed eligibility for participation in this study to create a bounded system (Merriam, 2009). A framework for purposeful sampling was utilized to select potential research sites. First, variation in sampling was used to identify three of nine educational service districts (ESDs) in Washington state. These three ESDs represent the variety of geography and

topography in Washington state and include an area surrounding an interstate corridor, an area isolated by a mountain range, and an area both isolated and further divided by large bodies of water and mountains. The ESD regions are located on both sides of the Cascade Mountain Range, including “Eastern” and “Western” Washington. Conventional wisdom in Washington state classifies Western Washington as predominately metropolitan and Eastern Washington as predominately rural, and the ESD regions were selected to include the perspectives of rural administrators from both sides of the state. In addition to diverse geography and varying proximity to metropolitan areas, the regions selected represent a diversity of the local economic industries present throughout the state. There are a total of 79 school districts stretching across the three ESDs. According to data from the 2013-2014 school year, NCES classified 16 districts as Rural, Remote; 13 districts as Rural, Distant; and 9 districts as Rural, Fringe. Rural schools were also located in districts not classified as rural, including rural schools in one city-classified district, rural schools in nine suburb-classified districts, and rural schools in ten town-classified districts (United States Department of Education, 2015). Selection of research sites was guided by the location of schools within each of the ESD regions. Therefore, all of the schools selected for this study are classified as rural schools, but not every rural school is situated in a rural district.

To identify school and district sites as candidates for a sample population, I analyzed the Washington State Achievement Index score (AI) calculated by the Washington State Board of Education (2016) for each rural school in the 79 districts. Scores from the 2010-2011, 2011-2012, 2012-2013, and 2013-2014 school years were analyzed to identify schools with upward trends in their Achievement Index scores. Achievement Index scores for 2010-2014 are a composite of (a) the percent of students meeting or exceeding state reading, writing, mathematics

and science standards as measured by the Washington Comprehensive Assessment Program (40% of AI for elementary and middle schools and 33% of AI for high schools); (b) median student growth percentiles in reading and mathematics determined by growth models developed by the National Center for the Improvement of Educational Assessment (60% of AI for elementary and middle schools and 33% of AI for high schools); and (c) the adjusted 5-year cohort graduation rates (33% of AI for high schools). Though not available for all of the school years included in this study, and therefore not employed as a selection tool, Washington state now provides an average of the previous three years, this is an example of a composite noted by Jimerson (2005) as a tool for examining student achievement in small schools.

Case selection limitations. A limitation of this study is that a minority of the schools had increases and 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 a general 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. Further complicating the use of academic scores in small schools is the suppression of data, particularly grade-level and subgroup data for minorities, to protect student confidentiality. Therefore, Achievement Index scores were employed as a method for creating a bounded system with an emphasis on academic achievement (Merriam, 2009). An additional limitation is that while some of the schools included have a majority or near majority of non-white populations, the scan of improving schools also includes several schools with racially-homogeneous, but socioeconomically diverse, student populations. This is representative of the

various communities across the state but does not include schools where a majority of students represent highly transient or majority minority populations.

Recruitment. After qualifying districts and schools were identified, I contacted the superintendent and principal for each potential site. Superintendents were typically my first point of contact for two reasons: first, this allowed superintendents to accept or decline this research within their district, and second, superintendents tend to have schedules that require the most advanced planning. Following an affirmative response from the superintendent, I reached out to the principal(s) within the district to invite their participation. All initial contact was facilitated via email, and a handful of participants requested preliminary telephone conversations to better understand the study. Not all invited superintendents or principals agreed to participate in this study. In these cases, the administrators declined to participate or did not respond to the invitation. The study design required participation from both the principal and the superintendent to include a school and district in the study.

Participant Selection. The majority of data for this study consisted of semi-structured interviews with 15 local superintendents and principals and 16 ESD administrators. ESD administrators interviewed at each of the three ESD included: (a) superintendents; (b) assistant superintendents for teaching and learning, or assistant superintendents with a similar title; (c) teaching and learning administrators with a focus on school improvement; and (d) content specialists at each ESD (See [Table 3-1](#)). In addition, special education administrators and planning and assessment administrators were interviewed at two of the three ESDs. Some titles were generalized for this study to protect the confidentiality of participants with unique titles, as some working titles were specific to a certain ESD. Generalized titles capture the nature of participants' duties. ESD administrators were selected for the proximity of their work with local

district administrators and for the perspective their role in working with schools across the region affords them. Nearly all interviews with ESD administrators were conducted in-person, and the 16 ESA participants were distributed across the three ESDs included in this study. See [Table 3-1](#) for an overview of participating administrators from each ESD. Participants were recruited with an emphasis on understanding the operations of each ESD and their interaction with local administrators in each region.

Table 3-1: Educational Service District Participants

Educational Service District Participants			
	ESD I	ESD II	ESD III
Title Used	Participants		
Superintendent	1	1	1
Assistant Superintendent [for Teaching & Learning]	1	1	1
Teaching and Learning Administrator	1	1	1
Content Specialist	1 (Math)	1 (English Language Arts)	1 (Science)
Special Education Director	1	1	0
Assessment & Planning Director	1	1	0

Additional interviews included meeting with administrators leading eight schools across seven districts: seven principals, six superintendents, and one principal/superintendent. Interviews with all but one superintendent took place in person, and all principals were interviewed at their school. See [Table 3-2](#) for an overview of school enrollment, percent of non-white students, percent of students receiving free and reduced priced lunch and for Achievement Index scores. [Table 3-3](#) indicates the Washington State Board of Education rankings for Achievement Index scores.

Table 3-2: School and District Research Sites

Educational Service District I								
SCHOOL	LEVEL	ENROLLMENT 5/2014	% Nonwhite 2014	% Free- Reduced Lunch	AI Score 10-11	AI Score 11-12	AI Score 12-13	AI Score 13-14
School A	6-8	550-600	38	47	5.73	5.93	6.32	6.19
School B	K-6	400-450	19	32	7.75	5.90	8.02	7.90
School C	K-6	150-200	17	59	8.60	7.55	8.10	8.15
Educational Service District II								
SCHOOL	LEVEL	ENROLLMENT 5/2014	% Nonwhite 2014	% Free- Reduced Lunch	AI Score 10-11	AI Score 11-12	AI Score 12-13	AI Score 13-14
School D	9-12	300-350	19	41	6.71	6.96	7.29	7.75
School E	K-5	150-200	96	78	5.10	7.70	8.17	6.27
Educational Service District III								
SCHOOL	LEVEL	ENROLLMENT 5/2014	% Nonwhite 2014	% Free- Reduced Lunch	AI Score 10-11	AI Score 11-12	AI Score 12-13	AI Score 13-14
School F	9-12	400-450	49	56	7.27	8.49	7.92	8.69
School G	K-5	50-100	22	59	3.60	5.00	5.50	5.50
School H	6-12	150-200	33	62	6.44	5.75	6.63	6.65
<i>Note: Schools G & H are in the same district</i>								
<i>Note: Enrollment data from May 2014 is provided in ranges of 50. Percentage of nonwhite students is taken from 2014 and rounded to the nearest percent. Percentage of students receiving free or reduced priced lunch is taken from 2014 and rounded to the nearest percent.</i>								
<i>AI: Achievement Index</i>								

Information provided by the Washington State Board of Education (2016).

Table 3-3: Achievement Index Categories

Achievement Index Table	
TIER	INDEX RANGE
Exemplary	7.85 to 10.00
Very Good	6.81 to <7.85
Good	5.86 to <6.81
Fair	4.84 to <5.86
Underperforming	3.77 to <4.84
Bottom 5%	1.00 to <3.77

Information provided by the Washington State Board of Education (2016).

Methodology

Semi-structured interviews comprise the majority of the data collected for this study. All interviews were transcribed and the transcripts analyzed. Additional artifacts, such as campus tour notes and documents provided by participants, were helpful in providing deeper context for this study and in triangulating the information administrators provided during interviews.

Semi structured interviews. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with all participants and ranged in length, but all interviews were approximately an hour long. The majority of interviews were conducted one-on-one with a single participant, but some participants requested to collaborate with a colleague for their interview. The two-participant interviews included appropriate pairings, such as an ESD superintendent and assistant superintendent for teaching and learning and a principal and colleague who works as both a principal and superintendent.

The majority of interviews were conducted in-person. Due to scheduling challenges, one district superintendent and two ESD administrators, including an assistant superintendent for teaching and learning and a special education services administrator, were interviewed by phone. All principals were interviewed at their school, and many offered extensive school tours and introductions to teachers and students to support my understanding of their work. Interviewing most participants in-person and ensuring that all principals were interviewed in-person aided in building trust with participants. By establishing trust and rapport with participants in their environment, I was better equipped to capture participants' points of view (Janesick, 2000). In addition, in-person meetings allowed me to engage in campus and facilities tours, deepening my understanding of the leadership context. These tours contributed to "rich" field notes and

specific, in-process commentaries that later informed analysis and memoing (Emerson, Fretz, & Shaw, 1995).

Interview protocol. The interview followed a semi-structured protocol (See Appendix A) and engaged participants in conversation about the teaching and learning improvement work unfolding in their building, district, or educational service district; their contributions to this work; and the development of this work, or the overarching links the work had to district or educational service district-level efforts. Participants were also asked to address the ways in which their community provides support for education and the ways in which the local schools engage with their communities. Finally, another stream of inquiry engaged participants in conversation about the challenges that they face in their work context and the supports they identify as useful in helping them mitigate these challenges including formal and informal supports. An interview was conducted with a principal and superintendent to pilot the interview protocol, but the data collected in that interview was not used in this study.

Document analysis. Additional data informing this study consisted of documents from schools, districts, and ESDs. Much of this material is or was publicly available online and includes parent and community outreach from schools and districts and professional development offerings from ESDs. Additionally, some participants provided documents to enhance my understanding of their work and context, such as a matrix of the improvement efforts underway in their school.

Validity

Internal. Interviews with multiple staff members holding a variety of roles across three educational service districts, local districts, and schools bolstered triangulation of this study by engaging participants with different perspectives (Merriam, 2009). Engaging participants with

multiple perspectives assisted in clarifying meaning and verifying repeated observations (Stake, 2000). Interviewing district superintendents for each participating principal promoted the triangulation of teaching and learning efforts from the school and district perspective. This multi-layered study provides a rich and deep understanding of the many coherent and divergent teaching and learning efforts unfolding within each school, district, and educational service district included in this study. Corroboration from multiple sources enhances the trustworthiness of data analysis, but multiple sources or perspectives may also lead to conflicting findings and instances of conflicting findings are highlighted throughout this document (Miles, Huberman, & Saldaña, 2014). In addition, including participants spread throughout the leadership hierarchies in local schools, districts, and educational service districts allowed for participants with points of view that differ from the mainstream, and this diversified the perspectives represented in the study and assisted in avoiding bias during data collection and analysis (Miles et al., 2014). Visiting each school and meeting with each principal in-person further supported internal validity. As noted, these observational experiences deepened my understanding of each school and, in many cases, demonstrated the teaching and learning work under way. Field notes taken during these observations were a valuable source of data during analytic memoing. In addition, the analysis of documents provided by the administrators or available on ESD, district, and school websites, such as family-outreach information and calendars of professional learning opportunities, provided an opportunity to further triangulate interview data.

External. Several factors were taken into account in the design and presentation of this study to support external validity. First, rich descriptions of the interview sites are embedded throughout the chapters that follow to support readers' understanding of the variety of sites engaged and potential transferability of the findings and analysis. Additionally, the educational

service district regions included were selected by engaging in purposeful sampling to ensure that the size, location, geographic constraints, and student populations represent the diversity of Washington state demographics and communities. The schools and corresponding districts that met inclusion criteria were also selected with an emphasis on variation, including location, size, and grades served, to encourage generalizability of the findings.

Bias. Merriam (1998) notes that sensitivity, or intuitive nature, is an important trait that qualitative researchers must bring to their work. As I approached this research, I made efforts to be what Merriam might classify as ‘sensitive’ by engaging participants as an active listener and by allowing the participants to provide their own unique classifications of the successes and challenges related to their work as educators. In particular, I worked to build an interview protocol that used innocuous language, such as referring to “priorities” rather than “learning agendas” or “school improvement priorities.” Interview questions were designed to avoid explicit references to specific topics, including contentious statewide policy debates, while providing space throughout the interview to discuss professional successes and challenges.

Analytical Techniques

Inductive analysis. All interviews were transcribed and checked for accuracy. The transcripts and supporting documents were analyzed using a deductive and an inductive approach. The general inductive approach (Thomas, 2006) was employed to allow themes represented in the data but not strongly represented in previous literature to surface. Thomas outlines the procedures used in the inductive analysis of qualitative data: (a) data cleaning and preparation of raw data files; (b) close reading of the text; (c) creation of categories where general categories are likely distilled from research aims and specific categories derived from multiple readings of the data; (d) allowing for the coding of one segment of text into more than

one relevant category and allowing for some data to not be assigned to any category if it is not relevant to research objectives; and (e) refinement of category system by allowing for subtopics, searching for conflicting points of view, and combining or linking categories under a superordinate category.

Deductive analysis. Deductive analysis was completed using codes derived from the literature and frameworks underpinning this study. Because qualitative studies have conceptual structure and are organized around a small number of research questions (Stake, 2000), it is important to condense “the bulk of our data into analyzable units by creating categories with and from our data” and thereby using coding as a means of generating concepts “from and with” data (Coffey & Atkinson, 1996, p. 26). According to Coffey and Atkinson, these analyzable units, or codes, are heuristic and provide “ways of interacting with and thinking about the data” (p. 30).

Coding. Further open coding, a process through which concepts are established and their characteristics are discovered in the data, allowed for the classification of similar and dissimilar data and the conceptualization of common characteristics (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). The process of coding is used to divide data into simpler categories and to “expand and tease out the data, in order to formulate new questions and levels of interpretation” (Coffey & Atkinson, 1996, p. 30). Codes act as tags and are used to mark specific themes in a text (Ryan & Bernard, 2000). As a result, the process of actively coding data is not to discover what is there but to link “specific events and observations to more general analytic categories and issues” (Emerson et al., 1995, p. 154). As Strauss and Corbin urge, as concepts accumulated, they were grouped into categories and, later, into subcategories. The use of subcategories supported articulating additional details regarding information, such as “when, where, why, and how a phenomenon is likely to occur” (Strauss & Corbin, 1998, p. 119). Then, axial coding was employed to relate and link categories

to subcategories based on “properties and dimensions” (Strauss & Corbin, 1998, p. 124). To track concepts as they became more complex, I utilized lists of codes, organized in hierarchies, and developed and refined these lists as an iterative process (Ryan & Bernard, 2000).

Framework approach. As I engaged in inductive and deductive analysis, I used the framework approach to qualitative data analysis as an overarching guide (Ritchie & Spencer, 2002) by employing iteratively developed codes to guide data analysis. The framework method of qualitative data analysis is comprised of five stages. **The familiarization** stage includes developing a sense for the diversity of the data and the complexities within the data. The familiarization stage is also a time during which abstraction and conceptualization starts to take shape as recurrent themes are noted. Next, **identifying a thematic framework** allows for the sorting and organization of the data and emerging themes. The framework index is constructed using the initial themes and concepts informing the research, issues raised during the collection of data, and themes that emerge during data analysis. As a result, a framework index is likely to have refined iterations, but it is crucial that the initial research questions are addressed. **Indexing** involves applying the thematic framework to the data, and the transcripts comprise the most significant source of indexed data for this study. **Charting** allows for the organization of indexed data by grouping indexed occurrences in an organizational tool that allows for further refinement and categorization through heading and subheadings. Finally, **mapping and interpretation** is the dynamic process through which the researcher investigates patterns and dynamics within the data to search for and develop a structure, rather than a simple cataloguing of evidence, to explain relationships between and within the data.

An analysis matrix assisted the process of mapping and interpretation (Ritchie & Spencer, 2002). This study includes a number of cases and several stands of conceptual inquiry,

so the analysis matrix was grouped into multiple streams (Miles et al., 2014) to facilitate a manageable, high-level analysis with a large number of variables. In addition, this approach supported the identification and cross-analysis of complexities within and across the data. Mapping of data supported my ability to step back from particulars while considering how to frame the analysis, and this provided an opportunity to consider the overarching questions (Emerson et al., 1995). Because qualitative data analysis requires multiple rounds of review due to the evolving nature of qualitative data, all data was engaged in multiple, iterative rounds during which the ongoing analysis was refined and checked (Miles et al., 2014). As Coffey and Atkinson note, the codes and categories developed for organizational purposes were used to make pathways through the data (1996). Data analysis was further supported by multiple rounds of memoing which supported drawing connections between data points.

Memoing. Memoing was also an important tool during the data analysis phase in identifying connections within and across cases, and the process of memoing was particularly helpful in refining analytical codes and categories. Initially, memos were composed for each participant at the educational service districts, each district (superintendent), and each school (principal). These within-case memos presented important opportunities to become deeply familiar with each case as an individual opportunity for inquiry and allowed unique patterns within each case to emerge before generalization across cases informed analysis (Eisenhardt, 2002). Additionally, as Eisenhardt notes, developing such familiarity with each case accelerates cross-case comparison. These initial memos provided a platform for pursuing a more focused analysis that addressed emerging themes across cases. Cross-case, or integrative memos, link coding categories and themes emerging from the data and also provide an opportunity to link observational notes and other data points with transcript data (Emerson et al., 1995).

Five rounds of integrative memos informed this analysis. (1) First, integrative memos were composed for each district, using the principal and superintendent interviews as the primary data source, and for each ESD, using the all interviews from ESD administrators. (2) Next, regional integrative memos were composed and included all schools and districts with each ESD. (3) Then, ESD administrators' perspectives were added to these regional memos. This allowed for the identification of unique themes or trends within the ESDs. (4) Additionally, memos were composed to include all schools and districts across the regions without including ESD perspectives. (5) Finally, memos were composed to capture patterns and themes across the schools and districts and ESDs engaged in this study. This process ensured that themes across geographic boundaries were captured using ESDs as a unit of analysis and without using ESDs as a unit of analysis. As Emerson et al. (1995) note, a key benefit of composing integrative memos is that cross-case comparisons provide an opportunity to identify the contextual and background information necessary for helping a reader unfamiliar with the context. Therefore, memoing was a useful tool for determining and presenting similarities and distinctions across the cases included in this study.

Ethical Concerns

The University of Washington Human Subjects Review Committee approved this study. All participants were briefed on the risks associated with participation and with the confidentiality guidelines that protect their participation in the study. A key risk associated with the study is that a member of the public could potentially determine likely participants by triangulating census data and state data on individual schools. No participants are identified by name. Additionally, the names of schools or districts are not identified. Potential participants were given all of this information in their invitation to participate, and they were reminded of

these points in detail immediately preceding each interview. After agreeing to informed consent, participants signed the consent forms for this study. To further protect the confidentiality of participants, each participant was identified by a unique code on recording files and corresponding transcripts.

Limitations

In addition to the site selection limitations outlined previously, several additional limitations constrain this study. Although three educational service districts were selected to represent the diverse topography, remoteness, demographics, and varied sociopolitical nature of the various portions of the state, this study represents some but not all of the extreme reaches of Washington's geography. For example, this study does engage a public school, and an additional district, with significant Native American populations, but it does not include any of the United States Bureau of Indian Education schools in Washington state. The selection criteria for the inclusion of schools and districts in this study included the expectation that schools did not house grades kindergarten through twelve in a single unit or grades kindergarten through eight if no high school students resided in the district. This decision was made because such schools and districts operate so differently from their counterparts. One participant in the study is a principal and superintendent, but this individual is not the only principal in the district.

An additional limitation of this study points to the rural education literature available to support the framing of this study. This study attempts to contribute to this body of knowledge, but the empirical research seeking to better understand educational excellence in the rural context is much less robust than urban-focused research. Another limitation indicative of rural research that impacts this study are the many ways that rural is defined and identified. This study relies on locale codes to identify specific schools while some studies identify district locale

classification as the mechanism for studying rural schools and students. Other studies use metropolitan and nonmetropolitan counties as the defining characteristic of nonrural or rural. A result of using individual schools as a selection mechanism, this study includes rural schools located in nonrural districts and rural districts located in nonrural counties. Whenever possible, this study seeks to qualify how background information on rural populations, particularly demographic information, was gathered and analyzed. This research was designed to offer a transparent study that cuts across rural contexts in Washington state and contributes to the rural education literature.

Generalizability

To address the limitations of this study, a number of strategies were utilized to bolster the generalizability and transferability of this study and its outcomes to better understand rural contexts across Washington state and beyond, as developing generalizability is a key responsibility of a qualitative researcher (Stake, 2000). In particular, this study engages rural administrators from a variety of different contexts and community demographics. Additionally, the educational service districts and local districts and schools represent a cross-section of Washington's geography, topography, demographics, and local economies. This study was designed with a focus on generalizability to other rural contexts and to provide grounds for validating observations and generalization (Stake, 2000). In addition to employing rich description of the research sites and participants (Merriam, 1998), this study places an emphasis on negative exceptions to patterns when such dissents are present in the findings (Coffey & Atkinson, 1996). Therefore, the diversity of research sites included in this study and clear, robust presentation of the sites, participants, and findings support this study's generalizability to other rural contexts and conceptual understandings of rural school leadership.

Chapter 4

Infrastructure Supports and Regional Leadership: Understanding the Role of Educational Service Districts

Study Context

Data collection for this study was completed during a time of significant change in Washington state's education landscape. The Common Core State Standards were a frequent topic during my conversations with educational service district administrators and with district superintendents and school principals, roles that will be collectively referenced as "local administrators." The implementation of Next Generation Science Standards was also a topic of conversation with ESD administrators particularly focused on or interested in science or STEM (Science Technology Engineering and Math) education. As local and ESD administrators continue their work of more comprehensively understanding and implementing the new standards, they were also preparing for the new Smarter Balanced Assessment that would measure students' abilities to meet the newly implemented standards. Several local administrators were piloting the new online assessment in their districts while others were building technology capacity to support the online administration of the new assessment.

In addition to learning and implementing new standards and assessment procedures, local administrators were learning new legislatively-mandated teacher evaluation systems. Therefore, ESD administrators were working to support local educators' understanding of these systems and local administrators' capacity to use the systems and lead professional learning about them. Legislation in Washington state required districts to adopt one of three evaluation frameworks: (a) the Center for Educational Leadership 5D + (Five Dimensions of Teaching and Learning)

Teacher Evaluation Rubric 2.0 (a framework developed by the Center for Educational Leadership housed at the University of Washington); (b) the Dr. Robert Marzano Evaluation Framework; and (c) the Charlotte Danielson Framework for Teaching. This research is not a study of an evaluation model or the implementation of an evaluation model. Yet, the work of districts, schools, and ESDs to implement and support these models is layered throughout the findings. While each ESD, district, and school may have additional teaching and learning priorities, these evaluation systems were the basis of most conversations about system-wide teaching and learning structures and are often referenced below as “teaching and learning frameworks.”

Although these initiatives factored into conversations with all participants, they also served as a jumping-off point for discussing their local or regional priorities and work. As such, this is not an implementation study conducted to better understand how these initiatives are supported. Instead, this study seeks to better understand how ESD and local administrators develop, or lead the development of, local and regional agendas that are responsive to external demands (such as new standards, new assessments, and new evaluation models) and responsive to developing a learning agenda rooted in their local context.

As ESD administrators discussed supporting the local administrators and teachers throughout their regions, they voiced both frustration and concern, and this was shared across the three ESDs. ESD administrators were frustrated that several reform initiatives were happening simultaneously. For example, the superintendent of ESD III called this a “scary time” for educators, and the assistant superintendent from ESD III said,

I really do think we have asked people to do the most complex work we've ever asked with the least amount of training to do it, or understanding, or funding to support it.

That's a challenge that is really a heavy lift. ... Yeah, I don't think people are unwilling. I think they are tired, and they need more support, and they need more time to learn.

