

No Principal Left Behind: A Qualitative Study on the Current Leadership Challenges for
Principals in Small Rural Districts and Access to Support for Professional Growth

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DISSERTATION

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DEDICATION

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ABSTRACT

The role of the K-12 principal is one that is vast and diverse in its range of responsibilities. This qualitative study examined the current challenges specifically facing small rural school district principals and the access available to support for professional growth in that role. McREL's Balanced Leadership Framework was used as the theoretical framework to demonstrate the significance the role of the principal has on student achievement and the importance of sufficiently supporting the growth and development of those serving in that role. The methodology for this study was a narrative inquiry that utilized reflective journals, semi-structured interviews, and field observations to capture the lived experiences of principals in small rural districts. Findings within the study indicate that these principals currently face challenges in balancing the multiple roles that they fill, along with meeting student needs with limited resources, and establishing strong relationships in the school and community. Each principal accesses current systems of support through peer networks, on-site administrative teams, and state-supported resources, affording positive impacts such as shared ideas, resources, and improved leadership growth. However, common barriers that were articulated involved struggling to manage the logistical impact of being absent from their buildings as well as finding a lack of relevancy in provided support programs to meet their unique needs. These barriers contribute to a lack of continued and meaningful professional growth on a consistent basis. This study provides research to support the intentional implementation of leadership training and support opportunities for principals in small rural districts that is on-going, provided within a context that meets their unique needs, and eliminates obstacles and barriers to accessing the support.

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Chapter I

Research has shown that the role of the K-12 principal is a dynamic one that requires a diverse skill set in today's educational landscape and that the job has changed significantly over the years (Bravender & Staub, 2018; Bouffard, 2019; Pannell et al., 2015; Pannell & Sergi-McBrayer, 2020; Schrik & Wasonga, 2019; Waters & Cameron, 2007). Principals have always been responsible for such tasks as managing the building and handling discipline issues. Currently, principals are expected to also be sound instructional leaders, along with being competent and effective organizational managers (Fuentes & Jimerson, 2020; Lyons, 2019; Pannell & Sergi-McBrayer, 2020; Waters & Cameron, 2007). The scope of the instructional leadership role of a principal involves a variety of functions such as building and communicating school goals and vision, developing high academic outcomes, monitoring student learning and support services, investing in the development of instructional staff, and building relationships with stakeholders in the community (Bagwell, 2019; Cetin & Kinik, 2016; Buyukgoze, 2016; Hauseman et al., 2017; Rouleau, 2021; Waters & Cameron, 2007). Additionally, principals invest time in other managerial duties such as scheduling, student discipline, and addressing parental concerns (Hauseman, 2017; Hoyer et al., 2017; Martin, 2018; Neumerski et al., 2018; Weber et al., 2014). Both instructional leadership and organizational management are important functions that create the entirety of the role of a principal, and finding the balance of how to address both lenses becomes complicated, thus necessitating a well-prepared and supported leader (Cetin & Kinik, 2016; Fuentes & Jimerson, 2020; Lyons, 2019; Waters & Cameron, 2007).

The numerous facets of the instructional leader role are often challenging to balance. All these responsibilities require dedicated time, which often spread the school principal thin. This

can lead to an issue of not regularly addressing areas such as curriculum and instruction fully (Bouffard, 2019; Buyukgoze, 2016; Fuentes & Jimerson, 2020; Hoyer et al., 2017; Martin, 2018). Some principals can meet this need by developing teams that include teacher leaders to assist them in implementing instructional leadership practices and efforts, utilizing distributed leadership (Tilford, 2010; Weiner, 2014). However, while larger districts may have more resources and staff to devote to assisting principals in the management of their instructional leadership efforts, often principals of small schools are tasked to manage most of these responsibilities and challenges alone (Klocko & Justis, 2019; Wieczorek & Manard, 2018; Wood et al., 2013). It is well researched that instructional leadership has a large and notable impact on student achievement, preceded only by quality instruction within the classroom (Baptiste, 2019; Lyons, 2019; Hansen & Larusdottir, 2015; Hutton, 2019; Pannell et al., 2015; Tan, 2016; Waters & Cameron, 2007). Regardless of the additional demands faced, whether in a rural or urban district, there is an expectation inherent in the role of a school administrators to positively impact student achievement and climate through mindful leadership efforts, often seen through their work with teachers and instructional practices (Buyukgoze, 2016; Cetin & Kinik, 2016; Pannell et al., 2015; Waters & Cameron, 2007).