Supporting this complex work required ESDs to rapidly build capacity so they could help districts do the same, and as a result, ESDs and districts were forced to juggle competing demands for local administrators and teachers and/or prioritize one reform initiative over others. As a mechanism for supporting the translation of state education policy to make it accessible and actionable for districts, ESD assistant superintendents, teaching and learning administrators, and content specialists were concerned about the impact on teachers and whether or not there was enough support for teachers to make the shifts in practice that these initiatives required. Not only do new standards require a shift in the content of lessons, the new evaluation systems require a new approach to delivering and discussing instruction. As a result, ESDs and local districts were working to shift practices for teachers' engagement and support of students and local administrators' engagement and support of teachers.

Rural Poverty

An additional factor that influenced conversations at ESD offices and across local districts was the poverty present in rural communities throughout the state. In particular, ESD administrators across regions spoke about the challenges that rural poverty presents local administrators, the impact of poverty on teaching and learning initiatives, and in turn, the ways in which thinking about rural poverty factors into their work supporting local administrators. Across the regions, ESD administrators noted that widespread, multi-generational poverty

influenced family, and in some cases, community expectations for students. In particular, administrators' perceptions of family and local culture conflicted with college and career readiness expectations embedded within the Common Core State Standards. According to an ESD content specialist, in some communities and for some families, there was never a "need to go on to college" because "their way of life has been good for a very long time." This, she noted, is particularly problematic because without some post-high school education, rural youth aren't likely to have the standard of living that their parents have.

As ESD administrators described the ways that their work was influenced by rural poverty, they shared that many students, particularly those living in poverty, don't have an adult who can advocate for them or help them navigate the education system. While this is true of students across rural, suburban, and urban settings, ESD administrators expressed concern over the lack of resources available to students in rural settings. As the ESD II assessment and planning director shared,

I think that poverty is a huge equity issue in this area with access to education and with access to advocates at the school level, at the district level. For students to have access to those advocates that are knowledgeable about the education system, that feel comfortable with it, that know how to navigate the education system, I think that's a huge equity issue, and it's a huge barrier for kids.

This is discussed elsewhere in further detail, but ESD administrators were quick to note that the lack of resources within schools and communities, due to small size and often remote nature, adversely impacted students and the ability of districts to support students. In particular, ESD administrators emphasized that many districts are educating student populations with high levels

of poverty, and as a result, local administrators are working to meet basic needs of students. One administrator lamented that opportunity gaps for students get better or worse depending on local administrators' recognition of these fundamental issues for marginalized students who aren't showing up ready to learn.

The decline in traditional rural industries has contributed to an economic decline in many rural areas (Budge, 2006). This decline encourages many young people to leave rural communities in search of continuing education and employment and has fostered an "economic emigration" that has resulted in a "refined distillation of poverty" (Mathis, 2003, p. 127). This dynamic also impacts resources available to students. For example, students with significant learning disabilities have few options for job training and placement as they transition out of the K-12 system. Additionally, while family wealth might impact the technology students have at home, lagging economic development, in addition to remoteness, impacts the quality of Internet service available in communities. Such examples are illustrative of equity issues whose impact stretches beyond the socioeconomic status of individual students' families. As a result, it can be a struggle to broaden horizons for rural students. As the ESD II special education director summarized, "People live in really small, rural, isolated communities for a reason, and it tends to be that they're not really interested in the bigger world."

In addition to challenging economic realities in rural communities and school districts, ESD administrators also noted that demographic changes create challenges for local districts. In particular, the English Learner (EL) student population is growing as the state becomes more diverse, and this includes areas of the state that have traditionally not featured diverse populations. In addition, large local employers, ranging from the military to the logging industry, are downsizing in this part of the country. Finally, due in part to these economic factors, the

population in many rural communities is over representative of retirees, and as the ESD III superintendent shared, senior citizens are the most reliable voting bloc in local elections.

The lack of social and medical services in most rural and remote communities impacts rural students and educators and surfaced as a key issue impacting rural education during conversations with ESD and local administrators. In addition, the challenges posed by sparse public infrastructure are exacerbated by the dynamics of rural poverty across these regions. As an ESD I content specialist emphasized, there is more public and policy awareness of urban poverty and more avenues to address that poverty. Across the three regions, economic factors have impacted the financial health of entire communities. Whether due to layoffs at the local refinery in School B's community or a continued downturn in the logging industry in School C's region, ESD and local administrators indicated that they are noticing an increase in challenges exacerbated by poverty. While local industries in rural communities vary across the state, as they do across the country, traditional rural industries face similar economic hardship (Budge, 2006; Mathis, 2003; McGranahan, 1994). As School A's principal shared, families are moving to more metropolitan areas where they have jobs because gasoline is expensive, and their rural community provides no public transportation. Yet, many families have stayed in these communities, and administrators discussed their efforts to provide students with support by expanding students' access to food during the school day, emphasizing 21st century skills because students have no access to technology at home, handing out toiletries, and washing students' clothes and coats during the school day. As School D's superintendent explained, the history of students' families often determines their path in schooling,

We are a fixed-mindset organization. Absolutely, without a doubt. Kids come to school from these families, that's where they're going to stay. If they come from the well-to-do

or supportive families that we know, they're going to make growth. That's our mindset. If they come from such-and-such family, which is not any typical example. But, that's what's been our history here, and it continues to be our history.

He is working to create opportunities so all students can succeed by working with principals and teacher leaders, and eventually all teachers, to change the district's approach to working with students. For example, the leaders had recently finished a principals' book study of Carol Dweck's (2006) book *Mindset*. He shared that this was helpful, but, "it's hard because we have to admit that we've been in a fixed mindset."

The Importance of Community in Rural Schools

As ESD administrators discussed the rural communities in their regions they described the communities as generally more traditional, more conservative, and more resistant to change, consistent with a characterization made by Kannapel and DeYoung (1999). The ESD III assistant superintendent said, "I don't think there's much expectation externally in communities for a whole bunch of change." Other administrators offered explanations for the rural resistance to change. These theories included the idea that most of the educators working in rural districts came from the area and, as a result, don't think they need to change practices. Not only are the adults in these rural communities perceived as more resistant to change by the ESD administrators, ESD administrators across regions and some local administrators voiced that rural communities' expectations for students were also resistant to change. Yet, as the ESD III superintendent pointed out, "Cultural shift ultimately makes its way into small and rural schools," and even conservative communities come to embrace those shifts for schools and students. A key example was the resistance by some rural communities to embrace use of the

Internet in their schools. Speaking about one specific example, he said, “It was the preference of the school community, if you will, that there not be Internet in their school for a whole host of conservative reasons. Interestingly enough, they had Internet at home but just simply didn’t want it at school,” but, “through the course of this decade, as you might imagine, the external pressures, and new families, and new circumstances, even that has begun to shift and change.” The ESD superintendent described a key role of the ESD as a bridge for traditional educators during a “scary time” characterized by both cultural and education policy shifts.

The Role of Educational Service Districts in Supporting Rural Schools

Educational service districts are service agencies in Washington state, and these organizations do not have the authority to make mandates or hold school districts accountable for implementation of state policy. As the ESD III teaching and learning administrator noted, “We’re not compliance officers. We don’t want to be. We want to be partners and have relationships.” In building these relationships with local schools and districts, ESDs can help educators navigate the bureaucratic tangle of regulations and stakeholders that govern education policy and schools in Washington state.

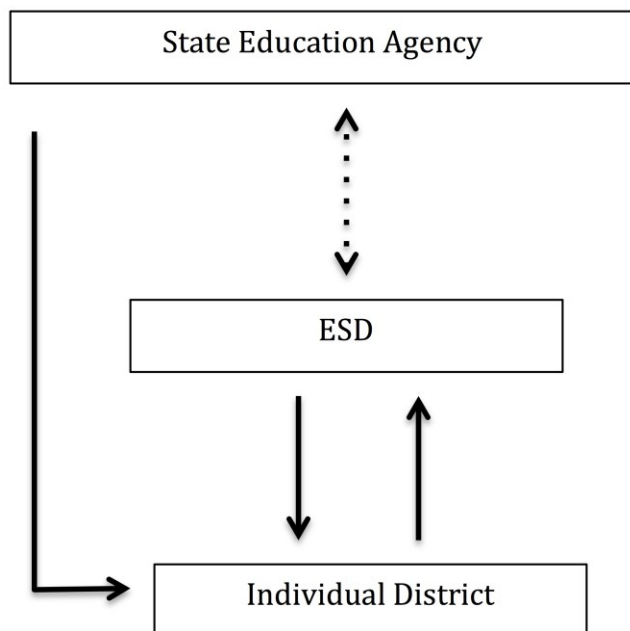


Figure 4-1: ESDs as Intermediaries

ESDs as Intermediaries Between State and Local Education Agencies

The superintendent of ESD I lamented the “too many groups and entities” governing education in Washington state, including the Superintendent of Public Instruction (publicly elected), the State Board of Education (half appointed by the governor, half elected by school board members), the Professional Educator Standards Board governing certification requirements (appointed by the governor), and the legislature, comprising “the most convoluted school government structure imaginable.” Yet, the ESD serves as the policy translator to help smaller districts stay abreast of key policy developments. Or, as the ESD I assistant superintendent described it, the ESD can act as a buffer for things that are “happening to” teachers.

Schools and local districts have no clear charge or mandate to engage with educational service districts. ESDs provide supports that are optional for districts to receive or purchase. Yet,

in the case of many services, such as contracting special education services and technology infrastructure supports, purchasing services from the ESD is the only viable option for most rural districts. Compliance-related support was a key component of the services provided to schools and districts cited by administrators across all three regions. The assistant superintendent from ESD I provided the example of supporting compliance for mandated highly capable programs and screenings. She created a cooperative of small districts to hire a consultant for technical assistance in the districts and to hold four meetings at the ESD for training with various tools. In this case, a \$2,500 contribution from each district allows the districts to follow state laws. Rather than compliance officers, ESDs have the ability to partner with districts as compliance stewards. In their role as compliance stewards, ESDs act as an intermediary and/or buffer between the various stakeholders creating mandates and the educators who must execute these mandates.

Local district engagement. ESD content specialists and administrators discussed the various teaching and learning projects that they were working on within or across districts, and in addition, administrators were working closely with districts in a variety of ways to engage local boards of education. The ESD I superintendent stressed that ESDs are employed by and responsible to local boards of education, not superintendents, and this created difficult dynamics for him when placed between a feuding board and superintendent. Typical engagement with the local boards of education took two forms. First, the ESD is in an advocacy position for sustaining itself and its services. Additionally, some ESD administrators are working with local administrators to write plans for local learning improvement initiatives that are presented to their board of education. In these instances, the ESD is not simply providing content support or resource assistance, such as technology services; instead, the ESD is working with the administrators to help develop and communicate learning improvement agendas that are

responsive to their individual, local needs. As an ESD superintendent describes his work, ESDs walk “side by side” with the districts in their efforts to improve learning opportunities for students. Across the country, educational service agencies are known for their role as professional development providers and coordinators for special services. In Washington state, ESDs provide a variety of services and supports that range from coordinating direct services for students to engaging district leaders in building regional agendas for teaching and learning priorities.

Table 4-1: Categories of ESD Services for Districts

ESD Services for Local Districts	
Supporting Regional Teaching & Learning Agendas	Defining regional teaching and learning priorities
	Directing broad teaching & learning change
Teaching & Learning Supports	Building capacity for new teaching and learning policy implementation
	Partnering for local teaching and learning improvement
	Providing content-specific supports
Back-Office Supports	Coordinating special services
	Supplementing local infrastructure
	Assisting with compliance mandates

Fee-for-service realities. While ESDs partner with schools and districts to aid in the improvement of local teaching and learning efforts, they must also operate, at least loosely, on a fee-for-service model since the ESDs are primarily self-sustaining with approximately three percent of their annual budget funded by the state. This operating model introduces a potential tension between acting as leaders and sustaining the organization. In particular, the ESD II special education administrator noted that being “marketing and business specialists and

schmoozers... hinders my ability to be more of a leader in the field.” She noted that she is always conscious of the need for financial sustainability of the services she coordinates. As she explains, she can coordinate a training at the ESD, but if districts can’t pay for teachers to attend or afford substitutes to cover classes, then no one will participate, and she won’t be able to pay for the training. Further, she notes that sometimes districts express a desire for ESD services but ultimately can’t afford to purchase those services. The teaching and learning administrator from this ESD expressed that they are working to move away from the fee-for-service model and described her time in the previous year as a “free commodity” because she provided requested teaching and learning resources without charging or found a way to incorporate the work with local districts in a Title I grant. She explained this as a strategic decision to support rural schools because ESDs that primarily serve larger districts have “a bigger influx of money coming in.” While she articulated less of a concern about a sustainable business model impacting her leadership abilities, she did note that her work would “change a little bit next year, but I think we’ve made a really close partnership with those districts, they learned to trust us.” Her comment suggests that devoting this time as a “free commodity” was an investment in relationship building and, possibly, curating relationships with districts that might use more ESD services.

The expense of ESD services and the need to provide services that districts would use was a topic of conversation during interviews with all ESD administrators. Indeed, they were all explicit about the importance of being responsive to districts’ needs. The financial aspect of their operations was explicit in some interviews and implicit in others. For example, the superintendent of ESD III explained the need for his ESD to more clearly and persuasively highlight the quantity and breadth of the work the ESD was doing within districts because school board members were asking: “What the hell are we paying for?” when quarterly bills arrived.

This effort led to the development of a matrix that tracks real-time data for all programs that a district is receiving from the ESD, but it also required a culture shift in the way the ESD saw their work of “walking beside, walking behind” the districts and spurred the ESD to bring their work out of the “shadows.” Despite these efforts, the majority of local administrators noted the expense of ESD services, and a minority of local district superintendents and principals indicated that specialized support from their ESD was something they could not afford.

Many ESD programs are grant funded, and the ESDs often work to leverage grants for even larger grants over extended terms. For example, at the time of the interviews, ESD II had recently leveraged their work from a \$200,000 grant from a foundation to obtain a nearly \$700,000 grant administered by the state education agency. These efforts enhance the ability of the ESDs to grow teaching and learning capacity within schools. Likewise, the content specialist from ESD I shared that after three years of overseeing a grant funded initiative, the project was able to continue on its own budget line due to its positive reputation. A minority of ESD administrators and one local administrator specifically noted that programs did sometimes end once a grant was finished, signaling a challenge associated with the ESD business model.

Variable structures and services. ESDs have great flexibility in how they respond to needs of districts in their region, but as ESD I superintendent noted, this is also a weakness because individual ESD leadership impacts the availability and quality of services ESDs offer.

One of the strengths of the Washington state ESD system, also one of the greatest weaknesses, that is that there's very little we're required to do. The reason I view that as a strength is it really allows each ESD to respond to the needs in the region.

While there is a standardization to some roles across ESDs (for example, superintendents, assistant superintendents for teaching and learning or with a similar title, special education administrators, and content specialists for core subject areas), there are a variety of positions for which titles and key duties are very different across ESDs depending on the grants or state contracts assembling their portfolio of duties. Yet, some ESDs employ multiple content specialists, for example elementary and secondary English language arts specialists, while other ESDs employ only one and engage in additional work through limited contracts.

Because ESDs must charge for or find funding for much of their work, application of support for certain populations or initiatives is not standardized throughout the state. For example, only one ESD in Western Washington, out of five ESDs, has a migrant education program. This program is funded by the state education agency and offers assistance to districts requiring support for migrant students. The migrant education program at this ESD is spread across 20 districts and represents only a portion of one teaching and learning administrator's position. As the ESD I teaching and learning administrator indicated, she has great flexibility in her position while others have "roles are more clearly defined. It's not just [a] go and see what you can do to help kind of thing." Just as local rural administrators perform a variety of duties, the majority of ESD administrators interviewed also serve multiple roles. As ESD administrators acknowledged their varied roles and often expanding portfolio of responsibilities, they also acknowledged that the culture at ESDs, though different across the three in some ways, was supportive of helping ESD administrators build their own professional capacity to, in turn, better support local districts.

Supporting Rural Districts

ESD administrators, particularly those who had previously worked in a rural context, discussed the variety of demands placed on administrators and the ways in which this presents different and challenging dynamics for rural and small district administrators. There was broad consensus across ESD administrators that rural administrators had to wear “many hats” due to their small organizational nature. ESD administrators expressed concern that wearing these many hats meant districts were in survival mode, particularly in matters relating to teaching and learning. The ESD I assistant superintendent frankly wondered how rural administrators can improve their practice or an entire school when they are responsible for doing it all and have no time to pause and reflect, “[rural administrators] are spread so thin that they hardly ever look up to take a breath and try to figure out how to get better at what they’re doing.” Another ESD I administrator offered that there is “less completeness” to rural work because rural administrators must constantly and rapidly move along to their next duty.

ESD administrators see supporting the portfolio of duties that rural administrators face as a key function of their work. This support ranges from official duties, such as an ESD administrator serving as the special education administrator and coordinator for districts throughout a region, to partnerships and professional support for small districts that can’t employ curriculum directors, content coaches, human resources staff, or a number of other positions ubiquitous in larger districts. As discussed further below, ESD supports represent a continuum of structures and relationships, and these vary from region to region throughout the state. Yet, across the regions, ESD leaders pointed out that because rural administrators are charged with so many responsibilities, they facilitate key work on their behalf, including connections between current reform initiatives. Two key trends surfaced throughout conversations with ESD

administrators: that ESDs work to support deepening the capacity that local administrators and educators have for teaching and learning priorities, including but not limited to standards and evaluation frameworks; and that the ESD can assist with some of the duties that occupy central office energy. As the ESD II teaching and learning administrator noted,

The hard part for [rural administrators] is just all of the have to's that get put on any district plate, the reports... this report, that report... That's what's really hard on them, and most of that stuff we can't help with, so I take on: 'Sure, I'll write a plan for you, and you can present it to your board. Sure, we can review that policy for you.'

According to the superintendent of ESD II, one half of the districts in that region do not have a dedicated teaching and learning administrator, and this typically forces the superintendents to split their time between district management and teaching and learning duties not typically assumed by superintendents in larger districts.

ESD II expends a particular focus on supporting teaching and learning efforts in smaller districts by translating state and federal mandates and supporting implementation of new requirements by leveraging economies of scale at the ESD. According to this ESD superintendent, a major focus for him is identifying ways to leverage and conserve resources, "time, money, and people," so districts can "use scarce resources for something else." He mentioned that smaller districts "refer to me often as their central office," as an entity that translated mandates "into a form of something that they can use." As the assistant superintendent for this ESD explained, "We practically serve as the curriculum department for a small district and the professional developers, and that's how they see us." To understand local needs, this ESD assistant superintendent and the teaching and learning administrator visited each district in

the region to meet with the superintendent or teaching and learning lead to discuss their priorities, barriers to realizing those priorities, and ways in which the ESD can assist. She keeps these priorities displayed on a board in her office as a reminder, and as she characterized the ESD's work with districts, she said, "We're really constantly striving to be essential, not an add on, not something different." Investing the time of the teaching and learning administrator in developing relationships with districts over the course of the year was a key priority for ESD II and stands in contrast to the fee-for-service model, but the allocation of time she would spend as a "free commodity" was expected to change in subsequent school years.

Special education services. One of the most significant ways in which ESDs leverage economies of scale to support school districts is through special education supports. Participants from all three ESDs discussed how special education services are incorporated into their portfolio of programs for districts, and the administrators overseeing special education services for two of the ESDs were participants in this study. Both administrators see an important function of their role as saving districts resources by arranging for collaborative resource and personnel sharing agreements. As the special education director from ESD I noted, saving a district money on special education services could benefit teaching and learning opportunities for all students:

By providing those kind of supports, the district then was able to retain their valuable monetary resources and continue to use them in other areas rather than having to take a big chunk of their budget and try to spend it on this one child's very unique needs.

Additionally, the special education director from ESD II pointed out that all districts in that region utilize services from the special education cooperative. Saving resources by finding ways

to mitigate the remoteness of districts is a key challenge. The special education director from ESD I explains that the ESD works “within whatever capacity we have to maximize the resources by minimizing what could be unnecessary costs, like travel for example, travel and overnight stays.” To do this, a promising practice has been negotiating the purchase of services or contracting professional development from neighboring and nearby districts. The director from ESD II shared the same strategies and noted sometimes stepping out of the collaboration once the connection was made to save districts the cost of additional ESD overhead.

In addition to providing and locating special education services, the ESDs also serve a leadership function for small districts within their regions. For example, the ESD II special education director spoke about adopting the special education director role within the districts that, without the ESD, were unlikely to have any sort of special education department. She views serving in this capacity as a key resource that she can provide small and rural district superintendents who already “wear all the other hats in the district.” Likewise, the leadership of ESD I saw a need within the communities they serve and led the way in creating a new infrastructure for services. Specifically, students were suffering from service gaps in the mental health offerings available to them, and the ESD created a mental health services provider that gives continuity of care regardless of the source of payment, such as insurance or Medicaid. As three administrators at ESD I mentioned, building the infrastructure was a feat for the ESD, but the services continue to be requested, particularly in remote areas. At the time of the interviews, this program employed eight full-time therapists and a psychiatrist was under contract. In these cases, the ESDs are not simply providing a service, they are providing expertise-based leadership in districts and creating new infrastructure for tackling shared challenges.

Finally, even though the ESDs are working to fill resource gaps to help schools better serve students with special needs, administrators from all three ESDs discussed challenges that the small nature and/or remoteness of districts can pose for families and schools in need of connecting students with services. In particular, remoteness from medical care means that some students wait several years without receiving a proper diagnosis because their families don't have the resources to get them to larger cities with hospitals. As the assessment and planning director of ESD I explained,

If all the services are located along that [Interstate] corridor then how do you, you can't expect a family that has to make a decision about whether they're going to buy a gallon of milk or a gallon of gas to get their kid to a therapist in [a town] because they live [an hour away]. Those are, I think, the primary barriers.

In addition, opportunities for students to transition out of special education services with a robust transition plan and job coaching are limited in areas lacking significant economic development and urban infrastructure. Yet, as the special education director from ESD I noted, families are moving from more urban areas and expecting that the same services will be available in the smaller and more remote districts. As the ESD II special education director shared, rural districts “just get more creative and do the best they can with what they've got,” and it is their role to support that work with expertise and resources.

Filling gaps in infrastructure. ESDs provide a variety of back-office supports to small school districts. These include business, fiscal, and procurement services; human resources management; and technology support. As the superintendent of ESD II noted, small districts refer to the ESD as their “central office.” Additionally, a key central office function that ESDs provide for rural schools is technology support. Access to technology is documented as a key

challenge for rural schools (Bouck, 2004; Mathis, 2003), and this is consistent with the varied access schools have to high-speed Internet in Washington state, but the ESDs do play a key role in supporting the technology needs of small and remote districts. For example, ESDs provide significant technology supports to rural districts that are otherwise unable to employ a technology director or afford their own technology infrastructure. There is state financial support for technology access in schools, but as the ESD I superintendent noted, this gets high-speed Internet to the school building but not throughout the school, so “you can have an eight-inch pipe coming in and if it suddenly drops to a half inch to go to all these different classrooms the eight inch coming in doesn't do you any good.” While state support to wire schools with Internet access does exist, some of the state’s more remote schools have not received high-speed Internet access. For example, School E, located on a K-12 campus, received high-speed Internet for the first time during the 2015-2016 academic year. Prior to that, the campus had “dial-up” Internet. Securing high-speed Internet on that campus took four years of significant effort from the local superintendent, including coordination with multiple Native American tribes. As she explained, “You can’t hard-wire it because of the landscape and the weather. It’s microwaved from point to point out there onto the roof and down into the school.” Now, thanks partly to ESD support for technology, students on that campus have access to a variety of online learning opportunities, and teachers have access to a new portfolio of resources for their classrooms. As School E’s superintendent explained, access to high-speed Internet is a “basic requirement.”

The planning and assessment director from ESD I spoke about holding monthly meetings for district technology directors, but a district must have a technology director to benefit from such meetings. Yet, administrators across the three educational service districts discussed the importance of providing opportunities for students to access technology. The equity implications

of technology access were a topic of conversation with many ESD and local administrators. In light of the new Common Core assessments administered online, keyboarding skills are necessary for equitable opportunities for success on standardized tests. The superintendent of ESD III discussed the ways in which technology has erased barriers for smaller, more remote districts to access information and the broader world:

What's happened ... with the advent of technology, is that the geographic barriers in many ways have disappeared ... When you were a little smaller, more rural, you were a little more isolated in years past, and that has disappeared significantly.

ESD I is engaging in work that provides a key example of such barrier removal. The special education administrator and technology department are working together with school districts to establish teletherapy services for students and families with therapy needs:

Sometimes we're doing technical assistance for our technology department with these districts. Helping them just figure out how they can get videoconferencing and teletherapy services, and then blend some funding so that maybe they open their doors in the evening so that a mental health specialist can come in via teleconferencing and work with a family that is having some special needs that have been impeding the educational progress of the child.

Similarly, local administrators across ESD regions emphasized that, as the superintendent of School E described it, technology is their "link to the outside world" and allows them to access distance learning for students and professional learning for teachers. In these efforts, the ESD is working to leverage resources to meet the specific needs of educators, students, and families.

ESDs also provide learning-improvement and cost-saving supports by administering a variety of cooperatives that are coordinated by the ESD but funded by the local districts. Examples of this include services that one typically expects to be coordinated by ESDs, such as contracted special education supports for students with low-incidence special learning needs, but the ESDs also provide contracted and cooperative supports that range from drug and alcohol programs to bullying prevention programs to fiscal and technology supports. In some cases, these programs have direct tethers to teaching and learning improvement. In other instances, these services allow for the operation of small districts that could otherwise not independently support business or modern human resources operations.

Supporting Survival of Remote Districts. Despite providing much-needed support, ESDs help some of the smallest and/or most remote districts survive but not thrive with the same intensity as less remote districts. In these situations, the ESDs might provide technology support, special education service contracting, and fiscal and human resources staffing. Yet, school/district conversations about learning improvement agendas do not always filter to the ESD, nor do all collective initiatives across the ESD funnel to the most remote schools with reliable frequency. ESD offices are regional, but they are still a several hour drive from faraway districts, and this impacts the ability of educators (particularly principals and teachers) to engage in anything more than compliance-related professional development. The distance also means that the most remote districts must shoulder greater expense to send teachers to the ESD or to bring ESD content specialists to them since they are charged for travel time. The most remote school included in this study, School E, approximately a three-and-a-half-hour drive from their ESD, indicated that the cost of procuring ESD services or participating in professional development offers is very expensive. They do engage the ESD's content specialists and

teaching and learning administrators, but they must do so judiciously. The administrators in this district discussed the importance of protecting teachers' time with students, and this makes lengthy travel to the ESD office an unlikely option for teachers during school days.

Administrators for Schools G and H, approximately a 45-minute drive from their ESD, enjoy a closer proximity to the ESD office, but they described an additional challenge for small districts, echoed by School E's administrators: the difficulty of securing substitutes for teachers. These were key barriers described by administrators for Schools E, G, and H to accessing ESD services.

The Role of Educational Service Districts

The superintendent of ESD I described the role of his organization by saying, "I think an ESD is more like a McDonald's than it is a school district" because the role of the ESD is to provide schools and districts with on-demand support. Across interviews, ESD administrators, particularly the superintendents, often used the word "indispensable" as they discussed their desired relationship with districts. If ESDs aren't indispensable to districts, they will cease to exist. In Washington, the nine ESDs are state supported, but as participants noted, this support accounts for approximately three percent of their annual budget. The ESD superintendents believe that to be indispensable to districts they must provide responsive, on-demand supports. As a result, the ESDs must operate under a business model because their ability to sell services accounts for the vast majority of their budget. As the superintendent who described the ESD as a McDonald's confessed, "There could be great differences in the availability of services to kids and to teachers and to the administrators in a school or district depending upon who is in what chairs in the ESD." There was variability in staffing structure, educator outreach, and non-core professional development offerings across the three ESDs included in this study, but there were

also consistent examples highlighting the ways in which ESD administrators support the goals of tightly coupled schools and districts.

ESDs build capacity for educational improvement efforts by providing districts with content-specific expertise. Even the larger rural districts in this study had very limited capacity for supporting professional development across content areas because they could not employ content coaches or large central office staffs. ESDs, however, benefit from economies of scale and can provide limited free support and contracted support. Two to three days of free support from each of the core content areas (such as math, science, and language arts) are provided for all districts in the ESDs, and the districts can purchase additional support from the ESDs if they have a need for more services. The additional days cost approximately \$700 each, and some districts noted that this was simply too expensive, particularly when transit time for ESD staff to remote locations is included. Yet, the additional days that a district can purchase tend to be less expensive than contracting support from an outside provider, and districts do use the ESD content experts and other administrators for assistance with key learning improvement priorities, such as building a new cross-grade approach to incorporating vocabulary instruction. These opportunities are tailored to the unique needs of individual schools and districts, at their request, and vary from a one-size-fits-all professional development model. Collaboration with the ESD can result in (semi-) embedded, ongoing support for instructional improvement, a type of support that is often lacking for rural educators (Reaves & Larmer, 1996).

Characteristics of ESD Identity

ESD superintendents described their roles and the work of their organizations in very similar terms. ESD administrators across regions described being indispensable as: providing “a

service, the very best service as quick as possible (ESD I assistant superintendent) to being “a partner to turn to” (ESD II teaching and learning administrator) to “walking beside” districts in their work with students (ESD III superintendent). The superintendent of ESD I views “the role of an ESD as to provide behind-the-scenes support to school districts and the learning that takes place in those districts.” As the ESD III superintendent summarized, “if you’re not indispensable to your local school districts, if they don’t have to have you, you’re toast. You’re done.” The number of programs for which an ESD is responsible varies by ESD but often totals well over 100 distinct initiatives. Although each of these initiatives typically serves multiple districts, administrators do attempt to meet the needs of individual schools and districts. According to the superintendent of ESD II, “Although they all have their own personalities, their own culture, to the extent that we could leverage what little we have and for the good of student achievement across the board, the better off we are.”

One educational service district in Washington serves Seattle and the surrounding metropolitan area while the other eight ESDs cover much more expansive regions and serve varied populations. For example, ESD I serves districts ranging from less than 50 students to over 20,000 students. As a result, ESDs are charged with meeting a broad range of needs. Yet, across ESDs the administrators were clear that larger districts do not have the same need for their services. In some cases, large districts might take advantage of ESD offerings and, in limited instances, large districts needed to rely on ESDs for official duties, such as processing teacher certification. While larger districts are able to support operations such as human resources, special education, and curriculum and professional development functions on their own, smaller districts simply do not have the capacity to do so. In providing these services and, in particular,

the practice-shifting professional development, the ESD has a unique, if not precarious role. According to the ESD III assistant superintendent,

Our job as a service agency is to meet people where they're at. We don't necessarily advocate or push, but if they're ready and they want help, we'll be right there with them.... We showcase some things and hope that people come in that direction.

She provided the example of project-based learning for which she was seeking six or seven schools interested in a pilot project. She explained her approach to this initiative, "Let's come together and learn and see where we can go." Such collaborative efforts and providing professional learning that transforms practice requires the ESDs to build, sustain, and leverage quality relationships with district and school leaders.

The role of relationships. ESD administrators across all three regions emphasized that "trust" is a commodity that is important to build and maintain. Across interviews with all ESD administrators, two key themes related to trust-building emerged: relationship building on a personal level with local schools and districts and responsiveness to their needs with high-quality services. ESD administrators felt that building relationships with districts facilitated more direct contact from districts and the likelihood that they would be able to help districts with their priorities. As the ESD I assistant superintendent explained, "I think ESDs are absolutely essential in being the aunts and uncles to help the district." At the same time, ESD administrators, including all superintendents and assistant superintendents, acknowledged that those relationships were strengthened when local superintendents and principals can expect that their services will be of high-quality and provide them with the support required.

According to the ESD I superintendent, “ESD work is relationships first and then everything else follows.” The ESD I assistant superintendent indicated that not only are the relationships between ESD staff and local educators important, so too are the relationships the ESD can facilitate by connecting local educators with others who have similar needs. Much relationship building is done in schools through work done “sitting side-by-side with principals,” according to the assessment and planning director from ESD II who also connected relationship-building with reputation-building as a source for high-quality coaching and resources. ESD administrators connected relationships with the importance of building a solid reputation in their region. A content specialist from ESD I also noted the utility of relationships because established relationships can help prevent local educators taking a defensive stance in conversations focused on improving teaching practice. ESD administrators build and/or bolster relationships by meeting with educators in their schools and by growing relationships through multiple touch-points such as passing along resources that align with their teaching and learning priorities. For example, all three ESD superintendents convene regular meetings and meet with local superintendents in their communities, as do assistant superintendents. Special education administrators work closely with the local administrators in their regions to develop specific programs and services to meet students’ needs, and the school improvement specialists and content coaches work with principals and teachers in schools and through professional learning opportunities at the ESD office.

The importance of responsiveness took two key forms. First, ESD administrators felt that responsive timeliness was important. For example, the assistant superintendent from ESD I explained, “Our philosophy in our ESD is to provide a service, the very best service, as quickly as possible.” Second, in addition to real-time support, ESD administrators across the regions

spoke of the importance of district and school-level involvement to learn the “personality” or “flavor” of the different districts. Knowledge of district-specific context emerged as important for understanding the capacity schools have for implementing teaching and learning initiatives, ranging from the technology available for teachers to the local staff’s receptiveness to change. The ESD II assistant superintendent emphasized the importance of being responsive to districts’ needs, “We have to be nimble enough to be able to provide the support at a time and place that works for the district,” and, as an example from ESD II, this can mean traveling to the district if the district can’t secure substitutes. All three ESD superintendents spoke about the importance of relationships, responsiveness, and district-level involvement, and this ethos was clearly articulated among ESD participants across the three regions. Finally, ESD content specialists, in particular, indicated that along with their efforts to build the trust in the ESD, they rely on teachers and administrators they know to be responsive by working closely with them on new initiatives, suggesting the importance of two-way trust.

Providing Professional Learning Opportunities and Content-Specific Expertise

Every ESD administrator noted the considerable amount of traveling they do to districts throughout their region, and long commutes seemed to be embedded within the duties for each position. In fact, one teaching and learning administrator shared that the amount of time spent on the road prompted her to transition to a position with a local district. Each region included in the study has several districts that are nearly a day’s drive away from the ESD office, and this is not uncommon for other ESDs throughout the state. As they were familiar with the considerable distance to schools, ESDs administrators were sympathetic to the challenges that districts face in getting educators to the ESD headquarters for professional development. ESD administrators across regions recognized this as a challenge, and they also recognized the substitute teacher

shortage as a major barrier. This shortage is occurring throughout the state but is particularly pronounced in remote rural communities. Even if the professional development offered at the ESD is free, the districts must pay for substitutes and travel, and as a content specialist from ESD III pointed out, charging districts for travelling to them creates an instant equity barrier for the most remote districts.

Differentiating regional supports. ESD administrators recognized that, if even possible, it can be a significant burden of time and finances for districts to send teachers to ESD headquarters. Yet, the approach ESDs and individual ESD administrators take to mitigate the challenge of distance are varied within and across ESDs. ESD III divided itself into sub-regions and is offering various professional learning opportunities in several or all of the sub-regions. In addition, this ESD attempts to provide more professional learning opportunities outside of school hours. For example, an extended workshop might start after school on Friday and continue all day on Saturday, thereby removing the need to drive several hours to the ESD headquarters and the need for securing substitute teachers. This ESD is also working to build relationships with various venues, such as training centers, in the sub-regions to facilitate their capacity to host trainings for groups of teachers.

The remaining two ESDs have less formal structures to mitigating the challenge of distance, though various administrators at both ESDs, including the superintendents, noted the importance of traveling to the districts regularly. Superintendent travel to local districts for ESDs I and II, however, was aligned with developing and maintaining relationships rather than a distribution of professional learning opportunities. The teaching and learning administrator from ESD II mentioned having “angst” about the large geographical area divided by water and the need for more local opportunities balanced with the need to gather everyone from the entire

region for a “larger perspective.” Similarly, as the teaching and learning administrator from ESD II noted, the single workshop model doesn’t work as well as ongoing professional learning, and she and her colleagues are working to identify additional opportunities for embedded or ongoing learning. Administrators from the three ESDs talked about walkthroughs and coaching, and the teaching and learning administrator from ESD III discussed coaching cycles as an important tool in school improvement. However, examples of job-embedded coaching, provided by the ESD leaders, trended toward ad-hoc opportunities, such as the ESD superintendents doing classroom walkthroughs with district superintendents, rather than regular and sustained peer or leader coaching. Additional examples of school-level efforts to build such opportunities into their regular practice will follow in subsequent sections.

One ESD administrator, one district superintendent, and one principal discussed the culture of traveling out of the district for professional learning as a professional “right” that teachers expected, but this is made difficult during the school year due to remoteness, lack of substitutes, or both. It was clear from the interviews with ESD administrators across the three regions that they recognize and understand challenges that remoteness places on accessing high-quality professional learning opportunities and that they are working, albeit in different ways, to bridge some of the physical challenges of remoteness and to address professionalization and information-sharing opportunities for educators in more remote districts. While ESDs I and II have less structured approaches to distributing various meetings and workshops, the content specialists from these ESDs mentioned that they or their colleagues within their ESD do try to provide some professional development opportunities in districts to enhance convenience for remote educators.

Addressing remoteness while building capacity. ESD administrators across the regions are using creative efforts to address the challenge of remoteness and to promote ongoing professional learning opportunities in local schools and districts. Each of the ESDs has various fellows programs, typically targeting core content areas, allowing teachers to develop expertise during workshops and ongoing engagement. The teachers take that expertise back to their districts to build the capacity of their local colleagues in new content or instructional practices. This is similar to a train-the-trainer model, but it does emphasize teacher leadership as a significant component of the fellows experience. Under this model, a science specialist from ESD III is working with a group of science teachers on a Next Generation Science Standards initiative requiring ongoing online collegiality and several hands-on, in-person professional learning meetings. To include teachers who are remote and unlikely to participate in-person, she created pairings of teachers so those who could attend the meetings in-person had a “buddy” joining via videoconferencing. Using iPads and working with their “FaceTime Friends,” the remote teachers are able to experience the hands-on activities as if they are there. The science specialist noted that some of remote teachers experienced challenges with high-speed, streaming Internet during the sessions, but this creative method allows for teachers from remote areas to participate in professional learning opportunities that had previously not been available to them.

Convening for a Regional Learning Improvement Agenda

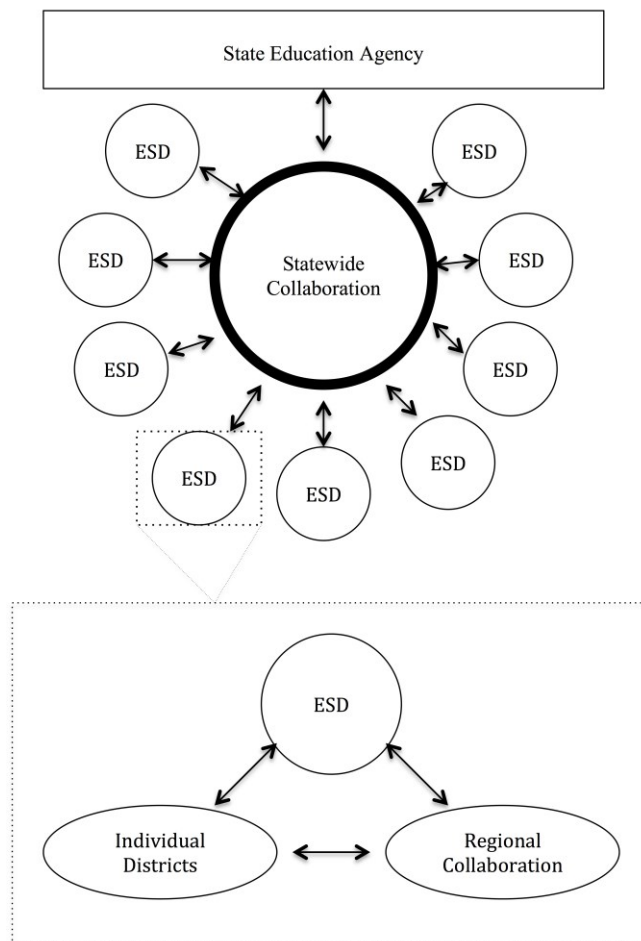


Figure 4-2: Convening Statewide and Regional Collaboration

The ESDs in Washington state serve as a convener to facilitate connections and conversations broadly, across the ESD service region, and between individual districts. This model for support takes a number of forms across the three ESDs, but each of the ESD superintendents convenes a meeting of all district superintendents within the region, typically each month during the school year. During these meetings, it is common for superintendents to receive key policy updates or to learn about new services offered by the ESD. Yet, the vast majority of the meetings are spent engaging in collaborative professional learning and problem solving targeting shared problems of practice. The local superintendents determine the agenda

for these meetings, and the ESD superintendent locates the resources required to facilitate the professional learning topics. The superintendent of ESD I explained that he surveys the superintendents in the region, and the executive committee of superintendents works to identify the collective priorities. This ESD has some of the largest districts in the state, so he stipulates that the topics must be “of interest to all” districts, large and small.

Superintendents of ESDs I and II discussed their efforts to model best practices for staff meetings by using guided questions and consultancy protocols and by incorporating adult learning theory to encourage local superintendents to utilize this in their district meetings. In addition, to make meetings as constructive as possible, the superintendent of ESD I reserves 45 minutes at the end of meetings to tackle challenges that administrators are facing at that time. These meetings are also helpful to the work of ESD administrators and content specialists. As the ESD II teaching and learning administrator shared, these meetings “keep that flow of information up and down and back and forth.” ESD superintendents felt that maintaining open lines of communication allows them to solicit feedback that will lead to adjusted ESD offerings and to fine-tune programs.

Similarly, the ESD assistant superintendents for teaching and learning reported convening the district assistant superintendents throughout their regions for meetings, and a number of models for cross-region networks emerged across the ESDs. For example, an ESD might convene additional professional networks for human resources directors and technology directors similar to those of the superintendent and assistant superintendent networks. Yet, while all districts do have a superintendent, smaller districts do not have assistant superintendents or any additional administrators overseeing departments. In these cases, ESD administrators felt surveys and one-on-one meetings with superintendents and principals proved to be the most

helpful mechanism for ESD administrators to learn about the priorities and needs of the smallest districts.

In addition to ongoing collaboration for administrators in similar roles, ESD I has developed a Leadership Academy that works with teams of district and building administrators to improve struggling schools, and this engages administrators independently in their districts and collectively at the ESD. This venture started as a “seed” project funded by reserves, but due to its success, the Leadership Academy now charges approximately \$10,000 per school, and over 50 schools have completed the process. Additional examples include the coordination of fellow-style-networks for teachers within the ESDs where teachers from core content areas, representing every district that wishes to participate, come together to engage in professional learning. Some of these programs are branded as “fellows” programs and some are not, but they share similar structural components. In the fellows programs, participating teachers must have their district’s support to ensure that they will come back to the district to lead professional learning sessions for local teachers. ESD content specialists reported that these were helpful opportunities to build regional capacity for instructional improvement. Local district and school administrators described the fellows networks as valuable opportunities for participating teachers, though two local administrators associated participation in the fellows networks with a commitment that would take teachers away from their classrooms.

Most ESD administrators and all of the content specialists discussed the role of “waterfall” or “train-the-trainer” professional development models as important for disseminating new information as widely as possible, and though unstated, it seemed ESD administrators considered this to be an efficient model for timely distribution of new information and practices. As the ESD II superintendent explained, “The focus is delivering effective

professional development to staff so that then they can increase student achievement in classrooms.” The tenor of such comments relayed urgency in the work of the ESDs to strengthen the work of individual districts and to widely disseminate new information and best practices.

Administrators across ESDs stated that the larger districts within their regions didn’t need them for services related to content expertise because they can afford to employ classroom coaches and content specialists. Yet, ESD administrators also noted that large districts within their regions do still contract other services and engage in network meetings, such as superintendent roundtables. In addition, administrators from ESDs I and III discussed how ESD content specialists embed themselves in trainings and meetings for district coaches in the larger districts to better understand the work happening in those districts and to help align this work with that of the ESD. An administrator from the remaining ESD described the variety of individuals who might attend content-specific meetings, including teachers from smaller districts and content coaches or teachers on special assignment from larger districts. Though their positions may vary, these individuals return to their districts with a consistent skill set to share and a coherent message about teaching and learning. Therefore, these collaborative engagement opportunities help identify and calibrate priorities for teaching and learning that stretch across the region.

Prompting Learning Improvement Change

ESDs gently prompt local districts’ learning improvement agendas, as the ESD III assistant superintendent explained, “We showcase some things, and hope that people come in that direction.” In addition to supporting coherent practices and providing core services across their regions, the ESDs also provide a gentle push for districts in new directions. As the

superintendent of ESD III described it, the ESD serves as a “bridge” and acts as a “lifeline across that bridge” to help districts embrace new practices in teaching and learning. The gentle push of the ESD’s regional agenda was apparent across the three regions.

This work extends beyond curriculum workshops and fee-for-service offerings and reaches across each of the three regions to encourage new practices within individual districts and new ways of thinking about teaching and learning. Yet, these priorities are not determined by the ESD alone. In all three regions, the ESD works to engage districts individually and collectively to understand the region’s priorities and to gather resources and build offerings based on those priorities.

Table 4-2: ESD-Driven Regional Teaching and Learning Priorities

ESD-Driven Regional Teaching and Learning Priorities	ESD I doesn’t receive funds or grants to support English Learners, but they noticed the change in demographics in their region and identified supporting EL practice in schools as a priority. In this case, they invested operating funds in outreach efforts and district supports for working with EL students in general education classrooms.
	ESD II is working to create close partnerships between schools, universities, government agencies, nonprofits, and businesses to support STEM education in their region and to tie enhanced STEM education to economic development efforts.
	ESD III is engaging in work that changes the culture of schools through popular positive behavior interventions and support (PBIS) trainings that prepare staff to help all students engage in and contribute to their school communities. In addition, the ESD is embarking on a venture to define and support what a “New School” might look like by recognizing that developments in technology and society now place individual students, rather than school buildings, at the center of learning.

Teaching and learning resource sharing in remote areas. The ESDs, particularly the two ESDs with more remote districts, ESDs II and III, worked to link districts with similar needs and in close proximity. In addition to facilitating partnerships for sharing special education

services, the ESD can facilitate relationships that support sharing the cost of teaching and learning resources. ESD administrators, particularly in ESD III, discussed times when the networks they convened would result in the sharing of teaching and learning resources between districts or inviting of neighboring districts to their professional development seminars. For example, according to the superintendent and a content specialist from ESD III, smaller and remote districts are partnering on teaching and learning decisions so they can share resources and professional learning. Such examples result in no net financial gain for the ESDs, but they do allow for resource sharing between districts. As a result, districts are able to share resources within, and independent of, ESDs. Through formal and informal practices, ESDs facilitate networks for tackling challenges within shared realities.

Leveraging State Mandates for Cohesive Improvement Efforts

ESDs work to marshal state compliance efforts and other capacity building opportunities in ways that support cohesive efforts for educational improvement. As state-mandated and partially state-supported entities, ESDs are responsible for disseminating the policy and practice decisions of the state education agency and legislature, and this is done with an emphasis on statewide alignment across the nine ESDs. Content specialists employed by each ESD deliver content-specific expertise to schools and districts, and each specialist attends monthly meetings with their job-alike colleagues from across the state. Most of the ESD administrators interviewed indicated that they met regularly with their counterparts, including content specialists who met monthly with counterparts at the ESD in the Seattle area, a standing meeting that requires significant travel from administrators across the state by both car and air. State education agency employees often attend these meetings in addition to ESD employees. For example, ESD assistant superintendents for teaching and learning meet monthly in a similar fashion with the

state assistant superintendent for teaching and learning. The purpose for these meetings was presented as multifaceted. Broadly, they serve as an opportunity to collaborate on strategies to address shared problems of practice. Content specialists use this time to develop standardized content and then push out to their regions to provide professional development. ESD administrators indicated that there is an emphasis for ESDs thinking about how their work aligns across ESDs. For example, content specialists interviewed said they felt these opportunities were valuable in helping to ensure continuity as statewide teaching and learning priorities evolve. For example, content specialists discussed the importance of “unpacking” the Common Core State Standards together and finding general connections to local communities that might be replicated throughout the state.