One of the many facets principals are responsible for is the supervision of classroom teachers and instruction (Bagwell, 2019; Balyer & Ozcan, 2020; Buyukgoze, 2016; Fuentes & Jimerson, 2020; Hauseman et al., 2017). This supervisory role is intended to be collaborative and growth-based to maximize the instructional methods utilized by teachers and impact a positive staff culture (Baptiste, 2019; Balyer & Ozcan, 2020; Buyukgoze, 2016; Cetin & Kinik, 2016; Gurley et al., 2016; Kars & Inandi, 2018). With this effort, teachers desire principals to invest in their development, recognize their efforts, communicate clear goals and support their

environmental needs (Cetin & Kinik, 2016; Hughes et al., 2015; Maponya, 2020; Nooruddin & Bhamani, 2019; Rouleau, 2021; Waters & Cameron, 2007). Supportive leadership can be especially important to retain teachers in schools that experience an increased number of challenges such as poverty, limited resources, and geographical isolation (Baptiste, 2019; Hughes et al., 2015; Hutton, 2019; Shaw & Newton, 2014; Wood et al., 2013).

Some of the most influential characteristics of principal leadership include communication, establishing good relationships, and being approachable (Baptiste, 2019; Kars & Inandi, 2018; Rouleau, 2021; Waters & Cameron, 2007). Principals that invest in their teachers can produce high levels of trust within the organization, thus moving it forward positively (Balyer, 2017; Buyukgoze, 2016; Kars & Inandi, 2018; Webster & Litchka, 2020). School performance can be successful when teachers perceive the leader as trustworthy and invested in their success (Balyer, 2017; Webster & Litchka, 2020). Teacher perceptions of school leaders and leadership practices ultimately influence teacher success in the classroom (Balyer, 2017; Baptiste, 2019; Hughes et al., 2015; Munir & Khalil, 2016; Zahed-Babelan et al., 2019). Teachers desire leaders to provide clear communication, needed resources, and support of classroom instruction (Bagwell, 2019; Cetin & Kinik, 2016; Hughes et al., 2015; Maponya, 2020; Munir & Khalil, 2016; Waters et al., 2004; Zahed-Babelan et al., 2019). School principals impact teacher perceptions positively through the ability to be knowledgeable in curriculum, instruction, and assessment, thus supporting the instructional environment (Balyer, 2017; Balyer & Ozcan, 2020; Fuentes & Jimerson, 2020; Hughes et al., 2015; Jones & Watson, 2017). Leadership behaviors that focus on quality instruction benefit teacher effectiveness, in turn positively impacting school climate and the overall organizational health of the school (Buyukgoze, 2016; Cetin & Kinik, 2016; Hansen & Larusdottir, 2015; Maponya, 2020; Moore et

al., 2016; Ross & Cozzens, 2016; Parlar & Cansoy, 2017). Research indicates school leaders significantly impact school climate through leadership style and practices. As a result of this impact on climate, there is also a notable effect on student achievement (Allen et al., 2015; Buyukgoze, 2016; Maponya, 2020; Moore et al., 2016; Rouleau, 2021; Waters & Cameron, 2007). Principals provide important guidance and coaching for teachers as evaluators of instructional practice and need to ensure that they, as the instructional leaders, are properly prepared for doing this effectively (Balyer & Ozcan, 2020; Marzano, 2005; Waters et al., 2004).

With the significant impact on student achievement and school climate, the need for school leaders to be sufficiently prepared for the role as instructional leaders becomes highly evident (Balyer & Ozcan, 2020; Marzano, 2012; Waters et al., 2004). However, many principals come into the role without enough experience or skill development to handle the increasing pressures or to effectively impact the organization's improvement efforts (Cohen & Schechter, 2019; Hildreth et al., 2018; Lyons, 2019; Mestry, 2017; Pannell & Sergi-McBayer, 2020; Sepurur & Mohlakwana, 2020). While administrators go through university preparation programs, many come into the role relying on common sense and previous experiences to guide them through the various challenges (Lyons, 2019; Mestry, 2017; Pannell & Sergi-McBayer, 2020). Research has examined how established mentoring and ongoing professional development programs for administrators have positively impacted growth and the ability to implement best practices (Bravender & Staub, 2018; Bouffard, 2019; Carpenter & Krutka, 2018; Cieminski, 2018; DeJong & Grundmeyer, 2018; Hildreth et al., 2018; Nava et al., 2020; Pannell & Sergi-McBayer, 2020; Szczesiul, 2014).