Complementary Professional Development Offerings

Rather than offering professional development opportunities siloed into compliance and content categories, ESDs analyze necessary and potential topics for the year to craft a slate of complimentary offerings. These opportunities are informed by, but not solely dependent on, individual school/district preferences, but in an effort to support a variety of needs and interests, these offerings are all under a broad learning-improvement umbrella. At each of the three ESDs, content specialists from across subject areas are coming together to discuss ways that they can support cross-content implementation of evolutions in education policy. Though the intensity of this cross-content collaboration varied across the three ESDs, it was clear within each ESD that content specialists and administrators are seeking ways to link the essential initiatives that are simultaneously unfolding, such as Common Core and Next Generation Science Standards, new statewide standardized assessments, and new teacher evaluation frameworks, with each other and to make implementation easier for districts and more meaningful to teachers’ everyday realities.

The content specialists and other administrators, such as assistant superintendents for teaching and learning, are working closely with each other and with districts to support the ongoing implementation of new standards, assessments and evaluation frameworks. For example, administrators from all three ESDs discussed their efforts to integrate these initiatives across their professional development offerings for teachers.

Simultaneously, ESD I is working with ESD staff and with districts to develop a common instructional improvement vocabulary in their region to better facilitate dialogue about shared priorities across schools and districts throughout the region. Yet, as the ESD I teaching and learning administrator shared, not all schools or local districts are starting from the same point. The ultimate intention of this common instructional improvement vocabulary is to serve as a shared platform for teaching and learning work across the districts moving forward. This is a component of an overarching effort to link teaching and learning initiatives and to connect schools with the supports they need. As the ESD I teaching and learning administrator explained,

That's been really a fun part of this job is really being able to make connections with building leadership, teacher leaders and get to the heart of what is it that we can do to support you. I tell them, "I'm one person, but I sort of have this whole structure behind me." Sometimes my role is really just helping people access the services that we have available here at ESD that are already in place. Sometimes it's creating something new. It could look a variety of ways.

The ESD I administrators intend that a common vocabulary at the core of complimentary offerings will be useful in supporting schools' similar and individual needs and will support implementation of the new teaching and learning frameworks across content areas.

The ESDs are charged with fostering proficiency and supporting implementation of three distinct teaching and learning frameworks that are new to many, if not most, teachers and supervising administrators. One key method for linking improvement initiatives at the ESDs is done through the work of content specialists who also serve as implementation specialists for the three teacher evaluation frameworks used in Washington. As the ESD II assistant superintendent for teaching and learning explained,

Something that we really strive to do is let them see where the connections are, that they're not totally separate. That's hard and has to be done explicitly in many cases where they just don't have the time to process that and think of it on their own.

The notion that a key function of ESD administrators, in particular, was to remove things from the district administrators' "plates" was a common interview response.

Looking to the Teaching and Learning Horizon

A key thread running through interviews with ESD administrators was that they helped districts see what is on the horizon. As the ESD II assessment and planning director shared, it is critical that the ESD employs strong communication techniques to be sure that districts are aware of the various opportunities and resources available to educators in the region. In doing so, the ESD II superintendent and ESD I content specialist emphasized that a key priority for teaching and learning work at the ESD is to build "momentum" for instructional change and to ensure that the work continues in local schools after the ESD steps away.

The ESDs structure their operations to provide support beyond siloed workshops, and participants at all ESDs discussed their work to integrate content areas and to link the content areas and their specialists to one another. In addition, the ESDs are prioritizing key teaching and

learning initiatives. For example, ESD III is linking mathematics instructional development and their engagement with early childhood education to enhance learning opportunities for students, and ESD I is employing “authentic instruction” frameworks to enhance teachers’ skill sets for student engagement and collaborative learning. In addition to an emphasis on cross content collaboration, the ESDs are also working to integrate opportunities for teachers, and ultimately students, to apply content knowledge to “real world” scenarios, such as fields of employment. These efforts were particularly evident in the STEM fields.

Online professional learning. In addition to the sub-regional professional learning opportunities discussed earlier, ESD administrators discussed the pressing need for providing professional development opportunities that are responsive to both remoteness and the realities for educators working in any context. The superintendent of ESD III explained that the ESD is increasingly emphasizing online, evening, and weekend professional learning opportunities. Yet, the assistant superintendent from the same ESD noted that, due to the gravity of the new standards and teaching and learning frameworks, the ESD is considering returning to day-long and summer meetings because developing expertise with the new mandates requires dedicated time and concentration.

Tension regarding online professional learning opportunities was also discussed. The ESD I teaching and learning administrator mentioned that educators in the region feel webinars are ineffective and that they prefer in-person engagement and information delivery. Of course, in-person opportunities require educators to be away from their schools and districts, and this ultimately poses a different challenge. Seven local and ESD administrators discussed state education agency webinars. While the local administrators lamented that they were not always clear or offered at opportune times, the ESD administrators described a function of their role as

translators for state-level developments that impact schools. For example, the ESD II assistant superintendent works to translate their webinars into a digestible format. Nearly every local district and school administrator lamented that the state education agency lacks an understanding of the context of his or her work in rural, small, and/or remote districts. The work of ESD administrators to translate developments further reinforces their role as an intermediary between the variety of elected, appointed, and bureaucratic state-level stakeholders governing education and schools and districts in Washington state.

Building capacity for rapid change. In addition to showcasing new developments in the field of practice and building momentum for instructional change, ESDs are charged with building their own capacity and the capacity of local districts to support new mandates. As previously outlined, a significant mandate unfolding at the time of the interviews was the implementation of teaching and learning frameworks as teacher evaluation frameworks. In response to these mandates, ESDs are working to draw connections between the mandates and developments in their professional learning opportunities and services. As the superintendent and assistant superintendent of ESD II emphasized, they are working to connect the teaching and learning frameworks, Common Core, and Common Core assessments to make those connections explicit and the learning about those connections accessible for teachers. Across the ESDs, efforts to integrate multiple teaching and learning evaluation frameworks into content-specific professional learning opportunities are unfolding, but this poses several challenges. Two key challenges discussed by ESD participants included (a) the broad need for securing system-wide support for training, time for training to change teaching and learning practices, and implementation support and monitoring infrastructure to ensure moving forward with new practices; and (b) the challenge of aligning content-specific professional learning opportunities

with three different teaching and learning frameworks. The majority of local districts across all three ESDs had selected the Center for Educational Leadership Five Dimensions of Teaching and Learning (CEL) framework, but several districts from each ESD were using the Dr. Robert Marzano Evaluation Framework or the Charlotte Danielson Framework for Teaching (for example, two or three local districts for each framework). The concentration of local districts selecting one framework was frequently attributed to the relative proximity of the local districts to the University of Washington in Seattle, the home of the Center for Educational Leadership, and the notion that many school and district administrators had a prior familiarity with this framework. Though the majority of local districts adopted the CEL framework, others had not, and this required the ESDs to attempt alignment of professional learning with all three.

The ESDs further sought to support the implementation of the new frameworks in local districts by appointing content specialists to also serve as framework specialists. As the ESDs seek to embed these new initiatives in their offerings, they are also working with districts to support this change. Whether writing an implementation plan for the comprehensive policy shifts that a local administrator will present to their board or developing a new school wide vocabulary unit, ESD administrators are partnering with local districts and schools to support local educators' capacity for realizing the rapid succession of policies mandating teaching and learning changes. As the ESD III assistant superintendent explained, "We're really talking about a shift in how we teach," and,

I really do think we have asked people to do the most complex work we've ever asked with the least amount of training to do it, or understanding, or funding to support it.

That's a challenge that is really a heavy lift... I don't think people are unwilling. I think they are tired, and they need more support, and they need more time to learn.

In addition to attempting to translate these significant changes to the classroom in a cohesive way, the ESDs are also working to fill an expertise gap in local schools and districts by identifying the ways in which they can be of the most assistance to support, as the assistant superintendent of ESD III explained, “very different kinds of ways of interacting with students and facilitating learning.” Such a significant change requires a significant investment of educators’ time to build new skill sets and significant effort on the part of the ESDs to facilitate this change in practice for every teacher in their respective regions.

Discussion

This study reinforces several themes present in the rural education literature. For example, participants described tight-knit communities, many of which are facing economic challenges. In addition, even districts in the most metropolitan of the ESD regions included in this study are confronted with the challenges that remoteness from resources, and from professional learning supports, pose. Washington state’s educational service districts operate as support organizations to bridge challenges of remoteness by providing support services that help schools focus on the core business of schooling, strengthening teaching and learning. The supports that ESDs provide, such as special education coordination and back-office supports ranging from technology services to procurement, allow local districts to focus their efforts on teaching and learning priorities.

The back-office supports ESDs provide are essential to the survival of the districts they serve. By leveraging “time, money, and people” for the central office functions, as the ESD II superintendent explained, they allow districts to “use scarce resources for something else.” Both small and larger rural districts in this study benefited from ESD back-office supports, as their

central offices are not departmentalized or large enough to support hiring positions ubiquitous in larger districts. As a result, the ESDs' coordination of these services allows rural districts to take advantage of economies of scale and provide services, such as technology supports, to students that would not be possible to individually finance and maintain. These partnerships also allow small, rural district administrators to focus their efforts on teaching and learning improvement within their individual districts.

In addition to back-office supports, educational service districts are also key stakeholders in the dissemination and implementation of state policies, as evidenced in this study through the ESDs' focus on building local capacity for teaching and learning teacher evaluation frameworks, Common Core State Standards implementation, and the Smarter Balanced Assessment. The critical role of educational service districts in building local districts' capacity to comply with state mandates extends beyond their role as coordinators of supports in schools or as centralized consortia for resource sharing.

ESDs act as intermediaries between the state education agency and local districts, and in doing so, they translate education policy and build capacity to assist local districts in complying with federal and state mandates. Additionally, ESDs build an infrastructure for bringing promising practices for teaching and learning improvement into alignment with policy mandates, such as the evaluation frameworks, and, more broadly, with developments in the field of education, ranging from STEM education to project based learning. In doing so, ESDs have an opportunity to engage in teaching and learning activities in schools and to collaborate with local districts and individual schools in ways that the state education agency does not. Therefore, ESDs have an opportunity to translate federal and state policy changes for local districts, and in addition, ESDs have the opportunity to articulate regional needs to the state education agency.

This study suggests that in addition to providing back-office supports and serving local districts to build capacity for policy developments, ESDs in Washington state play a critical role in their partnerships with local districts as partners for teaching and learning improvement. As evidenced by ESD administrators' work with individual educators and local administrators throughout their regions, ESDs seek opportunities to draw connections between the content-specific expertise they provide and their capacity-building efforts for policy mandates. As the ESD II superintendent explained, "We practically serve as the curriculum department for a small district, and the professional developers, and that's how they see us." Through showcasing improvement strategies and through the dissemination of free and contracted teaching and learning services from a central, coordinated organization, ESDs contribute to the essential functions of school districts as outlined by Rorrer et al. (2008), "(a) establishing instructional leadership, (b) reorienting the organization, (c) establishing policy coherence, and (d) maintaining an equity focus" (p. 307).

As a result, ESDs support teaching and learning improvement in local districts *and* facilitate local districts' ability to pivot from back-office functions to concentrate on teaching and learning improvement. By performing the back-office functions that a central office would oversee in a large district and by facilitating broad understanding of foundational teaching and learning shifts (both policy mandates and contemporary directions, such as project-based learning and STEM partnerships), ESDs bolster local districts' ability to engage in local teaching and learning improvement and the building of locally nuanced learning improvement agendas.

As ESDs engage in the work of convening local administrators throughout their regions, the ESD, as an organization, and ESD administrators, as individuals, rely on building and sustaining relationships with local leaders by emphasizing interpersonal and organizational trust

as a key tool for investing local administrators in the ESD's work and offerings. In addition to fostering relationships to bring educators to the ESD, ESD III is actively seeking opportunities to equitably distribute professional learning opportunities by offering workshops and seminars in sub-regions. This helps mitigate the challenges facing remote schools due to distance and topography.

In many ways, the ESDs function as a central office does in a large district by acting as a learning organization (Honig, 2008) to engage local administrators in the development of their educational agendas and to provide supports targeting these priorities. ESD administrators focus on fostering and sustaining relationships with local administrators to better understand their individual needs and local learning improvement agendas. More systematically, ESDs convene regular regional meetings with local district superintendents, as well as other local administrators, and invite these local administrators to articulate their shared priorities. This dynamic and sustained engagement invites local districts to shape a regional learning improvement agenda. Simultaneously, ESD administrators collaborate with their peers and with the state education agency at a state level to build ESD capacity for supporting local districts. Therefore, ESDs (a) build capacity for educational improvement efforts by providing districts with content-specific expertise; (b) serve as a convener to facilitate connections and conversations broadly, across the ESD service region, and between individual districts; and (c) work to marshal state compliance efforts and other capacity building opportunities in ways that support cohesive efforts for educational improvement.

This collaborative approach to working within and among districts supports a unified vision for educational improvement throughout the region while encouraging flexibility for local priorities (Supovitz, 2006) and secures some central supports, including valuable expertise, for

these local goals (Honig & Hatch, 2004). Therefore, the ESD instructional improvement efforts can be embedded within the daily actions of the ESD administrators and specialists as well as the local districts and schools they serve (Knapp, 2008).

With an emphasis on student learning, ESDs can bring professional and system learning together with learning goals (Knapp et al., 2003b) to support the collective professional capacity building of teachers across geographic regions. ESD administrators within these regions, in turn, collaborate with colleagues from across the state, thereby extending the opportunity for curriculum and professional alignment across the statewide system. Yet, the emphasis for professional growth and organizational development is on individual districts as they identify and refine teaching and learning priorities and the ESDs (a) link districts with similar needs and interests and (b) provide central support for local administrators' goals.

Supovitz (2006) posits that organizational learning drives sustainability and notes that this is supported by fostering individual learning and by using interactions as a way to foster learning across the group. This study reaffirms that distance challenges professional development delivery (Eady & Zepeda, 2008; Reaves & Larmer, 1996; Williams & Nierengarten, 2011). Yet, this study also suggests that ESDs can have a significant role in supporting school and district level priorities for learning improvement efforts by leveraging a locally responsive, but regional, strategy for learning improvement and by re-envisioning a deeper commitment to tackling the challenges that remoteness and rural contexts present educators.

Chapter 5

The Role of Community in Learning Improvement

Whenever possible, principals and superintendents forge formal and informal partnerships that result in added capacity for supporting schools and students. Partnerships may connect students and teachers with organizations that can support instruction in core content areas, such as partnerships with state parks, fish and wildlife agency outposts, and local historical societies. Additionally, administrators may work to connect students with academic and personal supports within the community, such as volunteer tutors or mentors. All but one elementary and secondary school, both situated in the same community, indicated that volunteers from the community are an integral part of their day-to-day work with students, and in particular, that the presence of volunteers in their schools was essential to teaching and learning priorities. Reasons for the absence of volunteers in Schools G and H are addressed later in this chapter. In all other instances, 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 their life after high school.

Fostering Partnerships to Supplement Educational Offerings

Not only do partnerships support students' learning, they also help rural educators bridge the effects of remoteness. Local district and ESD 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. For example, School D is within a 30-minute drive of an annual film festival in a small community, and the principal has forged a relationship

that provides students with access to various festival activities and brings filmmakers to the high school so students have the opportunity to collaborate and learn about the filmmaking process. Other examples included schools engaging local businesses to expose students to potential job sectors, such as the hospitality and events industries in a remote resort area near School F. These examples are from schools that, though remote, are in close proximity to resort communities or tourist sites. This proximity does not guarantee automatic opportunities for students, but it does offer the schools clear pathways for exposing students to life outside of their communities, often seen as the “big world” (Budge, 2006).

School and district administrators from Schools E, G, and H discussed the challenge some of their students have after they’ve graduated from high school and go off to college. As the superintendent of School H stated, “There are a lot of kids that crash and burn” because they “can’t handle” the environment of a big university or the absence of the structure they knew in a small town and school. Administrators recognize this as a challenge and are working to address the dynamic in a number of ways. For example, School E’s district has created informal support networks for graduates from their community while they are away at college. School D works to bring speakers to expose students to the world beyond their community, and though the principal noted the expense of taking students out of the area, most students have the opportunity to travel to Seattle at some point during their schooling. These opportunities serve as platforms to connect students from these schools to experiences outside their communities, and they are supported by building budgets and supplemented by fundraising.

Resource Pathways Supporting Learning Improvement Agendas

Table 5-1: Resource Pathways Supporting Learning Improvement Agendas

Four Resource Pathway Categories			
District and Education Supports, such as the ESD	Formal Partnerships	Families and Individual Community Members	Community-Networked Support

The District and Formal Education Supporters

All local administrators discussed the ESD serving their region as a resource for professional learning opportunities, teaching and learning supports, and special services, stressing that the ESDs are a key support for their schools and districts. The superintendent of School D described the ESD as an “extension of school districts” and emphasized that “ESDs are the biggest support structure that we can have for schools, especially small schools, all up-and-down our [region].”

Local administrators described engaging in professional learning opportunities for the key initiatives that were unfolding at the time of the interviews. Even administrators who voiced not frequently using the ESD noted that their assistance in developing knowledge and skills for the policy shifts in education was much appreciated. In addition to training for the new teaching and learning evaluation frameworks, ESDs helped administrators and teachers develop a working knowledge of the frameworks to aid the selection process. Districts use the ESDs to train teachers on the use of the frameworks and rely on the ESDs for ongoing training. For example, administrators in School D’s district were certified trainers for their selected framework and initially provided seven days of professional development for the new frameworks, but teachers new to their district receive one day of ESD training and ongoing coaching from their local administrator.

All administrators voiced the importance of the ESD's content-specific supports. In particular, most administrators noted the value of content-specific professional learning for teachers. This included three administrators who were reluctant to provide a full endorsement of their ESD due to their impression that quality varied between ESD programs. In addition to content-specific support, such as math or science instruction, administrators discussed other types of skill-specific supports provided by the ESD. For example, School A uses a one-to-one model providing every student with a notebook computer, and the ESD provided training and instructional resources to support the transition to this model. In addition, the principal and superintendent of School D, part of ESD II, noted the value of the ongoing professional learning opportunities that the ESD provides. School F, whose student body was 46% Hispanic in 2014, uses ESD III for English Learner instructional supports. These are opportunities that teachers and administrators from smaller and more remote districts are otherwise unlikely to have and bolster their ability to provide quality content-specific supports.

In addition to the content support and professional learning opportunities the ESDs provide, local administrators stressed the importance of the ESD's role in facilitating collaboration. The superintendent of School D discussed the importance of ESD II in facilitating cross-district connections for administrators who might otherwise be the only principal in their district. As he noted, statewide professional organizations, including the Association of Washington School Principals (AWSP) and the Washington Association of School Administrators (WASA), "have a good website, they have some good ideas," but they provide "one-shot professional development" whereas an administrator can participate in sustained, group engagement through the ESD. Local administrators from all three regions noted the value of networks facilitated by the ESDs. The principal of School A discussed the value of interacting

with other districts to build the train-the-trainer capacity that allows principals to return to their own schools to train teachers on new evaluation frameworks, and the superintendent of School A discussed the value of participating in ESD I's Leadership Academy which provides ongoing leadership collaboration over the course of a year. The superintendent of School C discussed ESD I's role in facilitating connections with other districts to support proficiency scaling for Common Core readiness. Similarly, the School F's district is partnering with ESD III and another district to bring in an expert on poverty and provide professional learning for teachers. Finally, the administrators for Schools G and H discussed the importance of the opportunities their teachers have to meet and work with colleagues from other districts during ESD III's workshops. This district is small, and teachers have no opportunities within the district to collaborate with colleagues teaching the same content.

The expense of ESD services was a topic discussed by multiple districts. The administrative team for Schools G and H discussed the expense of ESD III services, "We can't afford to have them come here because they charge \$700 a day, but they provide a lot of great opportunities." In particular, the opportunity to network and collaborate with other teachers is a key service the ESDs provide, yet the substitute shortage makes sending teachers to the ESD on a regular basis difficult. Regarding ESD II, the superintendent of School E, approximately three and a half hours away from the ESD office, explained, "They do a lot for us but generally – sometimes staff will go [to the ESD office] – I try always to get them to come here..." Regarding the expense of the ESD II services, she said, "It's expensive, but it's not as expensive as a teacher being out of a classroom, to me, for student learning."

In addition to the importance of their administrator and teacher leadership offerings, administrators referenced the supports the ESD provides for special education services,

technology, and business office supports. Generally, administrators spent limited time discussing the more technical supports provide by the ESDs, but they did note that they would not otherwise be able to afford or coordinate such services on their own.

Finally, administrators also discussed looking inward to their own schools and districts to identify support pathways for their teaching and learning priorities. As noted, administrators in School D's district were certified trainers for the teaching and learning framework, so the district's initial professional development offerings were offered by their own administrators. The principal and superintendent of School E facilitate much of their staff's professional learning, and as the principal stated, "We're pretty self-sufficient out here... If we can't find what we need then we create it." This entrepreneurial spirit supports self-created resources, and it is also a skill set that local administrators apply when creating partnerships to support teaching and learning.

Formal Partnerships

Administrators across districts and educational service districts stressed that partnerships with organizations beyond the district provided students with valuable experiences. Such partnerships assume a variety of formats, from partnerships with government agencies to local nonprofits to Native Tribal Councils. In some cases, the ESD might organize partnerships; for example, ESD III is contracted by several Public Utility Districts (PUD) in the region to provide outreach services and electrical safety programs in local schools, and ESD II is convening a STEM network that includes government agencies and local employers. In the vast majority of the examples shared by local administrators, or during interviews with ESD administrators, local

administrators who seek to enhance the quality and breadth of their students' education forged the partnerships.

Some partnerships seek to enhance students' connection to their community and culture. For example, nearly 65% of students attending School E are Native American, but all students in this school take native language classes that are taught by tribal elders who are certified as language instructors by the state education agency, and the certification is facilitated with the help of the local heritage museum. In addition, the principal of School E cites the Tribal Council as a key supporter of the district's learning priorities, "Whenever we need something and we ask for it, they're always there to provide that. Our Tribal Council is very, very supportive of education." As she points out, today's students will be "the ones running our Tribe in 20 years. We have to make sure they're well-educated."

Similarly rooted in learning about the local community, School D 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. Through this opportunity, students collaborate with peers from very different settings in addition to learning about habitats that are a critical component of their local ecosystem and a driving economic force in the region. These opportunities leverage the strong community ties that rural schools often enjoy to foster a greater sense of place and to connect these place-based pedagogies (e.g. Budge, 2006) with core content areas.

As noted previously, a portion of the partnerships local administrators forge are coordinated to expose students to the world beyond their communities. School E has developed the sustained relationship with the nearby film festival to provide students with a unique learning

opportunity that would otherwise be unavailable to them. The principal of School F has also forged a number of partnerships with local entities that support students' learning opportunities. As he notes, their levy leaves athletics well-funded, but modest local philanthropy also supports students' exposure to arts and culture, for example, a trip to see the Pacific Northwest Ballet in Seattle. To facilitate this philanthropy, he has developed a partnership with a racing event in a local resort community. The proceeds from this race provide opportunities for students to pursue extracurricular activities that they otherwise might not afford. Similarly, the sponsoring organization provides scholarships to students who would like to take College in the High School courses but cannot afford the fees. The race asks that students volunteer at the event in return, and the principal stressed that in the high school where approximately 50% of students are Hispanic and nearly 56% of students receive a free or reduced price lunch, this provides students with valuable learning opportunities that would otherwise not be available to them.

In addition to valuable extracurricular and academic opportunities, such partnerships prepare students for success beyond their schooling experience. As the ESD III superintendent described School F's relationship to the community, "They're beginning to view their community as an extended part of their campus... They are seeing that the learning, if you will, occurs both in school, out of school, downtown, across apprenticeships." The community in which School F is situated is deeply engaged in the school and its students, and this ranges from formal partnerships with the hospital to the Chamber of Commerce. In all cases, the partnerships are designed to embed students in their community and to build students' academic and/or technical skill sets.

Administrators also forged partnerships with additional education supporters outside of the ESD or district context. For example, School B's district has built a partnership with the local

hospital to contract hours with a psychiatrist for district consults and student visits to support students with significant behavioral challenges. Similarly, School F's district has created partnerships with a community health program for mental health support and a drug and alcohol counselor for addiction and abuse supports for students. School D has a school-based counseling program to support students and families when students receive a court-order to obtain counseling. And, the principal of School H explained her theory of action,

We're going to do small school really well. That's what we're going to do. We can't offer you everything that you can be offered at a large school, but we can offer you this, and we're really, really good at being a small school.

Embedded in their explanations of these partnerships were administrators' acknowledgement that they can't support the same types of programs larger districts can, but the support pathways they have developed are key elements supporting students' success in school and life.

Nearly all of the district and school administrators discussed 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 helps to fill gaps that would otherwise go without resources. Additionally, the majority of administrators, particularly superintendents, referenced the formal support of their communities through levies. Administrators from two districts indicated that while they have strong support for levies, they must ask responsibly since their citizens pay some of the highest levy rates in the state.

Informal Support

The presence of the community and families in schools emerged as a source of support for schools, and this presence adopted two distinct forms. First, the presence of volunteers in

schools contributed to the overall success of schools and the culture of learning in the school. Additionally, schools benefited from the expertise of community members as they crafted high-quality instructional programs and learning extension opportunities for students.

All local administrators cited volunteers as important to school operations and student learning. Schools G and H, comprising the K-12 campus in a small district, have little community presence in their schools, but as a part of their district-wide leadership curriculum, high school students act as teaching assistants in the elementary classroom. Similarly, School E emphasizes this cross-grade mentorship, and the superintendent noted that the pairings are often sibling-specific. Local administrators emphasized the importance of community support during the school day and for extracurricular activities. For example, kindergarten students in School D's district have adult mentors helping them with phonics instruction, and the older students who are reticent readers "read to Rover" by reading directly to community members' pets (and their owners) to build confidence. Finally, most principals and superintendents reported relying on volunteers and chaperones for events at the school.

In addition to general volunteerism, local administrators discussed the ways in which community members provided specific expertise that directly benefited students' learning. In the cases of the two high schools with robust Career and Technical Education (CTE) programs, Schools D and F, principals discussed the ways in which they engage parents, and the community-at-large, in CTE courses by relying on their expertise. This helps ensure that their CTE courses include curriculum consistent with recent developments in the professional field. For example, School F's culinary program has regular chef demonstrations and ongoing mentorship from a neighboring resort community where students find jobs after graduation. In addition, the Chamber of Commerce in School F's community hosts mock interviews for

students before they begin their internships in the community. Finally, School D hosted a farm-to-school farmers' market, and according to the principal, "All of the local organic farms that surround the school brought their wares and their expertise to our campus." The schools featured in these examples are all high schools, and the principals emphasized that the contributions of community members, some of them parents, were preparing students to succeed beyond graduation.

In most cases, the principals are the point-people for coordinating these opportunities, and they indicate doing so because they see the academic and personal benefits for students. These partnerships require an entrepreneurial skill set to build, sustain, and integrate these partnerships into the life of the school. Yet, connecting students with the people and public infrastructure, no matter how sparse, in their communities 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 growing sectors of the local economy in areas where traditional employment sectors, such as logging, have been in decline.

Community-Networked Support

Administrators secured resources for schools through a number of informal avenues, and many of these resources required notable coordination by the administrator. This mostly informal support included partnerships with community-based service organizations, such as Rotary Clubs, that provide resources for schools. For example, three ESD administrators, including the superintendents of ESDs II and III, and the principals and superintendents of Schools C and F

spoke specifically about the resources the Rotary Club provides and the importance of building relationships with local Rotary Clubs. For example, the principal of School F explained,

We have Rotary as a big part of our school. They help us. We have [a student club] that's connected to Rotary. They help sponsor a youth mission trip, so this is our third mission trip. A huge amount of money has to be raised, so Rotary is part of that. We partner with Rotary, so that's a great organization that helps us a lot.

In other cases, administrators leveraged their personal networks within the community to finesse resources for schools. The emphasis of support from community-based service organizations and community stakeholders is the result of community-networked support for schools. Building and maintaining relationships with organizations takes considerable time and energy, but the administrators treat these efforts as a priority investment.

Examples of community-networked support included expanded learning opportunities for students. For example, School F places students in internships with community members and local business leaders by leveraging relationships with the Chamber of Commerce. Similarly, these organizations engage the community-at-large on behalf of the schools, as the Rotary Club does in School C's district with an auction supporting scholarship funds.

Though essential to provide opportunities for students, a community's generosity can also create challenges for a small district. As a surprise at a school board meeting, Schools G and H received \$300,000 from their Masonic Lodge to start funding a new outdoor facility, a long-time community priority. Yet, the administration would rather prioritize support for instructional programs, and they recognize that while a significant amount of money, \$300,000 "is a drop in the bucket for an outdoor facility." This example highlights the tension that a community's deep sense of connection to their schools can unintentionally foster.

Yet, community-networked support can also prove essential for providing safe, functional school facilities. For example, School C, an elementary school, desperately needed a parking lot, and the principal was active in the local Rotary Club and had family and friends in the construction business. As a result of his community and personal networks, he was able to borrow equipment and machinery, find community members willing to assist, and get support for purchasing gravel and crushed rock; now, a mud patch behind the school is a parking lot. To do this, he leveraged relationships with formal organizations and his personal network.

Additional administrators cited informal community support in the form of modest private philanthropy funding, for example, technology and instructional materials in School B. For many years, School B has received an annual private donation that funds instructional materials, and with the superintendent's focus on equity, that singular donation is now shared across the district. The staff of School B determines how the funds for their school are allocated, and as the principal emphasized, "I really try to get teachers to connect it to learning." School B also has an active parent teacher association (PTA) that provides support for instructional materials and learning extension opportunities.

The principal of School B described the PTA as instrumental in funding the "frosting," and she immediately followed by saying, "But, I don't want to mean that that's fluffy and not important." Indeed, several models for the support of PTA emerged. Schools predominately aligned with one model, but the models are not mutually exclusive. For example,

- **Funding the frosting:** School B's PTA funds teaching and learning materials, such as classroom libraries, and learning extension opportunities, such as drama productions, sponsored assemblies, a traversing wall in the gym and the school's outside learning lab.
- **Community engagement:** The PTA at School E organizes a Halloween Festival that has broad, community-wide attendance and supports various school initiatives, including the

school ‘rewards’ store. Similarly, School B has various movie and craft nights coordinated by the PTA.

- **Agenda development:** The principal of School D works with the parent club to alternate the topics of their monthly meetings between school driven topics about teaching and learning and parent-selected topics ranging from preventing drug use to understanding support systems that children have in their lives.

In each case, local administrators described the ways in which engagement with their school’s parent group provided opportunities for students that would otherwise not be possible.

In addition, some administrators stressed that the PTA’s support resulted in outcomes that exposed students to the world beyond their community. For example, School E’s rewards store allows students to save good citizenship and academic reward tickets to ‘purchase’ a reward, a practice that emphasizes money management and planning. Additionally, School D works to bring the world outside their community to the school and have three or more assemblies each year, including a visit from young Israeli and Palestinian girls discussing breaking down generational behaviors.

Finally, an informal stream of support that two principals, in particular, leveraged was the stretching of resources, and in both cases they worked to connect hungry students with food. Independent of the district’s central office, the principal of School A worked with the kitchen staff to keep all leftovers from lunch under the proper conditions to continue service after school during after school drop-in hours with teachers. School F established a food share box so students had access to food to take home. Students drop uneaten fruit from lunch in the box, rather than throwing it away, and life skills students sort and package the food for hungry students to pick-up. As the principal explains, “it’s a poverty issue,” and the school is leveraging resources they already have and, in the case of School F, building interdependence between students to further emphasize community within the school.

Doing It All to Stretch Resources

For decades, scholars have described the wide variety of duties that rural administrators are charged with completing (e.g. Jacobson, 1988; Jones & Howley, 2009; Lamkin, 2006; Renihan & Noonan, 2012) often without the assistance that an administrator in a larger or more urban district might rely upon. Each participant in this study described the “many hats” they wear as administrators in rural schools, and each ESD administrator mentioned that rural administrators are chiefly responsible for more duties than their peers in more urban districts. No participants complained about their many duties, and during the majority of interviews, the additional duties came to light over the course of conversation. Yet, local administrators did voice frustration that those operating in outside contexts, such as the state capital, have little grasp on the realities of their day-to-day work in rural schools.

Whereas larger districts generally have central office staff who can manage compliance paperwork, nearly all of the superintendents voiced that they have exceptionally limited staffing capacity. A result is that superintendents are ultimately responsible to fill the roles that would be divided among staff in a larger district. As the superintendent of School F described his role, he is responsible for everything from instructional improvement to community engagement to personally fulfilling open records requests.

Principals described a similar range of duties, from splitting time as the principal of another school to mopping the floors to subbing in classrooms so teachers could obtain professional development. Two principals (Schools C and D) serve as principals for more than one school, and other principals discussed various additional roles including: district assessment supervisor, kitchen supervisor, and maintenance supervisor. These additional duties give administrators a broad knowledge of their school and school system, but the duties also compete

for their time and potentially with the best interests of teaching and learning. For example, the superintendent of School F recognizes that his role leading math curriculum adoption and a principal's role leading social studies curriculum adoption has "probably not the best guy to do that" making the selections. The superintendent of School D said bluntly,

I think in a small district you wear more hats... so you're never really good at anything. You're good at a lot of things but not really an expert at any one particular thing, which is, in my opinion, a downside at times.

This dynamic also influences one of the key resources local administrators referenced: time. As the superintendent of School C shared,

The balancing act is how do you schedule time so that you can do that community engagement work and at the same time, be in your classrooms, be in the schools working with principals. I don't think I can do it.

As a result, he and a colleague share the responsibility of working with principals, and he notes, "I think it's the size of the district that allows me to balance my time to get out there and do both." Other local administrators are also sharing duties to maximize the impact of their time.

For example, Schools D and F have robust teacher leadership teams that are supporting instructional staff along with the principals, and teacher leaders at School E track components of the School Improvement Plan. These administrators, and others, also discussed the need to protect teachers' time with students, and it was clear that the support of a strong instructional staff was viewed as an important resource to support school-wide teaching and learning.

Investing in Human Capital

According to the superintendent of School C, “The biggest bang for your buck is who you hire.” Indeed, six local administrators discussed the importance of getting the right educators to fill jobs because, according to the principal of School E, “Struggling kids have to have the best teachers, and that’s all there is to it.” During a separate interview, School E’s superintendent said, “Your district is only as good as your teachers. To me, they’re the core and then the parents and the community support ... it just grows out like that.” Connected to prudent hiring practices, administrators also discussed targeting their recruitment efforts to respected university teacher preparation programs and/or to educators who are prepared for or experienced in teaching in remote areas. Two administrators, the superintendent of School B and the principal of School D, discussed their desire for increased leadership capacity at the district level for recruiting teachers as a part of a more robust human resources program.

To distribute and stretch resources with an emphasis on students’ learning opportunities, administrators assume additional duties and often work with their staff to seek creative solutions that leverage teachers’ expertise and support student learning. In addition, these administrators seek talented educators who hold promise for supporting teaching and learning priorities within schools and who are likely to find personal and professional fulfillment in the rural context of the communities in which they work.

Local Teaching and Learning Priorities

Rapidly changing contexts for educators and for the communities in which schools and local districts are situated informed administrators’ teaching and learning priorities. Character education influenced several schools’ work with students, but administrators from most schools

also focused on students' productive citizenship as a main priority for them and for their communities. As the principal of School A, a middle school, explained,

I think their goals are to have successful, well-rounded individuals, good citizens, that's a big thing in our community. They want the kids to be ready for college, go on to a career. Whatever they wanted, they want them ready for something.

A high school principal from School D described a function of her job as opening "as many doors as possible" for students so they can make informed decisions about a career that works for them. She added, "I'm not someone who worries a lot about my high school graduation rate or the number of kids going to college. I want to make sure that the kids are on a path of success and happiness." Empowering students with the ability to take advantage of those opportunities was a frequent characterization of district, school, and community-wide goals.

Future Focused Priorities

At the same time, several administrators recognized that not all students in their community have access to opportunities or the ability to pursue opportunities, and they discussed their efforts to bring post-K-12 opportunities for students into alignment with their local teaching and learning priorities. In addition to Common Core implementation, which was unfolding in all districts, most districts are building college and career readiness initiatives into their strategic plans and teaching and learning priorities. For example, School B's district is focused on strengthening students' transition to college and career and working with students on long-term goal setting. School A's district has built an early warning system for struggling students, mentoring programs, college-themed dress up Fridays, and outreach specific to the district's Native American population (In 2014, Native American students comprised 10.6% of School A's

enrollment and 8.6% of the district's enrollment, compared to a statewide average of 1.5%). This district is reaching out to the community with the message, "Graduation is not a date in June. Graduation is a process that starts before kids ever come to us."

Though many of these local efforts were aligned with the desire for students from traditionally marginalized minority populations to receive equitable access to opportunities, other administrators discussed the need to challenge the community's perceptions of life and career after high school due to the changes in their local economy. School D's superintendent noted that there are few opportunities to secure living wage jobs in the town, but approximately an hour away there are a variety of technical training opportunities and jobs in the military industrial fields. As he mentioned, "There's nothing wrong with getting a technical degree and making 50 bucks an hour," so the district "is starting to push that" as an option for students.

The administrators for Schools G and H voiced that the most vocal members of their community emphasize entering a four-year college as the most important goal for students, but they are working to "educate the community on the very fact that career and college ready is much more important than four-year college entrance." In addition to broadening the perception of vocal community members, the administrators are working with staff and students to change the culture of their district's CTE courses with an emphasis on career, "You are learning about welding, for instance, with the goal of learning skills to be a welder as opposed to, you are learning welding because that is the class content... It's a shift in thinking." The regional technical high school for Schools G and H is approximately 45 minutes away, so high school students are unlikely to attend, but the administrators are working to change the community's perception of attending the community college, also 45 minutes away, because the technical

training and partnerships with industry and four-year institutions can help students succeed despite the economic challenges of their area.

Several hours across the state, School C's superintendent described shifting the culture of expectations for students and the community away from working in the dwindling logging industry after graduation. He noted that while their mission statement mentions "future learning and success," not everyone in the community was in agreement that this includes preparing students to pursue college and career-aligned opportunities. As a result, the district is emphasizing skills with students that will prepare them for college and/or career training programs and "messaging to our community that we believe that high expectations are important for our kids."

Fostering Equitable Access to Opportunities

Administrators expressed equity-focused efforts as underpinning their efforts to change the culture of schooling in their communities and in schools. For example, School D's superintendent discussed "putting structures into place that are more for kids as opposed to adults" and changing the perception that "we're doing okay" because some students from the community become doctors and lawyers. The principal of School D is also engaging in equity-focused leadership work because she believes it is "important to address equity every step of the way," particularly in detangling the strong correlation between socioeconomic status and test scores. As she investigates potential contributors to achievement and opportunity gaps in the school, she conducts "equity audits" by comparing the demographics of the school to a variety of their offerings including advanced placement enrollment, special education programs, athletics participation, and other extracurricular activities to see if the demographics of those programs

mirror the school's overall demographics because "if it's significantly different, then it's an equity issue."

Due to the great recession of 2007-2009, all superintendents mentioned that their districts were operating with constrained finances, but superintendents of Schools A and C both came to their positions within the prior several years and discussed the toll that budget cuts had taken on the district. For example, School A's superintendent found that the previous superintendent, who had died unexpectedly months before a planned retirement, had created some of the smallest class sizes in the state by "putting all available soft money into staffing," including grant revenue, and "there was no sustainability plan." In these cases, the superintendents were not only working to build capacity for a diversified teaching and learning program in their districts, they were also navigating fiscal challenges and managing the public perception that those challenges can bring.

Aligning Learning Priorities

Superintendents within their first several years in the districts discussed their process for building teaching and learning agendas and for linking those agendas with ongoing efforts in the district and with community expectations. For example, when he entered the district, School C's superintendent visited all classrooms in the district and interviewed teachers and other employees to understand the district's teaching and learning priorities and to uncover gaps including the absence of any writing initiative. School F's superintendent met broadly with staff and community members to build and focus district priorities, and School B's superintendent engaged an external evaluator to interview stakeholders across the district about the factors supporting and impeding their work. He continues to hone the district's agenda by meeting with

teachers, principals, and the teaching and learning director regularly, and this has resulted in action items such as increased time for teacher collaboration. School B's principal feels that the district's prioritization on data places pressure on principals which places pressures on teachers who then pressure students, ultimately reducing collaboration. Despite this, she emphasized that the district's priority on grade-level collaboration across the district has aligned instructional content and pacing while teachers retain freedom to teach their own lessons.

The feat of prioritizing initiatives across the district was a challenge that School A's superintendent encountered during her first year in the district because "the schools were all operating as independent contractors... It was a federation of schools." As a strategic plan unfolded, she worked to distill over 40 initiatives into four broad areas: (a) developing a common vocabulary for teaching and learning/instructional framework; (b) collaborative work; (c) common assessments; and (d) involving students in assessing their own work. While she emphasized that, if working alone, these were not the focus areas that she would have picked, but there was energy within the district for these topics and the momentum to move them forward. Yet, while the superintendents of Schools B, C, and F, specifically emphasized broad engagement in identifying district priorities, the superintendent of School A didn't engage the entire district but instead shared the priorities widely only after they had been articulated. She offered that the community-at-large could have been better engaged in bringing focus to the teaching and learning priorities, and she has since created community task forces and advisory boards to inform the district on topics ranging from facilities to multicultural issues.

School Wide Learning Improvement Priorities

All superintendents discussed adoption of teaching and learning frameworks tied to the state's new evaluation frameworks, and discussed broad priorities including book-studies and increased time for professional learning. Superintendents also discussed holding regular meetings and engaging in classroom walkthroughs with principals to deepen their understanding of the districts' evolving teaching and learning context. Similarly, interviews with principals provided informative context about schools' efforts to align overarching district priorities with teacher practice while also remaining responsive to students' needs.

Similar to district-level prioritization of initiatives, the principals in this study worked as instructional leaders to prioritize a building level-learning agenda or to buffer the effects of the many external demands placed on teachers. Having witnessed frequent administrative turnover in her district, the principal of School D emphasized that consistency with key priorities is important for the long-term success of a school. Having experienced similar dynamics before assuming the principalship of her school, the principal of School E also emphasized the importance of consistency and advocated for adjusting practices when needed because following implementation, "it takes years to see the results" of new initiatives. This principal keeps a spreadsheet that outlines all of the teaching and learning initiatives introduced in the school, changes made to the various programs, and progress made toward intended outcomes. She emphasized that clearly communicating expectations to teachers is important so teachers can, in turn, make expectations for students very clear. School E is helping students develop self-sufficient learning skills by building teacher practice and student learning around transparent learning targets and success indicators.

Enhancing student ownership of their own learning was a common theme across schools, but there was great variability in the implementation of these efforts. For example, as a component of district wide efforts, School A is engaging students in assessing their own work, and students “are being honored for what they’re coming up with, and they’re understanding better what they’re being asked to do.” Similarly, School F is focusing on student engagement and motivation by emphasizing project based learning to place more control for students’ learning in their own hands.

Schools G and H have embarked on a district wide effort to embed leadership education in the context of academic teaching and learning efforts. And the administrators, as well as the ESD III teaching and learning administrator, emphasize that it has empowered students in their academic work and in their personal lives. Indeed, responsiveness to students’ personal *and* academic growth was a key theme as administrators from a variety of districts discussed incorporating advisory periods into their daily schedules and implementing student-centered social-emotional and academic goal setting.

Local administrators characterized creating a culture that supports students’ personal growth as an important component of their building agenda. As School E’s superintendent shares, having one adult in a student’s life say one personal thing to them each day “will make a huge difference in that child’s life.” Finally, local administrators, particularly elementary school principals, discussed the interconnected nature of their school community and the investment of instructional and support staff in students’ success. As the principal of School C explained, “everybody is a teacher here.”

Chasing Learning Improvement

Superintendents from four districts, covering Schools A, C, D, G, and H, discussed the lag in local implementation of state policy that has been ingrained in their district culture. These administrators felt that previous district leaders encouraged delaying substantial changes due to a history of local control, limited accountability, and frequently shifting priorities. School D's superintendent reported that the district was behind in teaching and learning efforts when he stepped into the role. For example, under his leadership, the district adopted a new reading program for the first time in 20 years. In addition, the district has invested time and energy in professional learning for teachers and principals with the new teaching and learning evaluation frameworks and with Common Core implementation. As he shared, "We're doing the typical things that most districts are doing. We're just doing it later."

The principal/superintendent of School G, also superintendent of School H, was a teacher in the district before becoming an administrator and attributed playing "catch up for many years" to a previous superintendent's directive regarding mandates from the state education agency. As she recalled, "He would say if you get stuff in the mail about that, just throw it away, because it's going to go away. So for several years, that was our attitude." These administrators felt that this history led to a dynamic where they are constantly behind in teaching and learning policy mandates and best practices.

Additionally, the teaching and learning administrator for ESD II had previously worked in other states and noted that the culture around educational change in Washington state is resistant to change and slow to evolve. In particular, she noted that when a decision was made in other states, action happened. In Washington, the culture tends to reflect that once a decision is made at the state level, "maybe it'll happen... There's a delay, there's a real delay." This delay

slows implementing policy initiatives and sharing best practices. She noted that local districts tend to keep change at bay. ESDs work more closely with districts and schools than the State Superintendent for Public Instruction and state education agency, but ESDs have no authority to mandate implementation of changes, such as the Common Core State Standards, and this allows districts to keep change at bay for an extended period. As the superintendent of ESD III noted, change can happen very slowly in rural areas.

Change in Small Districts

Regarding district priorities, the superintendent of School E noted that the district must limit what it offers students, but by limiting their focus, the district has the opportunity to concentrate on those priorities. While the small size of the districts limits the offerings of their schools, it also allows administrators to create change with fewer layers of bureaucracy than one might encounter in a larger district. Four superintendents discussed the benefit of limited bureaucracy for implementing teaching and learning priorities within their districts. Though there are fewer layers, School D's superintendent cautioned that this dynamic is also a "double-edged sword" because "everything you choose to do is analyzed more rapidly than in a larger district." Separately, School D's principal added that while a tight-knit community can support local schools, this also leaves administrators with fewer layers of protection from the community.

Some local administrators were thankful for the flexibility that the small size of their district and/or school provided them. School C's superintendent emphasized that he encourages principals and teachers to experiment and engage in action research in their classrooms by giving latitude for educators to take risks, and the principal of School C took advantage of this offer by disrupting the school's structure for part of the day to provide students with math instruction

according to their math level rather than their grade level. Even the principal worked with a differentiated group, and after three years, the teachers were confident that they could provide differentiated instruction in their own classrooms. Regarding her ability to direct change quickly, the superintendent of School E explained,

I think that schools have a big order, and when you're in a big district, I think it's harder almost because out here, if I want to do something, if I want to make a change, I'm just going to make the change. It's not going to be going through twenty committees. It's going to happen pretty quickly. We're going to get input, but it doesn't take us long to move things. It doesn't take long to move the mouse here.

She continued by explaining implications for parent involvement and teaching and learning:

I feel for other districts and also parents that are within the boundaries of the large school districts because how do they have their voice heard? Where here, they're just going to call me and go, "This is why this isn't going to work for my child. Is there anything differently we can do?" Probably, I can figure something out. In Seattle, you can't.

In the case of School E, the principal emphasized that their small size allowed for individualized learning. As an example, regarding the popular dissemination of Response To Intervention (RTI) as a best practice, the principal said, "We've been doing that for a long time. That's just good teaching."