It has been found when administrators are involved in professional networks that engage in rich conversation around instructional leadership topics, they are able to build collegiate

relationships and contribute to an overall professional culture (Bravender & Staub, 2018; Carpenter & Krutka, 2018; Nava et al., 2020; Szczesiul, 2014). These networking opportunities can come from both in-person collaborative opportunities, and ones cultivated online, offering the chance to connect with those not in the same immediate geographical area (Carpenter & Krutka, 2018; Hildreth et al., 2018; Sanford et al., 2019; Stewart & Matthews, 2015; Szczesiul, 2014). Mentorship and networking programs can provide important growth and enhance the learning process of an instructional leader (Carpenter & Krutka, 2018; DeJong & Grundmeyer, 2018; Drummond & Halsey, 2014; Hildreth et al., 2018; Liang & Augustine-Shaw, 2016; Nava et al., 2020; Sanford et al., 2019). Districts can create more cohesive efforts when facilitating these teams in the effort to effect change by structuring systems of meaningful evaluations and mentoring, along with helping working conditions to be productive to the needs of administrators (Bouffard, 2019; Levin et al., 2020; Szczesiul, 2014; Thessin & Seashore Louis, 2020). The role of the school district can be very instrumental in delivering the needed training and support for administrators to grow in their skills (Bouffard, 2019; Levin et al., 2020; Szczesiul, 2014; Thessin & Seashore Louis, 2020). District leaders can also provide the continual support needed to help retain quality administrators in hard-to-fill positions, especially in smaller districts (Cieminski, 2018; Szczesiul, 2014). Investment in the continued development of principals, especially in the first years of his or her career, can be a critical component related to success and thus the success of the school organizations (Nava et al., 2020; Sepurur & Mohlakwana, 2020). Additionally, principals that participate in ongoing support and professional growth opportunities are perceived by teachers as stronger instructional leaders (Cowin & Newcomer, 2019; Naidoo, 2019).

Theoretical Framework

Many researchers have found that instructional leaders have a large impact on student achievement through the leadership practices they choose to implement (Baptiste, 2019; Lyons, 2019; Hansen & Larusdottir, 2015; Hutton, 2019; Pannell et al., 2015; Tan, 2016; Waters & Cameron, 2007). To understand the depth and breadth of the role of an instructional leader, the impact of that role, and the need to foster the development of its identified leadership practices, the theoretical framework used in this study is the Balanced Leadership Framework (2007) developed by Mid-continent Research for Education and Learning, or McREL. This framework was developed utilizing large amounts of research on leadership practices that impact student achievement (Cetin et al., 2016; Waters & Cameron, 2007; Waters et al., 2004).

The definition of instructional leadership has been vague in previous research, not providing leaders with practical definitions and practices of effective leaders. McREL examined 5,000 studies regarding principal leadership and how it has had an impact on student achievement, narrowing the study even further to a selected 69 studies that met standards of rigor, reliability, and design (Cetin et al., 2016; Waters & Cameron, 2007; Waters et al., 2004). From the analysis of these studies, 21 leadership responsibilities were highlighted that have a significant impact on student learning and school improvement (Waters & Cameron, 2007; Waters et al., 2004). With this research, the role of the instructional leader is more well-defined and provides a framework from which to implement research-based practices towards more effective leadership (Waters & Cameron, 2007; Waters et al., 2004). The articulated leadership practices that have been proven to impact student achievement, along with staff and community stakeholders, must be developed and nurtured in principals in order that they may be highly

effective in their role, regardless of school context (Jacob et al., 2015; Waters & Cameron, 2007).

Statement of the Problem

Rural schools have been found to have unique challenges due to smaller enrollment and limited resources, which can create more barriers and leadership challenges for principals in efforts towards success (Hohner & Riveros, 2017; Hutton, 2019; Parson & Hunter, 2019; Stewart & Matthews, 2015). The difference between the stress for an urban principal versus that of a rural principal is noteworthy (Acton, 2018; Klocko & Justis, 2019). While all principals deal with the pressure of managing finances, staffing, and curriculum, rural principals often face additional challenges due to unique circumstances not seen in most urban settings (Davies & Halsey, 2019; Hohner & Riveros, 2017; Klocko & Justis, 2019; Parson & Hunter, 2019; Wieczorek & Manard, 2018). Additional tasks and pressures can impede a principal's capacity to carry out necessary duties as an educational leader in a building when dealing with the limits of being in a small rural district (Davies & Halsey, 2019; Parson & Hunter, 2019; Wallin et al., 2019). While rural principals may have the same amount of responsibilities as non-rural principals, they often take on a sole leadership role without the ability to share leadership duties with additional administrators (Hohner & Riveros, 2017; Parson & Hunter, 2019). Thus, rural principals can feel isolated and even hindered in attempted efforts to receive support for leadership practices (Hoyner & Riveros, 2017; Wood et al., 2013). Rural principals can also experience much more pressure than an urban principal as they are an important member of their rural community, an aspect of leadership that is not as prevalent for the urban district principal (Davies & Halsey, 2019; Smit, 2017; Wieczorek & Manard, 2018). Rural principals are held to the same standards of expectation to meet federal and state requirements for academic