Professional Learning for Learning Improvement Agendas

Local administrators' collaborative efforts with colleagues and teachers to build capacity for teaching and learning evaluation frameworks, Common Core implementation, and Common

Core assessments were a framing component of participants' work with teaching and learning in their districts as they constructed district-wide efforts around these initiatives. For example, School A's principal discussed the district's efforts to build the teaching and learning frameworks, including material provided by ESD I, into all of their professional learning work with teachers, including release days. School D's district also centered all professional learning days on the framework during the first two years of implementation, and they now rely on ESD II for ongoing support of the framework, including new teacher training. Meanwhile, School B's superintendent discussed the district's efforts to bring "coherence and think about how the pieces connect" by emphasizing the use of data to monitor student progress and frame teaching and learning conversations with teachers. School B's principal concurred and referenced the districts' "united direction in terms of instructional leadership." In particular, this district has enhanced the mandated requirement of two observations per year by adding an additional two observations to emphasize teachers' professional learning through collaboration with their administrators.

A challenge of professional learning in the context of these changes, as School B's superintendent noted, is building capacity for implementing these changes and sustaining learning improvement work by maintaining a high level of skill across a school or local district. School B's principal pointed to the additional work this creates for educators, but the schools and local districts included in this study are creating professional learning opportunities through their efforts to empower administrators and teachers as instructional leaders and by emphasizing teacher collaboration, including professional learning communities. Additionally, through the creative use of teachers' time, schools are supporting students' learning and social-emotional needs.

The Importance of Time

Time was often described as an elusive, finite resource, but local administrators are identifying ways to create more time for teachers to collaborate with their colleagues and leveraging that time by connecting collaborative opportunities to students' learning. In the case of the districts for Schools A and B, additional time for professional learning was negotiated into teacher contracts for more teacher collaboration and, in the case of School B's district, longer staff meetings. Yet, just as the ESD superintendents have focused on structuring regional superintendents' meetings for professional learning, local superintendents and principals are also following suit. School A's superintendent is limiting management-related content at district meetings, and School A's principal has transitioned to digital announcements so teaching and learning improvement work, such as teaching demonstrations, can take place during staff meetings.

In addition to increased collaborative time for teachers, local districts and schools are also seeking ways to connect teachers' collaborative time directly with student learning. School C's teachers spend time together analyzing student data, and School B's teachers work in teams to focus on student work thereby deepening their understanding of student data. School B's principal explained that their previous professional learning relied on the cycles of inquiry model, but the formality of the model and composing the analysis was a "sticking point" for teachers. Subsequently, this model gave way to a team-oriented approach for using inquiry cycles to understand students' learning.

Distance as a Barrier for Professional Learning

Local administrators, particularly those from more remote or isolated areas, discussed the professional learning challenges posed by the distance of their school or district from urban centers. For example, School F's superintendent moved to the district from a more urban area on the other side of the state and discussed missing the close proximity to professional learning provided by a university. To address his hunger for additional professional learning, he attempted to coordinate a book study with semi-local districts in the region, but even that proved too challenging due to the time and effort required to convene participants. Indeed, lack of proximity to professional learning offerings limited the ability of teachers and administrators to seek outside professional development, and this is typical for rural educators (Reaves & Larmer, 1996).

Yet, districts are identifying ways to connect teachers with professional learning opportunities. The superintendent of Schools G and H described the act of traveling out of the district for professional education as a right that teachers traditionally assumed they had, and each teacher has a \$350 annual allowance for their development; yet, even when distance to educational service districts or universities is not a concern, the ability to secure qualified substitutes poses a challenge in many rural communities. Therefore, the administrators in this district have worked to change the paradigm of professional learning to one of internal enrichment with summer opportunities for external professional learning opportunities. For example, in an effort to significantly expand their advanced placement (AP) program, this district sends teachers for advanced placement training during the summer, gladly paying for the training and a hotel in Seattle and encouraging teachers to treat it as a working vacation by inviting their families.

Due to remoteness or isolation of the district and the substitute shortage, administrators from Schools G, H, and E also discussed their general inability to encourage, or even allow, teachers to travel for professional development during the school year. Superintendents for Schools B and F discussed their efforts to bring expertise from outside of their districts and their ESDs to support teaching and learning priorities through consulting or presentations. Regarding the ESD, the superintendent of School E emphasized that utilizing the ESD might be expensive, but paying for ESD II to travel to the district allowed teachers to stay in their classrooms with students. Due to the remoteness of this district, the superintendent has undertaken significant efforts to provide teachers with opportunities for online trainings, since School E recently received high-speed Internet, and she typically coordinates 20 to 30 hours of continuing education units for teachers, known in Washington state as “clock hours,” to be delivered in the district over the course of the summer. As a result of their remoteness, local administrators are forging opportunities that are responsive to teachers’ needs and local teaching and learning priorities.

Leveraging Internal Expertise

Another way local administrators are navigating the challenge of remoteness is by emphasizing the teaching and learning expertise in their schools and districts. For example, the principal of School C explained, “We’ll do some things with other staffs. We take our message, things we’ve been successful with. Also, we ask that our teachers be allowed to go to other schools and do some observation.” The ESD III regional school improvement specialist reported that principals are investing in roaming substitutes so teachers can engage with each other’s practice. Yet, there are rarely substitutes available for School E, so the principal acts as the roaming substitute allowing teachers to observe each other.

According to School E's superintendent, "Your district is only as good as your teachers," and the local districts and schools included in this study are leveraging their internal expertise to grow capacity for district and school-wide professional learning in a variety of ways. Due to administrators' expertise as certified trainers for the teaching and learning framework, School B's district relied upon their internal expertise for district wide training. Yet, due to distance from urban centers and professional offerings, other districts are relying on principals to provide professional development out of necessity. School C's principal facilitates an hour of professional learning for teachers each week, and at the time of the interview, School E's principal had just spent the weekend translating technical information about the Common Core State Standards-based curriculum assessments into a presentation for the school's teachers.

School A and B's districts are emphasizing the role of district and school-level teaching and learning teams to develop and provide cascading professional learning with a focus on embedding that learning in teachers' practice. In addition to employing the train-the-trainer model, local districts and schools are leveraging the expertise of their teacher leaders. To inform their work as instructional leaders, principals meet regularly with teacher leaders and seek guidance on their school's learning agenda. For example, School F's principal meets with the teacher leadership team every other week while the principals of School D and E engage teachers in developing priorities for the next year. School D's principal engages her teacher leader council in focusing priorities and developing a preliminary school budget, before seeking input from the entire staff, and School E's principal gathers teachers to create a list of their professional learning needs before spending the summer developing content to meet those collective expectations.

Collaborative, small teams. The principal of School D described the work of strengthening teaching and learning practice as "a team approach," and districts are identifying

opportunities for strengthening district-wide teaching and learning priorities through the use of professional learning communities (PLCs) and other methods that build and leverage expertise within the district. School F's district has made becoming a "learning organization" one of its priorities, and the administrators emphasize the importance of using PLCs to prepare for new expectations of educators and districts. While the superintendent of ESD III indicated that rural educators have fewer opportunities for learning communities than their more urban counterparts, many districts are identifying creative approaches to bring about opportunities for collaboration.

Though School E's district doesn't have a sizable staff to support PLCs with a narrow content focus, the superintendent contends that in their "tiny" district, "We're like a couple of PLCs." Similarly, Schools G and H, the elementary and secondary schools comprising their district on a shared campus, have a weekly early student release that provides teachers with an hour of collaboration time. The district has one teacher for each elementary grade and secondary content area, so they target long-term teaching and learning priorities that transcend content areas and grades by focusing on tools, strategies, and systems for use across grades and contents. This cross-grade approach is proving helpful in other small schools as well. For example, School C engages the whole staff in vertical planning for content areas across grade levels. Though slightly larger, School F is engaging in similar alignment of content teams from the middle and high schools. These methods exploit the small size of local districts and schools to promote broad understanding of standards and teaching and learning priorities across levels and content areas.

Creative use of teacher time for learning improvement efforts. In an effort to better leverage teachers' time and expertise for maximum impact (Miles & Ferris, 2015), some districts are reallocating teaching resources to align with local teaching and learning priorities. For

example, School F has employed block scheduling to ensure that teachers with larger workloads, such as English language arts teachers with more grading, get longer prep periods, and the principal emphasized that he's lucky it was never raised as an issue with the union. Further, looking to the coming Common Core assessments, the school is considering a trimester schedule that would allow for yearlong math courses with the intention of boosting students' success.

Additionally, School F has invested their resources in student success by hiring two liaisons to connect students and families with any supports they need to ensure the social, emotional, physical, and academic health of students. Nearly half of School F's student body is Hispanic and 56% of students receive free or reduced price lunches, and the superintendent emphasized, "We've put our dollars a lot into that social emotional piece dealing with barriers so that when they do come to school they can be academically successful." This district is financially well-positioned, due to rental income and significant extra funding from the state for a remote and necessary school within the district; therefore, the district was able to make this investment in the success of their students.

Nearby, but at nearly half the size, School H has reallocated teacher time to better utilize existing resources. After creating professional learning communities spanning grade-levels and content areas to address school-wide learning priorities, such as Common Core reading strategies, teachers and administrators identified an opportunity to support struggling students. Teachers from specialty areas (e.g. physical education, shop, business) identified a group of 20 juniors and seniors in need of additional assistance, and they spend PLC time providing academic and social supports for these students. The administrators stressed that the teachers did initially implement school-wide learning priorities, but the dean of students, a former PE teacher, recognized a need to use existing resources in a more meaningful way and proposed the shift. In

the cases of Schools F and H, the administrators report 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 schools have organized teachers and staff in ways that maximizes student learning (Miles & Ferris, 2015). As City (2008) emphasizes, resourcefulness in schools is the result of deploying resources in creative ways to address specific challenges.

Tightly Coupled Rural Communities and Schools

Rural schools often serve as the hub of the community in which they are located (Abshier et al., 2011; Lyson, 2002), and that dynamic was well-represented in the schools and communities included in this study. Often, the school building serves as the municipal center of activity for rural communities. Given the physical position of the schools, and in many cases, the role that educators play in their communities, expectations of rural educators extend beyond teaching and learning. As the superintendent of School E explained, the community's expectation "is that we kind of do it all because there's not a lot of other resources out there... We have a lot of support in our school that's not just academic." Similarly, administrators from Schools G and H emphasized multiple times, "This school is truly the heart of the community and has been forever." Given this tight coupling of rural communities and their schools and the expectations placed on rural educators, the stakes for rural administrators are quite high.

At School F, also described as a community hub, the administrators are working on increasing opportunities for the community's engagement in the school through opportunities including community dinners showcasing their culinary arts program. Other local administrators discussed the importance of bringing the community into their schools, and ESD content specialists noted their work to integrate community and family engagement into content-specific

professional development offerings such as parent and family education for Common Core mathematics instruction or STEM nights. As a result, ESDs are working to support educators in community engagement efforts in addition to supporting their delivery of content in the classroom.

Despite the tightly coupled nature of rural schools and communities, and the investment of those communities in their students' success, the investment of community members and families in the teaching and learning efforts of a school is not always evident. For example, the principal and principal/superintendent of Schools G and H discussed the tension they see between a very engaged community in school events and athletics and limited engagement in the school during the day. The administrators attributed this to a number of factors that distilled into three barriers for parental and community participation in their schools: (a) many students have two working parents, and this prevents regular parental engagement during the school day; (b) older community members recall classrooms as a place that the community doesn't go into; and (c) dysfunctional families find the idea of going to the school threatening. Despite their challenge to engage families and the community in the day-to-day instructional work of the schools, the elementary and secondary campus serves as a community hub. For example, while their football team won only one game during the season, "On our scoreboard, it's not been a successful year. Our sidelines are packed. They're there because they care about these kids and they care about this place." Similarly, they've experienced strong showings of support from the community for days spent on maintenance of the school building and grounds, but this hasn't translated into strong engagement in the teaching and learning activities within the school. As McLaughlin and Talbert posit, parents who are "alienated from school or other mainstream institutions can provide little of the support that teachers expect from traditional families" (1993, p. 225). Indeed,

changing the roles traditionally played by schools and community members requires new ways of thinking from the school and the community (Kushman & Barnhardt, 2001). Because community investment in schools does not guarantee community investment in teaching and learning, it is important to build a more nuanced understanding of the dynamics of small, rural communities and community engagement efforts that support teaching and learning activities with schools.

Involving Tight-Knit Communities in Schools

The tight-knit nature of small communities can be an asset and a challenge that rural administrators must navigate. For example, the superintendent of School D discussed the dynamics of leadership within a small community and the challenges interconnectedness can pose school board members, “Because there’s such a close-knit community, people assume when they call the board member they’re going to get immediate action for their point of view.” Yet, administrators from the most centralized and removed communities described the opportunity they have to build deep and personal relationships with students and their families not only during students’ time in their school but across their lifetimes. As the principal of School H explained, this community dynamic allows educators “to build relationships with kids and families that are deep and lasting.” As the superintendent of School E emphasized, “We know everything about them, so we’re able to provide more support than usual, and maybe we almost provide too much.” She described the “cohesive closeness” that the schools and community share, and the notion that communities held shared values was consistent across participants.

Participants who had worked in a variety of settings and in different regions of the state described their current communities as more conservative than urban and suburban areas and, in the case of the Eastern side of the Cascade Mountain Range, more agriculture and community

centric. Local administrators from all three ESD regions noted that the conservative nature of their communities influences their work by describing the role that perception plays. For example, School F's superintendent described his desire to hire an assistant superintendent but relented that, in a community that is loath to pay taxes, an additional central office hire wouldn't "look good."

Despite the conservative nature of their communities, all districts and schools are emphasizing equity for underrepresented demographic and socioeconomic groups, and in some cases, this requires shifting community expectations of schools and schooling. The superintendent of School A shared that the sentiments of her equity agenda are not always popular with the old guard of stakeholders in her community. For example, given the district's large population of Native American students, she has advocated reconsidering celebrating Christmas in the schools. Yet, School C's principal described the importance of the Christmas pageant for engaging not only families but also the larger community. Similarly, administrators from Schools G and H emphasized that they still call their schools' program in December a "Christmas program" and that they sing Christmas carols because "even if someone is not Christian, it's just the cultural norm of this community, so there's not fighting about that." The superintendent added, "If we didn't sing religious Christmas songs, we would hear about it. It's an expectation." The administrators' perceptions highlight their understanding of the community's underpinning priorities, and the importance of knowing communities well was a frequent topic during interviews. For example, School D's district is, according to the superintendent, 80% retirees, so the methods through which he reaches out to the community and brings the community into schools is, in part, targeted for that specific population. According to

him, “The more people you have in your schools the less likely they are to criticize it. You sell a levy every day.”

In School E, the community is engaged in teaching students through Native language and culture courses. Instructors from the community provide an hour of instruction for each grade level twice a week. In this case, students’ heritage is linked with academic content and the greater community. These developments are not supplementary to students’ education, instead these learning opportunities and resources bring students’ communities, personal development, and learning outcomes into alignment with one another.

Community Engagement

Administrators in rural districts interact with the local community through a variety of formal and informal means. These formal and informal communication pathways underscore the tight-knit nature of these communities and highlight the need for strong communication and engagement between schools and the community-at-large. As the principal of School A shared, “Communication is key, especially in a rural [district].” ESD administrators also characterized the ability to communicate well with the community as a critical skill for rural administrators to possess.

Formal community engagement. The ability to disseminate information on behalf of the district through largely passive means was one strategy administrators shared for engaging the community-at-large. For example, principals and superintendents might send newsletters weekly (principal B) or quarterly (School B and D’s districts). Alternatively, the principal and superintendent of School D discussed their increased efforts to use their websites and social

media to spread information widely, and School F's superintendent participates in a radio broadcast every other week.

Less passive, but still formal, School A's superintendent started an effort to engage the community in building the district's agenda through seven formal advisory committees and task forces addressing facilities, communication, multicultural issues, technology, graduation rate, safety, and a committee for students. As School A's principal, who has been in the district for much longer, emphasized, this formal engagement with wider participation from the community supplements the previous school-based Booster Club model and keeps the community better informed regarding the district's vision. Similarly, School F's superintendent met with a broad range of stakeholders when he started his post in the district and sends periodic progress updates to the staff, community members, and students involved in the initial visioning process.

The role of the local boards of education and the engagement of those boards also represented a component of administrators' formal engagement activities. For example, administrators from Schools G and H stressed that their board was actively involved in shaping the district's direction, and School D's superintendent, himself on a multi-year interim contract, emphasized that a new superintendent might change a district's approach but should not change the board's direction. Yet, School A's superintendent claims she was hired with the mandate to change the district's direction. Her predecessor had been there for approximately 20 years, and she was hired during a time of financial strain and saw the need to address issues of equity in the district and to engage the community. For example, during much of her predecessor's time, there were no public comments at the board meeting. Therefore, her efforts to involve the community in formal advisory committees and task forces represent a significant shift in the district's approach to engaging the community. Additionally, to further involve the board in the teaching

and learning priorities of schools, teachers from Schools F, G, and H are bringing board members into their classrooms and school events and presenting at board meetings to build the board's understanding of what shifts in education mandates mean for practice and, ultimately, for students.

A school leader's savvy engagement of the community-at-large can change long held school-community dynamics. When the principal of School C started his job, the city government wanted nothing to do with the life of the school. Yet, after he leveraged his personal and community networks to turn a mud patch behind the school into a gravel parking lot, thereby clearing the streets during school pick-up, the mayor sent him a letter with an official thank you. Since then, they've collaborated on projects, including securing a flashing school-zone light. Additionally, the mayor attends their beginning of the year school parade and open house and invites the principal to share the school's updates during city council meetings. In this case, community-networked support in form of a borrowed bulldozer and donated gravel for a parking lot changed the community dynamic and resulted in the involvement of community leaders in the life of the school.

Superintendents also described weathering local political battles. In the case of School G and H's district, the superintendent felt she had to opt into a multi-district athletic co-op to keep the district's athletics program alive, and this was not popular with the most vocal members of their community. Similarly, School A's superintendent found that student enrollment in the district's gifted program, called High Expectations (a pseudonym for this program is being used at the superintendent's request), was "not representative of our school district. It's a lot of staff's kids, who know how the system works. It's a lot of white kids. It's a lot of rich kids." First, she attempted to double the program's size to enroll a more diverse student population. Yet, "Our

board meetings are now constantly full of people who are talking about how I've ruined [High Expectations]." As a result, she is attempting to shrink the enrollment below the original threshold to more narrowly comply with state requirements, and she is also considering changing the name of the gifted program because the schools should have equally high expectations for all students. (The program's pseudonym was selected to represent the spirit of the program's actual name.)

Informal Community Engagement. Administrators inherit the preferences, habits, and history of their schools and community, and learning that history is an effective leadership tool that administrators can leverage. In addition to formal engagement, administrators also use a number of informal engagement pathways to interact with the community-at-large. Superintendents for Schools C and F discussed their efforts to host and attend small, informal events such as coffee hours. As School C's superintendent explained, "I had evenings where I was talking to two or three people, but those two or three people go out and talk to their friends, and their friends to talk to their friends." As School D's superintendent explained, face-to-face interaction and information sharing is what his community prefers.

Due to dwindling enrollments in School A's district, a school had to be closed and its students consolidated. The superintendent reported that even with a long and transparent process, the public outcry was substantial, a dynamic verified by School A's principal. Rural districts tend to be tight-knit, and this superintendent struggled with the need to politic in the community on a daily basis, 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.

The Visibility of Schools in Rural Communities

The importance of community visibility was another key theme discussed by participants. As School E's superintendent described her role in the community, "I am going to senior project presentations, eighth grade graduation, the football game, the basketball game. I'm trying my best, within my power, to get to pretty much everything I can." She emphasizes that this is important because "I want to be able to talk to parents about their kids" so she knows how she might help a student with a scholarship application or because "I saw their eighth grade presentation in social studies class the other day." The "downside," as she described, however is that she is the person responsible for attending all events.

Rural administrators have incredibly visible roles within their local community, and as a result, they are very public figures (Howley et al., 2005). All participants offered that as administrators, they wear "many hats," including community relations and parent engagement responsibilities. Nearly all administrators agreed that being visible in the community is a key component of their work. This was largely due to the importance of being accessible to families to talk about students' learning and academic progress, as described by the superintendent above. While no administrators questioned the importance of their visibility within the community, it was clear that this is a time consuming task. Responses suggest that broad engagement with and visibility in the community is a strategy that rural administrators use to sustain informal *and* formal connections with families. Additionally, instead of viewing interactions as social or

niceties exchanged in passing, the administrators viewed community-based engagement as a legitimate means for connecting with families to discuss education.

Student visibility in rural communities. Student presence in the community is also an important part of schools' community engagement process, and while taking a variety of forms, provides important learning opportunities for students and resources for schools. Communities celebrate their schools as the community hub. In the case of Schools G and H, the entire K-12 student body marches in the homecoming parade. The superintendent suggests the tradition may be "Podunk," but it is an important community builder for their students and fosters unofficial mentorships between younger and older students. School C also has a beginning of the year parade through the town ending in an open house at the school where parents meet teachers and talk about the school year to come. These events reinforce the school as the core of the community and invite parents and the community to participate in the life of the school.

In School F's district, all seniors have a 20-hour community service requirement. In addition, their student groups and clubs engage in a number of food, toy, and blood drives throughout the year. In response, there is significant reciprocity from the community through sponsorships of clubs and activities, hosting internships, and other engagement in the teaching and learning life of the school. School F's principal spoke about the community's expectation that they emphasize "good citizenship" and that they help their students become "good role models." The principals and superintendents of five schools discussed the significant role that character education plays in their work with students and how that character education relates directly to their work with students' families and the community-at-large.

Character education as a key learning priority. Character education was provided in a variety of ways across the school sites. For example, School C has a monthly assembly where a character trait is integrated with academic content. School E starts each day with an all school assembly celebrating individual and group academic achievement and reinforcing components of good citizenship, such as one's bubble of personal space. In addition, the principal of School E has created a school store where students can save and redeem good citizenship and academic vouchers, such as reading log tickets, for gift items including books and toys. The principal explained that this helps teach life skills, such as money management, but it is also "an opportunity for some kids to be able to get things that they might not otherwise be able to get," such as "Christmas presents, birthday presents, things for themselves." According to the principal, "It's just another one of those things that kids walk in and it just makes them feel good about being here and gives them something to look forward to."

Schools G and H have also built a character education program not only to teach and model good citizenship but to empower their students as individuals and as learners. As they implement their K-12 leadership curriculum, they are doing so with an emphasis on helping all students, including those who don't feel empowered at home, become "empowered to control their own academic success, their behavior, their personal success." The superintendent emphasized, "That goes back to our philosophy of leadership that every student is great. There's greatness in every student, and it's our job to find that."

Finally, a significant focus of character education is the emphasis on building a community within the school and by celebrating students as individuals. Administrators felt that the small size of their schools and the cohesive nature of the community supported their ability to focus the development of students as individuals. For example, the principal of School F reviews

every student report card and writes a note to students who have made improvements and to students who earned a 3.0 or better, and the principal of School C emphasized that he can share feedback about students' progress personally with parents. Finally, in the case of School E's district, this focus ties students to the community and their heritage through activities including Native language classes and making racing canoes in the high school industrial arts class.

Building Capacity for New Educational Dynamics

In addition to working with students, principals and superintendents are also working with the community-at-large to build capacity for and seek opportunities to pursue an equity agenda. In addition to the nuances of changing community expectations explored previously, nearly all superintendents acknowledged without prompting that populations within their communities have not been served equitably, and all local administrators discussed their efforts to ensure equitable educational opportunities for all students. According to the ESD III teaching and learning administrator, some traditionally marginalized communities have “mistrust” for education. Conversely, regarding communities of migrant agricultural workers who are predominately Hispanic, she shared,

They're working so hard to just farm and to do those kinds of things... I know that they send their children to school, and they believe that we will take care of it. It's a respect thing, really. It's a cultural thing. I don't know how many envision that their children are going to end up at college. It saddens me, and I know they love their children, but I think that a lot of families who have not gone to college, and there's that generational poverty, they don't see that as an option.

Therefore, schools must redouble their efforts to engage families and the community in their schools particularly where these traditionally marginalized populations live. Yet, these efforts are not without challenges. The superintendent of School A has engaged in a great deal of equity work during her tenure in the district, and she reported, “I would say as my approval rate with old time [town name] has gone down, my approval rate with the [Tribal] Nation has gone up.” Additionally, while describing resource reallocation to support learning improvement (Miles & Darling-Hammond, 1998), she explained,

I've made some decisions that aren't particularly popular, but I believe they're in the service of student learning. For instance, I did away with librarians so that we could have full day kindergarten for every child.

I have a very strong equity focus ... any time you have an equity agenda there's push back from people who benefited from an inequitable system.

As Corbett (2007) explained, “educated people” from outside of rural communities were seen, and may still be seen, “as trouble, both for the way they bring into communities their difference and their ideas, but also because they are more likely to be able to analyze and resist local power structures” (p. 270).

These administrators are engaging broad networks of stakeholders to involve diverse populations in the life of the schools. For example, as a new superintendent for School F, he engaged 300 community members in developing his priorities for the district and this included proportional representation from the Hispanic community that accounts for approximately half of the community. The district conducted a community needs assessment identifying early childhood education as a significant priority. Although the district does not have the ability to

run a comprehensive early learning program, they hold monthly professional learning sessions for home daycare and preschool providers to connect them with resources. Additionally, they facilitate a partnership with a university to provide 50 families with educational materials. As a result, the district is seeking to identify and enact an agenda that is responsive to the needs of the greater community and provides the community with equitable opportunities for school success before students are old enough to enroll. This district and School D's district are both engaging in book studies and professional learning that emphasize utilizing a growth mindset (Dweck, 2006) with students in their approach to ensure that students from all backgrounds have opportunities to be successful in their schooling.

Engaging families in teaching and learning. Family engagement in the teaching and learning of students was a key priority for local administrators. For example, School D is focused on involving parents in developing the school's agenda. The principal described her prioritization of approaching engagement work with a "community mindset" that is "interactive, two way." The parent organization for the school works with the principal to select the topics for the monthly meetings and the subjects alternate between school-based issues presented by the principal, such as Common Core assessment or helping students study at home when caregivers aren't familiar with the content, and community town-hall meetings, including topics such as drug and alcohol treatment options and criminal justice system supports. In addition to hosting these activities for families and the community-at-large, the principal posts all materials online and is working to build a social media and web-presence for the school. In particular, she hopes that by building a repository of resources online, she can increase equitable access to information, including information shared during these monthly events, to make access to information more equitable.

School E hosts a middle school transition night that involves the whole community for a barbecue. As the superintendent explains,

Down here, everybody brings their barbecues, lines them up, and the school will support buying the food... We do things like that because it's a way to bring the whole community together because it may be the only thing that might actually be happening that month.... Everybody's going to come, right? Then while they're there, we're talking to them about education and about the success of their children.

This school has a very high population of Native American students and has developed a collaborative relationship with the Tribal Council and local community. A variety of events are hosted at the school as a way to bring the community together. These events include social events, such as the annual Halloween Festival, and family-centered teaching and learning nights, such as math and literacy nights. Despite the social nature of some events, the administrators stressed the importance of creating organic opportunities to talk with families about teaching and learning. The principal and superintendent noted that before the current principal held this leadership position, welcoming families in the school was not an evident priority (the current principal was a teacher at School E prior to becoming the principal). Family engagement is a key priority for both leaders. The superintendent stressed that it is not unusual for parents who would like to discuss their child's schooling to drop by the district's central office where she is the only person with a role that directly impacts teaching and learning, and as a result, she is the individual who greets them. Likewise, the principal addressed her work to develop a culture, with teachers and parents, that welcomes parents to the school with an open door policy. As she explained,

I think just the way they're treated when they're here, the way that they're greeted when they come in the door, the way that they're welcomed by the classroom teacher and the other kids. I think just the way that they're communicated with. You can really put somebody off just by your tone of voice, and that parent may never walk back in the door again because of the way that they were spoken to. We really work hard to make sure they feel really comfortable when they come in.

Creating a more welcoming environment has been a years-long focus for this principal.

In addition to inviting families into the school, the principal of School E also spoke about working with families in the community, placing an emphasis on changing the community-wide culture of learning. In addition to these social events, the school enjoys near 100% participation at conferences and math and reading nights, and the principal attributes part of this universal participation to the efforts to make families welcome and comfortable in the school. Indeed, even in cases where the event is not formally related to a content area, educators are talking with families, and the community, about students' learning and building relationships that are the foundation for a sustainable student-centered dialogue between families and teachers.

Building bridges and making up for lost time. The idea that administrators were making up for lost time in building relationships with the community was a sentiment shared across the more diverse schools and districts. In addition to efforts to make the school more welcoming and accessible to all parents, principals are working to engage families in academic activities. For example, with an emphasis on engaging the Hispanic students and their families, the principal of School F has fostered a relationship with the management at the local meatpacking plant, where the majority of the Hispanic families work. School personnel,

including the principal, schedule meeting blocks at the plant so families can meet with them in a convenient location and not miss work. In addition, student-led conferences helped to bolster the engagement of Hispanic families in their students' education. This principal is also working to create a more inclusive environment, and though not a Spanish speaker, he memorizes a few minutes of Spanish to welcome families to the high school graduation. These examples represent both gestures of goodwill and meaningful opportunities for traditionally marginalized populations to engage in students' education.

Finally, School E, where approximately 64% of the students are Native American, has worked with the local tribal council and the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) to marshal approval of a fish processing plant. The approval took several years, but now the school can host monthly traditional tribal lunches with fish caught by students' families. These initiatives have required a significant investment of the local administrators' time. Yet, they recognize the importance of connecting academic content with students' heritage and with the greater community.

Discussion

This study suggests that stakeholders outside of the school building and beyond the district office play an outsized role in the day-to-day functions of rural schools and a similarly significant role in the teaching and learning priorities of the schools. To facilitate the support of key external stakeholders, rural administrators build and maintain a variety of formal and informal partnerships. In addition to fostering these relationships, administrators also work with families and the community to build learning improvement agendas that are aligned with local expectations for student success. In some cases, administrators must also work with the

community to build capacity for updating local priorities for schooling and to orient those priorities with an equity focus.

In these pursuits, administrators access resources pathways to align resource allocation and distribution with local learning improvement agendas. The resource pathways administrators leverage include:

- **The district and traditional education supports**, such as ESDs, are traditional forms of local and regional support that bridge capacity gaps for local schools and help develop or maintain professional expertise.
- **Formal supports**, such as government agencies, nonprofits, and business partners, provide learning opportunities and can also support learning-extension opportunities.
- **Informal support** from families and individual community members support school operations and link expertise within the community with individual students or programs.
- **Community-networked support** represents a combination of these support pathways where the administrator acts as a hub for identifying and coordinating community-based resources.

Building, maintaining, and facilitating these relationships requires time and energy from rural administrators, and this is just one of the many responsibilities that competes for their attention.

As a result, rural administrators wear ‘many hats’ as they juggle multiple portfolios of responsibilities. Ultimately, this tension could interfere with administrators’ ability to lead teaching and learning work within their buildings and districts. Yet, it also highlights the importance of investing in human capital that will sustain local learning improvement work.

Administrators in rural contexts look to the community to inform local priorities for schooling, and in many cases, these priorities are rooted in the community’s notions of “good” citizenship and the desire for primary and secondary schools to prepare students for life beyond high school. Yet, in some cases, administrators must deftly work with their communities to shift those expectations to align with changing local and world economies and to create equitable

opportunities for all students. In doing so, administrators can leverage the lack of large-scale bureaucracies in their smaller districts to create and update learning improvement agendas. As the principal of School C explained, working in a small school context means that the principal is “the counselor, the priest, the custodian, those kinds of things every once and a while.” Yet, if they can successfully navigate competing priorities, rural administrators with little local bureaucracy may have an opportunity to engage in teaching and learning more deeply than a superintendent or principal in a more urban context, and this may serve them well as they collaborate with teachers and the community to fine-tune learning improvement agendas.

Educators in rural districts face challenges in obtaining and extending professional learning opportunities, and Alford and Ballenger previously found that administrators feel tension between competing needs for teachers to be in their classrooms with students and to be away from their classrooms to obtain professional learning (2012), but they can leverage their internal expertise to expand local capacity for professional learning and to support the local learning improvement agendas. By leveraging local expertise, through cross-grade level initiatives, collaborative small teams, and train-the-trainer initiatives, schools can increase teacher ownership in setting the direction of teaching and learning priorities within schools. In doing so, schools creatively reallocate teacher time to better utilize existing resources (Miles & Ferris, 2015).

Rural schools and communities are often tightly coupled, and as this study explores, administrators have an opportunity to 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 as it honors the school as the social hub of rural communities (Abshier et al., 2011; Lyson, 2002). Examples of these social events range from carnivals to holiday

programs to parades. Prater, Bermudez, and Owens (1997) found that rural parents attended school events more often than their urban and suburban counterparts, but urban and suburban parents talked about school with their children more frequently, attended school meetings more regularly, and communicated with teachers more frequently. The events described in this study often served as an occasion for the community to gather at the school, but in all cases, administrators classified these school events as opportunities to engage parents and families in the teaching and learning life of the school. The impetus 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. As Pan et al. (2003) suggest, involving families in the work of the school supports individual student learning and can also result in the flow of additional resources, including money, materials, and volunteerism, to schools.

Not only can family and community engagement result in additional resources, it may also support creating a school that is more conducive to learning and/or a school that is more closely connected to the community, and this connection often results in further additional resources for schools (Bauch, 2001). Engaging external environments is a key component of educational leadership across contexts (Knapp et al., 2003b). For the rural administrators participating in this study, fostering and sustaining internal and external relationships that will result in additional resources *and* crafting structures that distribute these resources for equitable learning opportunities are foundational components of their school improvement work.

Fostering more equitable school systems requires administrators to employ political savvy while working with educators and within the community to direct resources or attention to populations of students requiring extra support. As this study found, upholding tradition can be a

powerful rationale for maintaining equity gaps in some communities. In one case, the superintendent of School A faced opposition in her efforts to make changes and ultimately renegotiated the parameters of the proposed reforms. Moving forward, she placed an emphasis on formal, but easily constrained, engagement mechanisms for future community input. Conversely, other administrators in more remote, and perhaps more tight-knit or interdependent, communities were able to build and sustain ongoing partnerships and dialogue across socioeconomic and demographic boundaries to create loosely managed structures supporting equitable educational opportunities.

Fostering and sustaining positive relationships in the community, and with key community stakeholders, is particularly important for administrators in tight-knit communities who are working to change the community's expectation for schooling and/or to redistribute resources to ensure that all students have equitable access to learning opportunities. Building and maintaining these relationships is time consuming and, in the case of several administrators, rooted in creating relationships with one community member at a time. Other administrators were able to leverage their status as "from here" to deepen relationships in the community and ultimately connect resources with schools and student learning. Either scenario points to a necessary skill set for engaging stakeholders and building capacity for change.

As administrators engage in the work of leveraging resource pathways with an emphasis on growing community-networked support, they should consider the community's history and cultural expectations of schooling. Administrators engage in political and micropolitical leadership in any school, district, or community setting (Portin, 2005), but the tight-knit nature of many rural communities introduces a uniquely personal dynamic into administrators' efforts to implement a learning-improvement agenda. This is particularly the case when they are

advocating change. Yet, because rural administrators are highly visible members of their communities, they may leverage the school's unique position within the community to demonstrate deep connections between students and the community-at-large. In addition, developing a strong rationale for learning improvement may help administrators mediate political pressures (Plecki et al., 2006) particularly if the rationale is tied to the tight coupling of rural schools and their communities. Highlighting the connection between a community and its schools supports formal and informal community engagement and may ultimately bolster administrators' ability to build and refine local learning improvement agendas.

Chapter 6

Policy Considerations for Improving Rural Education

This study was designed to better understand how education leaders working in rural settings develop learning improvement agendas that take into account their rural context and to better understand how those learning improvement agendas are influenced and supported by local communities. Administrators in these districts are navigating a complex range of local politics and resource gaps while also navigating the multiple agendas of stakeholders and systems beyond their communities, including ESDs. In seeking to better understand the dynamics of rural school improvement, the important role of various stakeholders in facilitating learning improvement emerged as key theme. In particular, investigating the role of educational service districts and local communities in determining and supporting learning improvement agendas led to a deeper understanding of the role rural students and administrators play in their local communities.

Supporting Rural Schools

In Washington state, educational service districts provide back-office functions to support operations in small and rural districts. ESDs also provide professional learning opportunities to rural educators and build capacity for rural districts to meet policy mandates. These functions support rural schools' engagement in continuous teaching and learning improvement. The dissemination of professional learning opportunities varies between ESD regions in Washington state with one region, ESD III, explicitly focused on providing localized professional learning throughout the region. In addition to these functions, ESDs engage school and district administrators in developing a regional learning improvement agenda and provide additional

support as local administrators articulate their own local agendas. Though ESDs showcase promising practices and encourage districts to embrace new teaching and learning developments, local districts retain autonomy for developing learning priorities (Supovitz, 2006) as the ESD works to support these local goals (Honig & Hatch, 2004). In these ways, the ESD functions for small and rural districts in a role similar to a central office in a large, urban district. Specifically, ESDs (a) build capacity for educational improvement efforts by providing districts with content-specific expertise; (b) serve as a convener to facilitate connections and conversations broadly, across the ESD service region, and between individual districts; and (c) work to marshal state compliance efforts and other capacity building opportunities in ways that support cohesive efforts for educational improvement.

Engaging Communities in Teaching and Learning

Within local communities, school and district leaders forge partnerships to create opportunities for students and to support school operations. In doing so, rural school and district leaders access four resource pathways: (a) traditional education supports, such as the ESD; (b) formal supports, such as nonprofits and government agencies; (c) informal support from families and individual community members; and (d) community-networked support in which the administrator leverages formal and informal organizational and personal relationships to coordinate resources for schools. Fostering and maintaining these relationships is one of many duties, but it is a critical component of rural administrators' school-improvement and learning-improvement work. Building these relationships and facilitating links between schools and students and local organizations, businesses, and community members casts rural administrators in a community development role in which they strengthen schools and educational opportunities through community building efforts.

In addition to seeking new resources, rural administrators look within their schools to investigate opportunities to reallocate existing resources to support their learning improvement agenda (Miles & Ferris, 2015). Schools in rural communities often serve an important role as a community hub, and administrators leverage social events within schools to build capacity for families and the community to engage in teaching and learning efforts. In doing so, administrators also showcase the important role students play within rural communities. Engaging external stakeholders is a key component of educational leadership (Knapp et al., 2003b), and this is particularly salient in rural communities. In addition to sustaining normal operation of rural schools, local administrators who wish to reallocate existing resources to increase equitable opportunities for all students or those who seek to update a community's expectation for schooling must navigate official and unofficial local politics by collaborating with stakeholders in traditionally tight-knit communities. Such collaboration requires cultural, strategic, and political leadership skills (Portin, 2005).

Policy Considerations

Given the challenges facing rural schools, many of them unique to the rural context, a number of policy considerations are drawn from this study. These considerations are particularly notable as rural communities across the country become more diverse and as many rural areas continue to face economic hardships. As McGranahan (1994) emphasized, employment opportunities in rural areas continue to shift away from traditional rural economic drivers, and with this shift comes a charge for rural school systems to seek innovative approaches for ensuring sustainable local economies. Twenty years after McGranahan's call for rural schools to engage in economic development solutions, rural economies continue to change. In addition,

rural America is becoming more diverse at a rapid rate, and this requires a new strategic, expanded focus on equitable and sustainable systems of schooling in rural areas.

Developing Policies Responsive to Rural Contexts and Communities

This study extends the notion that rural schools serve as the center of their community. As this study demonstrates, administrators are working independently to provide services and supports for students beyond those typical of schools including social services, as Browne-Ferrigno and Allen also described (2006). In addition, administrators are leveraging their unique role in the community to secure additional resources for schools and to connect students with valuable learning opportunities.

Mathis (2003) called for the expansion of rural schools to facilitate their ability to serve in an official capacity as social centers with additional supports such as breakfast programs, after-school programs, and adult and early childhood education. Expanding supports for rural schools to acknowledge the social and community services provided in these community hubs would also require a shift in the perceptions of policymakers and powerbrokers regarding rural schools and communities. As the rural influence in public policy arenas decreases (Nachtigal, 1995), policy makers are often unaware of the role rural schools play in their communities (Morton & Harmon, 2011).

Dominant culture does not value traditional rural culture and often disparages rural people as “hicks” (Budge, 2006; Herzog & Pittman, 1999, p.14). This dynamic was apparent in interviews conducted for this study. For example, the principal of School D worked previously in urban and suburban districts in the Seattle metropolitan area, and during her time in those settings she encountered certain biases: “I heard how people talked about small schools. They

kind of look down their noses and think that we're backwoods country folk that work here because we couldn't get jobs in bigger districts.” She continued,

I find the exact opposite to be true. We all have to be more knowledgeable, wear more hats, get more training. We actually have to fight harder for resources, whether it's training, money, programs, because there's a lack of infrastructure in small districts. What you get in exchange is extremely innovative, creative people who know how to live with very little and still make great things happen. I think it's really sad. I've had multiple people say, "You've been there so long. When are you gonna get out of that little district and move onto something that's really gonna help you grow?" I was like, "You have no idea how much growing I do on an annual basis, because I'm it."

Regarding the dynamic this fosters, she added, “I think it's one of the biases that you're still, it's okay to have.” School improvement policy conversations and the agendas of research and practitioner focused organizations often portray rural schools as less important and the issues impacting rural schools as less urgent than issues impacting larger, more urban districts. Yet, rural districts are not simple to lead. As this study suggests, the lack of bureaucracy in a smaller district may make district-level changes easier to implement but may lead to instantaneous civic objection in ways that may not rapidly materialize in a larger district with more layers of formal governance. The ability to navigate these dynamics is one of the many skills that a successful rural administrator must possess.

Professionalizing Rural School Leadership

To foster a deeper widespread understanding of the distinctive characteristics of rural schools and the important role they play in their communities, rural education leaders must

engage in profile building activities that support a broad understanding of their challenges, needs, and successes. Abshier et al. (2011) shared successful strategies of small district superintendents for increasing revenues and stretching resources, and these included active involvement with supporting organizations and developing relationships with legislative representatives. Though already charged with wearing many hats, rural administrators should actively engage with their local, state, and federal elected and appointed officials to advocate for policies that will support rural communities and for the equitable distribution of resources to support rural schools.

In addition, the Office of the Superintendent for Public Instruction (OSPI), Washington's state education agency, might also identify rural issues in education as a key priority to build capacity for rural education initiatives in Washington. In 2009, a group of approximately 20 rural and education organizations met with President Obama's administration to discuss rural education (Lambert, 2009). This group's recommendations included creating an Office of Rural Education in the United States Department of Education to advocate for the needs of rural schools and investing in rural education research to understand challenges facing rural educators and the implications of demographic shifts in rural communities. OSPI could make a similar effort to support rural educators. Currently, OSPI's rural programs are limited to federally funded and mandated initiatives under the Small, Rural School Achievement Program umbrella. Therefore, OSPI has an opportunity to expand their role in supporting rural schools by investing in a concentrated effort to vet policy decisions through a rural lens. Finally, OSPI might work with statewide professional membership organizations, such as the Washington Association of School Administrators (WASA), the Association of Washington School Principals (AWSP), and the Washington State Association of Educational Service Districts (AESD) to create a

clearinghouse for promising strategies rural districts and their supporting organizations, such as ESDs, are developing to mitigate challenges of rurality and remoteness. For example, findings from this study include potentially beneficial strategies, such as the development of sub-regions in ESD III or leveraging partnerships with local communities, as administrators for School F have done with their local meatpacking plant where educators meet with parents during their breaks. Such partnerships might also foster greater collaboration with statewide professional associations to align support for rural educators and coordinated professional learning opportunities.

Pay Equity

This study suggests several state-level policy implications that could be adjusted to account for the nature of rural schooling. The first of these policy implications is addressing the gap in pay equity that impacts rural districts' ability to recruit and retain teachers. According to Nichols, "A major problem that has permeated the rural school landscape has been an inability to offer salaries that were competitive with urban school districts" (2004, p. 40), and study participants indicated that this is a challenge in their rural context. Five local administrators and five ESD administrators described the challenges that rural districts in Washington state face in recruiting and retaining teachers. As the assistant superintendent from ESD I explained, "Small districts ... can't keep teachers ... so it's just terrible inequity that where the poverty and remoteness is the greatest, the likelihood that those teachers are remaining for any length of time is small." Washington state has a nearly standardized base allocation for teacher salaries from the state, but local districts fund additional pay, known as time, responsibility, and incentive (TRI) pay through property tax levies. TRI pay enables districts in costlier areas, such as metropolitan Seattle, to pay higher salaries that support a higher cost of living. Yet, five local administrators

lamented that teachers from their small districts could teach in slightly larger communities nearby for increased pay. As the principal of School H explained,

It's difficult to maintain teachers and staffing ... I don't think that there's enough understanding of what a teacher in a small district is giving up by being in a small district as opposed to a large district. I think the state needs to take that on.

As a prime example of the inequity of TRI pay, administrators in Schools G and H shared that they can afford to pay teachers for two per diem days of TRI pay while a larger district a 45-minute drive away pays teachers for over 20 per diem days of TRI pay each year. The principal of School H called for a "statewide teacher salary scale that is really a statewide teacher salary scale" while emphasizing that regional differences make sense, but greater standardization of pay is needed within regions.

Teacher Certification

The White House meeting on rural education called for "grow your own" strategies to help rural districts recruit and retain qualified educators (Lambert, 2009). Administrators from four local districts, comprising all districts outside of the more metropolitan ESD I, reported challenges with recruiting highly qualified teachers. These administrators called for more flexibility in determining the highly-qualified status of teachers, and the principal of School D, a high school, added that secondary endorsements for already certified teachers should be easier to obtain. School E's district is working to "grow their own" by collaborating with an institution in Seattle and another remote district approximately an hour away to coordinate online classes and weekend courses. According to the principal, building the infrastructure for this certification cohort represents their plan for addressing turnover because "you have to get people who are going to stay for the long-term, and that's what really makes the difference."

The state could also adjust standardized expectations to support the needs of rural schools. For example, the superintendent of School E, in a remote district of less than 500 students, shared that her district had once received a \$500,000 grant from the state but would never again pursue a similar opportunity due to the onerous reporting regulations and the assumptions the grant made of recipients' local capacity. Such grants, she explained, are meant to support after school programs, but the district didn't initially get the grant because "we didn't have any community partners," such as the YMCA or Boys and Girls Club. She fought for the grant because it would provide after school opportunities for students, but the paperwork and reporting were "not doable with the manpower we had." She continued,

There's lots of great opportunities that come our way from the state, and the state does a great job of leveraging those opportunities, but managing some of the things that they [expect], I pass up many things because we can't manage that with three and a half people in our [central] office. It's impossible.

Additional supports and flexibility are not only needed for particularly remote schools and small schools. For example, in the case of Schools G and H, the district is fairly isolated from other communities, but it is within a 45-minute drive of a metropolitan area. According to the superintendent, "When I look back over my history here it feels like [we've] always been not, we're not low enough, we're not poor enough to really get any support to improve teaching and learning like other schools do." Yet, Schools G and H shared many challenges in common with School E, including recruiting and retaining highly-qualified teachers, building their own infrastructure for supporting students beyond the school day in the absence of community partners, and securing professional learning opportunities for teachers due to substitute shortages. Therefore, in addition to considering a school's size and distance from support

services, the state and rural education researchers alike should consider a school's access to resources within and outside of their community.