improvement as urban districts but must do so with more limited means (Wallin et al., 2019; Wood et al., 2013). The unique challenges for the rural principal, along with lower salaries, can often lead to a lower retention rate of quality administrators in these positions, which can have an overall impeding impact on a district in sustaining effective change efforts (Pendola & Fuller, 2018; Wood et al., 2013). No matter what the context and challenges, principals can still rise above those to create highly successful schools (Hutton, 2019; Preston & Barnes, 2017). All these challenges require leadership that can adapt to the context and persevere for success (Hutton, 2019; Preston & Barnes, 2017). This highlights the importance of determining avenues by which rural principals can be supported and empowered in their role as a leader. Doing this can help to instill perseverance towards success given the challenges they face as opposed to those of urban principals (Smit, 2017; Wallin et al., 2019; Wieczorek & Manard, 2018).

Research about systems of ongoing professional support and mentoring has shown principals benefit when engaged in them consistently (Bravender & Staub, 2018; Liang & Augustine-Shaw, 2016; Lyons, 2019; Mahfouz, 2018; Mestry, 2017). Mentorship programs that engage administrators regularly can provide ongoing feedback and rich conversation (Bravender & Staub, 2018; Carpenter & Krutka, 2018; Cowin & Newcomer, 2019; Nava et al., 2020; Szczesiul, 2014). In a mentoring or peer coaching program, personalized help can be provided, and relevant issues can be discussed within a professional network of administrators. This contributes to building a strong foundation of support for principals in their vast leadership role (Bravender & Staub, 2018; Bouffard, 2019; Carpenter & Krutka, 2018; Cieminski, 2018; Hildreth et al., 2018; Liang & Augustine-Shaw, 2016; Komives et al., 2005; Nava et al., 2020; Pannell & Sergi-McBayer, 2020; Szczesiul, 2014).

While successful rural principals have learned to balance challenges and multiple roles, the ability to receive ongoing support to learn this balance is not always readily available (Hatton et al., 2017; Hutton, 2019; Preston & Barnes, 2017; Stewart & Matthews, 2015). Rural school principals do not always have ready access to ongoing professional support and mentoring, though it is vitally important in the effort to support leadership challenges and diversity of the role as compared to the urban principal (Carpenter & Krutka, 2018; Hildreth et al., 2018; Mestry, 2017; Preston & Barnes, 2017; Stewart & Matthews, 2015). Another downfall of the diversity in the role of a principal within the rural context is that it can often lead to a sense of negative self-efficacy, contributing to leaders leaving the profession (Cieminski, 2018; Hansen, 2018; Hildreth et al., 2018; Hohner & Riveros, 2017; Levin et al., 2020; Pendola & Fuller, 2018).

Although research has been conducted to demonstrate that instructional leadership influences student achievement and school climate in significant ways (Allen et al., 2015; Buyukgoze, 2016; Hansen & Larusdottir, 2015; Hutton, 2019; Hughes et al., 2015; Lyons, 2019; Moore et al., 2016; Parlar & Cansoy, 2017; Ross & Cozzens, 2016), and that professional support for leaders is vitally important (Bravender & Staub, 2018; Carpenter & Krutka, 2018; Cieminski, 2018; Hansen & Larusdottir, 2015; Hildreth, 2018; Howley et al., 2019; Komives et al., 2005; Liang & Augustine-Shaw, 2016; Lyons, 2019; Mestry, 2017), the research is limited on how smaller, rural districts specifically support principals with growth opportunities to improve instructional leadership and ensure access to these supports regardless of limited resources compared to what is accessible by their urban counterparts. This study will help alleviate the gap in research by examining the current areas that need support for small, rural school principals, the potential barriers that exist for participation in programs or other support opportunities due to rurality, and the reflections of administrators in regard to the impact of

support programs on the leadership skills they put into practice within their current administrative setting.

Background

According to the Idaho State Department of Education (n.d.), the state of Idaho currently has 113 rural districts out of 149 total school districts, as defined by Idaho Code 33-319 which states that a district is considered rural when meeting the following criteria:

- (a) “There are fewer than twenty (20) enrolled students per square mile within the area encompassed by the school district's boundaries; or (b) The county in which a plurality of the school district's market value for assessment purposes is located contains less than twenty-five thousand (25,000) residents, based on the most recent decennial United States census” (Idaho State Department of Education, 2019, Idaho Code §33-319).