Investing in ESDs

The state could further invest in ESDs to leverage and expand the infrastructure supporting rural schools. For example, as this study explored, professional learning opportunities are difficult for educators in small, isolated, and/or remote districts to access. Therefore, an additional allocation of targeted funds to facilitate professional learning provided at the ESD or provided locally by the ESD would be a step toward linking rural districts with equitable access to state sponsored support. This financial support could help shrink the professional learning gap many rural educators experience by funding their travel to ESD headquarters or ESD administrators' travel to districts. In addition, further investment in ESD infrastructure could expand the back-office supports provided by ESDs to focus on supporting small districts' interaction with compliance efforts including paperwork and reporting. For example, an administrator at ESD I noticed that a majority of districts in the region were not receiving Universal Service Fund (USF) subsidies. When he asked local administrators about the funds, they responded that the process was too cumbersome, so now he manages 20 districts' applications and reporting for USF allocations. This, in turn, results in increased funding for Internet access and maintenance of technology equipment in local schools. Local administrators from nearly all districts in this study cited compliance efforts as a barrier for rural schools' success, and expanding ESD back-office supports could lessen the bureaucratic burden facing rural administrators.

In addition to expanded centralized support for back-office functions, the statewide system of educational service districts is uniquely positioned to assume a greater and more defined role in teacher and principal development. ESDs have the opportunity to provide teacher and administrator professional learning offerings that are more consistent from year to year and more standardized and widely available across the statewide network of ESDs. Such efforts would support the development of educators as professionals and would complement the majority of current professional learning offerings that are rooted in building a content-specific skill set. Expanding the capacity of ESDs to offer more standardized professionalized learning for teachers and administrators across the trajectory of their careers would require targeted investments from the state to allow a departure from current ESD funding models that are fee-for-service and grant dependent. In addition, while many districts may have few options other than utilizing their ESD for training or services, districts are not currently mandated to work with ESDs. Therefore, expanding the capacity of ESDs to serve as a more sustainably valuable resource for educators and districts would require a role change for ESDs to empower the development and facilitation of ongoing, comprehensive teacher and leader development programs.

Creating Professional Networks

Through long-term fellows opportunities and one-day or short-term workshops, ESDs provide important professional learning opportunities for many teachers whose districts cannot afford to hire outside consultants. Yet, short-term workshops require that teachers are away from their district, sometimes at a great distance, and lack the job-embedded, ongoing support that studies suggest is most successful for improving teachers' professional practice (Saxe, Gearhart, & Nasir, 2001; Stein, Smith, & Silver, 1999). Schools with an embedded culture of learning tend

to sustain improvement efforts beyond their initial introduction (Supovitz, 2006). As explored previously, principals of some small and rural schools contend that their school is a professional learning community with a culture of learning due to the very nature of being small, collaborative, and interdependent. Indeed, conditions for continuous improvement are fostered where teachers have the opportunity to engage in meaningful collaboration alongside their colleagues (Rosenholtz, 1991). Barth (2006) contends that engagement in a masterful group of colleagues results in empowerment, recognition, satisfaction, and success. Further complicating professional learning in small, rural schools is that a key component of fostering teaching improvement is the opportunity to collaborate in ongoing, focused efforts with colleagues who teach similar content (Gallimore, Ermeling, Saunders, & Goldenberg, 2009; Saxe et al., 2001; Stein et al., 1999). Indeed, “providing intensive, content-rich, and collegial learning opportunities for teachers can improve both teaching and student learning” (Darling-Hammond & Richardson, 2009, p. 52). Yet, small and remote districts cannot engage in the models offered by the learning improvement literature that emphasize professional learning communities convening around content-specific collaboration, particularly when a teacher might be the only educator in their district with their content-specific focus. Therefore, ESDs are in a unique position to leverage the same regional synergy available to superintendents through the ESDs’ superintendent roundtables to bring other groups of educators together for regular collegiality. For example, ESDs might facilitate quarterly meetings for grade bands within their region or sub-region to engage in collaborative curriculum development with an online platform facilitating contact in between meetings. Alternatively, ESDs might host summer workshops for teachers from alternating grade bands to work with content specialists and to develop

professional relationships with each other. Such activities would serve isolated educators well and further ESDs' approach to regional collaboration.

Similarly, local administrators, particularly principals, may not have opportunities to collaborate with peers within their districts. While superintendents have the opportunity to engage with peers from their region during regular meetings at the ESD, principals do not automatically have access to the same networks. As the superintendent of Schools G and H explained, "It's that professional and personal nurturing of administrators that's really an issue in a small area, I think. It's like our teachers, they don't have another first grade teacher to meet with." The principal of School H also offered, "There really aren't strong principal networks in our region." Literature acknowledges the importance of rural administrator networks, particularly for superintendents (Abshier et al., 2011; Canales, Tejada-Delgado, & Slate, 2008; Jenkins, 2007). Yet, the benefits of networking, namely disseminating information and best practices and fostering mentorships, could prove quite beneficial for rural principals as well.

Educational service districts are an obvious choice to continue filling the role of convener, given their knowledge of the schools and educators in each region, but the possibilities for expanding networking opportunities for rural educators are diverse. New opportunities for supporting rural educators would require additional resources for participating districts and the ESD as a convening entity. Supovitz (2006) calls for districts to reposition themselves as local support organizations, and practitioners and policy makers can impact learning improvement in rural schools through ongoing regional efforts linking educators within close geographic proximity and providing resources, including online platforms and flexibility, to foster, support, and sustain collaboration that impacts student learning.

Leadership Preparation

Finally, this study has implications for leadership preparation in Washington state and more broadly for the field of rural leadership preparation. While referencing the superintendent of School E as an exemplary administrator, the ESD II teaching and learning administrator explained,

That's the other thing about rural school districts is they tend not to get the best and brightest leaders, I'm just being honest. When you find one it's like, "Oh, please community, keep this person because this person is a treasure, and without her I don't know where you guys would be."

Additionally, the principal of School D shared,

I have to be the principal at the high school and the alternative school and manage the assessment system for the district, for no extra money, and deal with this perception that I'm somehow lesser skilled and have less knowledge because I work in a small district.

Therefore, it is crucial to prepare well-qualified, talented administrators to work in rural districts and to ensure that such administrators are well-prepared to tackle the myriad duties they will encounter as an administrator working in a rural context.

Portin (2005) outlines the critical functions of leadership, and these include several functions that are ultimately tightly coupled with a schools' community such as,

- Cultural Leadership: Tending to the symbolic resources of the school (for example, its traditions, climate, and history)
- Strategic Leadership: Promoting a vision, mission, goals, and developing a means to reach them
- External Development and Political Leadership: Representing the school in the community, developing capital, public relations, recruiting students, buffering and mediating external interests, and advocating for the school's interests
- Micropolitical Leadership: Buffering and mediating internal interests, maximizing resources (financial and human) (p. 16)

As the findings of this study suggest, a community's culture and expectations for their schools impact the schools' work with students and the development and implementation of a learning improvement agenda in critical ways. The Institute for Educational Leadership (2005) developed a brief on preparing leaders for rural schools and emphasized the importance of tailoring components of administrator preparation programs to the individual communities their graduates will eventually serve. This brief indicates that preparation programs should help future rural school leaders understand "how to nurture partnerships with constituents, school-board members, and a wide variety of community players to advance school goals" (p. 5). In addition, this study suggests that future rural administrators should receive specialized training in what Portin (2005) describes as external development and political leadership to prepare them for the very interpersonal, highly visible work of navigating community dynamics and politics.

This study highlighted many similarities of rural schools across regions in Washington state, but it also demonstrated the local nuances to which administrators must be adept at navigating. Effective rural administrators "respect the formal and informal power structures that form the backdrop against which educational decisions are made" (Institute for Educational Leadership, 2005). Yet, as this study demonstrated, to facilitate instructional improvement and promote equitable access for all students to educational opportunities, sometimes formal and informal power structures must be disrupted. Building the skill set of future rural school leaders to work alongside communities to articulate and implement equitable learning improvement agendas requires specialized leadership training.

High-quality principals are critical for supporting student learning, and this is particularly salient in improving the quality of education in struggling schools (Leithwood et al., 2004). Contemporary directions in principal preparation research and reform are concentrated on the

dynamics of specialized leadership training for challenged urban schools, and this includes an increasing emphasis placed on building and sustaining partnerships between urban districts and university principal preparation programs (e.g. Davis, 2016; Mitgang, 2013). While such an emphasis is informing successful leadership preparation and school leadership in an urban context, and includes valuable information that may be applied across contexts, this specialized focus relies on the infrastructure available in large urban districts. Additionally, this specialized partnership focus generally assumes that districts and brick and mortar campuses are in close proximity. Finally, while the contemporary emphasis on specialized leadership training for preparing urban school and system leaders and the urban-centric focus of education reform research has yielded promising new directions for improving urban education, this focus ignores the unique challenges facing rural schools and communities. Therefore, additional resources for rural schools, distributed to enhance equitable support across contexts, and research investigating successful rural school leader preparation will strengthen schools and school systems.

Chapter 7

Implications for Future Research

Understanding the ESD Role and Capacity

As this study found, educational service districts in Washington state have varied structures and operations while maintaining core similarities. These similarities included the presence of key administrators, such as superintendents, assistant superintendents for teaching and learning, special education administrators, and content specialists, and the key duties of the core employees were very similar across the three ESDs included in this study. Other roles varied in title and job responsibilities. Some of this may be attributed to the “many hats” certain ESD administrators wear as they oversee various grants and programs from their singular role. Further study of larger proportions of ESD staff across the three ESDs, or all nine ESDs, would provide insight into the variability of structures and programs across the ESDs and the ways in which this variability impacts how ESDs connect resources and teaching and learning efforts to local districts and schools. Additionally, this line of inquiry might uncover successful practices that increase stability of ESD offerings particularly when services originate as grant-funded programs.

Additional inquiry regarding the role ESDs play in supporting local districts’ capacity for implementing the new teaching and learning evaluation frameworks would provide useful information for policymakers and educators. As discussed, some content specialists within each ESD are also specialists for the newly implemented frameworks. All of the content specialists and various other ESD administrators described ESD efforts to integrate the evaluation frameworks with other professional learning opportunities. Yet, none of the content specialists

indicated that they were framework specialists for more than one teaching and learning framework. Additionally, districts within all of the ESDs included in this study trended very heavily in favor of one of the three frameworks. This raises questions about the viability of the ESDs' capacity to continually support implementation of the other frameworks and the extent to which those frameworks are being integrated into professional learning opportunities. Further study into the ESDs' dissemination of these frameworks across all nine ESDs might be helpful as stakeholders and policymakers consider the effectiveness of the frameworks and the policy allowing local districts to choose from three distinct options.

ESD II holds some professional learning opportunities in their region outside of the ESD office, though it seemed as though this was an idea generated by one of the participant's colleagues, rather than an organizational priority. ESD III has divided their region into sub-regions to offer professional learning opportunities away from the ESD office and closer to educators' communities. This study reinforces the challenges that remoteness poses educators seeking or needing to engage in professional learning activities, and further study across all nine regions in Washington might highlight promising strategies for situating professional learning closer to educators and uncover opportunities to institutionalize structures that promote accessibility to ESD services and regular attendance from educators.

ESD content specialists and other administrators, such as assistant superintendents and special education administrators, meet regularly and engage in collaboration with representatives from the state education agency. The nature of this contact warrants further study to better operationalize the role of educational service districts in the context of state policy and to investigate the opportunity for statewide alignment of teaching and learning priorities. Similar to the efforts of ESD I to develop an ESD-wide standardized vocabulary for teaching and learning

initiatives and to implement that with districts within their region, statewide collaboration of ESD administrators might provide an opportunity to develop a statewide teaching and learning language to support alignment of future policy and teaching and learning developments. Stephens and Keane (2005) explored Washington state's ESDs and similar support organizations in their book, *The Educational Service Agency: American Education's Invisible Partner*, and there is much left to learn about these "invisible" organizations. Perhaps it is, as ESD III's superintendent said, time to bring their work out of the "shadows."

Investing in Rural Communities Through Schools

This study reinforces the role of schools as hubs in rural communities and suggests that the role of the community is also important to the life of the school. Administrator and student visibility in the community can secure additional resources from the community-at-large to support teaching and learning within the schools. Additionally, engaging families and the community in shaping the learning improvement agenda within schools is important for the sustainability of the agenda. This family and community engagement differs from similar efforts in more urban contexts due to the highly interpersonal nature of rural school leadership. Several schools and districts within this study demonstrated a deep connection between community and schools and illustrated the ways in which community-wide values and goals for students impact teaching and learning priorities. For example, School F has a distinct emphasis on preparing students for the future with a specific focus on college and career readiness, and they realize this by leveraging the involvement of the community in their schools. Prior research has noted the success of involving families and the community in schools by engaging community members as mentors (King, 2012). Schools G and H are developing a character education program that will meet the community's goal of preparing good citizens and the schools' goal of preparing

empowered learners. Finally, School E is preparing students with the knowledge that some will one day be leaders of the Tribal Council and custodians of their important heritage. Therefore, future study might further investigate the specific teaching and learning implications of the school serving as the center of the community by engaging in school-embedded research to understand how this dynamic impacts teachers' actions in the classroom and students' perceptions of the role of schooling.

The very visible nature of their role was a topic of conversation with local superintendents and principals, and further study might continue to explore the dynamics of rural school leadership with a specific focus on the implications of living and working in a community with very little privacy. Administrators from Schools G and H offered, "There is literally zero privacy, I mean zero," and "zero social life." Yet, they continued, "If you were born and raised in this community, there's a little more grace for you probably than people who move in." This worries them as they think about graduates of their high school and the likelihood that they'll want to return to the community to teach, "I think the generation that is now graduating. I think they really want more anonymity. They really believe in more of a work/personal life separation and balance." In addition to the very public nature of working as a rural educator, another strand of conversation emerged relating to the gender of administrators.

The principal and principal superintendent of Schools G and H are both female, and the principal of School H shared,

To this day, I've not been to the tavern to eat, which is now a restaurant, but when I was hired 20 some years ago, the superintendent said, "Women don't go in that tavern. New female teachers don't go there." That just stuck with me, which today someone would

lose their job for saying those kinds of things to people. If I want to buy a bottle of wine, I certainly don't buy a bottle of wine here downtown.

Similarly, the assistant superintendent from ESD I worked previously in a rural school and emphasized that she did not want to live and work in the same community due to privacy concerns:

There's all kinds of social, emotional tolls on you that don't exist in a larger district ... The social, there's a liquor store in [the] little town I was in. I didn't live there. I knew better than to live there. I lived about 25 miles away. I think I bought liquor in town twice and that's it. In 32 years. Because parents and kids have a view of who you are as a teacher. It was just easier not to get involved with them understanding that I like vodka martinis. They don't need to know that. That's my business.

Finally, the superintendent of School A is pursuing an equity agenda that disrupts the status quo in her district. She is the first female superintendent in that district, and given the context of the expectations discussed by other female administrators, one wonders if a male superintendent making the same decisions would face identical scrutiny from the community-at-large.

Therefore, further study to better understand the role administrators' gender may play in rural districts could provide important findings that could help prepare future generations of male and female education leaders.

Similar inquiry regarding the role of advisory boards and other working groups for developing district and school policies would provide valuable context for the efforts of school administrators, such as the superintendent of School A, who is attempting to supplement the traditional informal communication mechanisms in place in many rural communities. In addition

to investigating new structures, such inquiry could also provide context for administrators attempting to create a dialogue that is inclusive of all populations within their communities. Administrators from Schools G and H, the superintendent of school A, and the principal and superintendent of school D discussed their efforts to ensure that all students were well served, not only students from particularly vocal or traditionally successful and privileged families.

As administrators with an equity-focus, particularly those who are not originally from the area, become leaders in rural communities, further study would uncover how their efforts to disrupt traditional structures of power within those school systems and communities are implemented. In particular, better understanding the ways in which these administrators build trust with their communities to create teaching and learning change and adjust learning improvement priorities with an equity-focus can support the field of leadership preparation as new leaders are trained to assume positions across urban, suburban, and rural contexts.

Better Understanding of Rural Family Engagement

Finally, additional research related to parent and family engagement in rural communities will increase practitioner knowledge of promising practices for engaging families and scholarly knowledge of the ways in which family engagement in rural contexts may differ from more heavily researched urban contexts. Using this study as an example, principals and superintendents from the smallest districts (covering Schools E, G, and H) noted holding the primary responsibility for convening families. Yet, as Ishimaru (2014) notes, community-organizing groups can help equalize power asymmetries between districts and underrepresented populations by building political and social capital. All principals mentioned either involving official parent teacher organizations (PTOs) or unofficial broad engagement of families in their

work, and the principal of School D, in particular, actively engages the PTO in planning the agenda for meetings and outreach opportunities. Participants did not identify community-based organizations or groups that supported their engagement of families, though two superintendents did note the importance of building relationships with the local Tribal Council.

This leaves important equity-focused work squarely on the shoulders of administrators with large, and growing, portfolios of work. As seen with the superintendent of School A, who felt as though the district's goodwill with the traditional community powerbrokers decreased as goodwill with the Tribal Nation increased, rural administrators are placed in a difficult position within their local political landscape. Therefore, it is important to better understand how successful rural schools are able to operate within the rural context to engage families and, in particular, families from underrepresented backgrounds.

Auerbach (2007) characterizes conferences and open houses as “token gestures” while Warren, Hong, Rubin, and Uy (2009) describes traditional parent involvement programs as “individualistic, school-centered, and activity based” and emphasizes that instead of relationship building through activity nights, the relational approach seeks to “build relationships among parents as a basis for their collective participation” (p. 2244). The characterization of activity nights, whether an evening focused on building math skills or a community-wide barbeque supporting transition planning for middle school, as “token gestures” may be consistent with current scholarship's urban-centric orientation, but it is not reflective of family engagement in these rural environments. Many rural communities see their local school as their social and civic hub, and it is through interaction with each other and with educators at the school-sponsored events where families deepen or build connections with one another and with the school. As rural communities become increasingly diverse (Johnson, 2012), it is important to investigate how

administrators are effectively engaging diverse families in schools by honoring the role of schools in rural communities. This study suggests that the process of family engagement is tightly coupled with community engagement, and this warrants further inquiry.

Conclusion

This study raises the need for continued investigation of the resources and supports that empower rural schools and districts to develop and execute an equity-focused learning improvement agenda. In particular, this study highlights the importance of coordinated, formal supports, such as Washington state's educational service districts, and less formal, or completely informal, supports located in local communities. As evidenced in this study, no two ESDs or rural communities are exactly the same. Yet, rural communities and predominately rural regions do share many needs in common, and school and district leaders within these communities navigate similar local contexts. Rural America is becoming more diverse, and that diversity introduces new languages, cultures, perspectives, and needs into communities and classrooms. Equity implications for rural education may be significantly rooted in education policy, but the critical role rural communities play in defining their local schooling agenda signals the necessity for preparing education leaders who are equity-focused and politically savvy to lead and sustain educational opportunities in a changing rural America.

In addition to better understanding the role of local communities and local resources in learning improvement efforts in rural schools, this study highlights the importance of and need for expanded engagement of rural constituencies by the Washington state education agency and other state-level stakeholders. Washington's ESD system is situated with the potential to increase regional collaboration with local districts by providing an expanded core of stable, high-quality,

and consistently offered professional learning opportunities that do not rely on a fee-for-service model or securing vast portfolios of grants. This study suggests that ESDs are critical partners in building educators' skill sets and that ESDs could expand their role in supporting learning improvement at the school and district levels, but this would require reimagined funding models that would allow for the alignment of a greater state-supported core of professional learning supports. A policy shift in this direction at the state level would also provide for the increased standardization of educator development and professional support across the state while allowing for flexibility at the regional and district levels. As this study suggests, the nature of ESDs encourages development of regional priorities and relationship building between ESD administrators and local educators, and this has the ability to foster agendas and initiatives that are responsive to the needs of local communities.

Schools play a unique and important role in rural communities. Yet, it is not simply the history of a school that communities hold dear, it is the role of schools as a convener for the community that helps sustain local culture across generations. Additionally, the important roles that students and educators play in the life of the community contribute to this local culture and can help shape a more equitable environment. Nested within this persisting dynamic is the critical role rural school and district leaders play by nurturing agendas with a sustainable learning improvement focus and by positioning their students for success following their schooling, whether it is in the community or beyond.

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APPENDIX A

Semi-Structured Interview Protocol

Can you tell me about the education or experiences that best prepared you for your role?

What work is happening in your district/school to improve teaching and learning?

- Probes:
- How is this work improving student outcomes?
 - Where do these initiatives come from?

In the context of these efforts, how do you contribute to the work of improving teaching and learning?

- Probe:
- What is your role in providing students with a high-quality education in the context of your school/district/ESD?

How does your community show its support for education?

- Probe: What are some key points of pride in the community?

What are some things that stand in the way of achieving goals for learning improvement, and how do you address these challenges?

How would you classify the goals of your school/district?

- Probes:
- What do successful student outcomes look like in your school/district?
 - What do you prepare students to do?
 - What are the key priorities for students' learning here?

How do these priorities address the challenges you face?

Do these priorities align with a plan developed by your district or educational service district? (school level only)

How do the district/ESD support the improvement of teaching and learning?

- Probes:
- Is that support adequate?
 - What else would be helpful?

Does the rural nature of your district impact resources available to you? If so, how do you deal with that?

Where do you go for advice, best practices, innovation?

- Probes:
- Do you ever seek advice from colleagues or peers?
 - Do you participate in professional associations? If so, has that been helpful?
 - What types of collaboration would be most helpful?

- What are some examples of the most useful professional development opportunities or resources that you've recently used?

What other roles and duties compete with your ability to support your priorities for student learning?

- Probes:
- What do you wish you could be doing more of?
 - What do you wish you could be doing less of?
 - Who are some of the official and unofficial leaders who help you do what you do?

What are some of the most valuable resources provided by the District or ESD that have assisted with efforts to improve teaching and learning?

- Probe:
- What are some of the most valuable resources provided by or within the community?

You mentioned some of the major strategies to improve teaching and learning in the school/district. How do you distribute human resources and other resources to support these efforts?

- Probes:
- What do you look for when hiring new staff?
 - How do you recruit when you have openings?

How do you engage these folks, both within the district/school and in the community?

- Probes:
- Do you rely on other resources or external partners?
 - How do you involve families, businesses and other partners in the community?
 - Has this involvement yielded additional resources or other benefits for your school/district?

Can you tell me about any gaps in infrastructure in your district and how they impact your ability to work with students?

- Probes:
- Can you think of any examples relating to facilities? Transportation? Technology? Recruiting and retaining highly qualified instructional staff?

What is one thing that policymakers in Olympia should know about your work, particularly your work in a rural context?

Is there anything else you would like to add?

APPENDIX B

Additional Information Regarding Research Sites

ESD I							
SCHOOL	LEVEL	ENROLLMENT 5/2014	% Nonwhite 2014	% Free- Reduced Lunch	Teachers	Miles from District Central Office	Miles from ESD Headquarters
School A	6-8	550-600	38	47	40	1	50
School B	K-6	400-450	19	32	25	5	5
School C	K-6	150-200	17	59	10	9	30
ESD II							
SCHOOL	LEVEL	ENROLLMENT 5/2014	% Nonwhite 2014	% Free- Reduced Lunch	Teachers	Miles from District Central Office	Miles from ESD Headquarters
School D	9-12	300-350	19	41	20	0	40
School E	K-5	150-200	96	78	10	17	145
ESD III							
SCHOOL	LEVEL	ENROLLMENT 5/2014	% Nonwhite 2014	% Free- Reduced Lunch	Teachers	Miles from District Central Office	Miles from ESD Headquarters
School F	9-12	400-450	49	56	30	1	35
School G	K-5	50-100	22	59	10	0	25
School H	6-12	150-200	33	62	15	0	25
<i>Note: Schools G & H are in the same district</i>							
<i>Note: Enrollment data from May 2014 is provided in ranges of 50. Percentage of nonwhite students is taken from 2014 and rounded to the nearest percent. Percentage of students receiving free or reduced priced lunch is taken from 2014 and rounded to the nearest percent. Number of classroom teachers is from the 2013-2014 school year and rounded to the nearest 5. Miles from District Central Office are rounded to the nearest mile, and miles from Educational Service District (ESD) Headquarters are rounded to the nearest 5.</i>							

Information provided by the Washington State Board of Education (2016).