With this large number of rural districts, there are many principals who face the challenges inherent in those positions daily, as researched on a broader level across various states (Chand & Mohan, 2019; Hohner & Riveros, 2017; Parson & Hunter, 2019; Wieczorek & Manard, 2018). Among the challenges that they face are high poverty rates, lack of resources, lack of adequate funding, lower salaries compared to urban districts, and staffing challenges (Chand & Mohan, 2019; Parson & Hunter, 2019; Pendola & Fuller, 2018; Sanchez et al., 2017; Smit, 2017; Wood et al., 2013). Given the shortage of teachers applying to rural schools, rural districts may look to applicants that have gone through an alternate route program rather than a traditional teacher preparation program (Bialka & Andrus, 2017; Brenner, 2015; Wilhelm et al., 2020). These teachers may require more support in the long run, thus requiring potentially more of a time investment from the administrator beyond what an urban principal may experience (Bialka & Andrus, 2017; Brenner, 2015; Wilhelm et al., 2020). These challenges present the need for rural principals to receive ongoing training past graduate programs in which they initially received their advanced degree and certification to be a comprehensive instructional

leader (Bravender & Staub, 2018; Cieminski, 2018; Drummond & Halsey, 2014; Liang & Augustine-Shaw, 2016; Lyons, 2019).

The role of the instructional leader is significant, as evidenced by its impact on student achievement and school climate (Allen et al., 2016; Buyukgoze, 2016; Hansen & Larusdottir, 2015; Hutton, 2019; Lyons, 2019; Ross & Cozzens, 2016; Tan 2016; Waters & Cameron, 2007). The demands and pressures of the role of an instructional leader can be daunting, with evidence showing that university programs were not sufficient preparation for all those leaders face with the plethora of challenges, therefore leading to a lack of retention of quality leaders (Cieminski, 2018; Hohner & Riveros, 2017; Lyons, 2019; Pendola & Fuller, 2018). Often, school leaders develop skills within the job, addressing the variety of challenges related to the school context in which they function (Lyons, 2019; Tan 2016). Mentoring support, regardless of school context, provides a benefit of the further development of a principal's leadership skills (DeJong & Grundmeyer, 2018; Hvidston & McKim, 2019; Lyons, 2019). Many leaders, both rural and urban, put a greater focus upon the organizational management of their respective schools, due in some part to a lack of in-depth training on best practices for instructional leadership (Fuentes & Jimerson, 2020; Lyons, 2019). Overall, ongoing support for school leadership and skill development on the job is vital to face the increasing challenges present in education today (DeJong & Grundmeyer, 2018; Hvidston & McKim, 2019; Lyons, 2019).

While all principals face challenges in some form or another, rural principals have additional challenges due to more limited resources, whether that is in the areas of funding or staffing (Hohner & Riveros, 2017; Hutton, 2019; Parson & Hunter, 2019; Stewart & Matthews, 2015). With more limited resources, it can be oftentimes more challenging for the rural principal to manage a budget that will effectively meet the needs of their school effectively (Hatton et al.,

2017; Parson & Hunter, 2019; Wieczorek & Manard, 2018). Principals in rural districts deal with significant differences through working in a more isolated leadership model, often filling multiple roles within the school setting (Hoyer et al., 2017; Parson & Hunter, 2019). With the challenges and constraints that rural schools often face, it has been found that rural principals have the shortest time of retention compared to principals in other contexts (Hansen, 2018; Hohner & Riveros, 2017; Pendola & Fuller, 2018). It is important, therefore, to examine how specific support can be provided to rural principals to meet the unique needs encountered in that context (Hansen, 2018; Pendola & Fuller, 2018). District leaders need to take into consideration a variety of factors that could affect the long-term vesting of a principal in their rural district. Addressing these factors could aid in retaining these principals for a longer duration, thus adding to the stability and achievement of a school (Hansen, 2018; Pendola & Fuller, 2018).

Research Questions

Ultimately, this study aims to examine the impact of continual professional support and mentoring of rural school administrators in instructional leadership and how it affects their ability to create strong, healthy organizations that support teachers and student learning. The following research questions will be addressed:

1. What are the lived experiences that principals in small, rural schools encounter that they feel require support and training as a leader?
2. What support do principals in small, rural schools currently access, and what is the reflection on how this support has impacted his or her leadership practices?
3. What are the barriers principals in small, rural districts encounter that impede the ability to participate in leadership support programs or opportunities to address

specific leadership challenges, and how has this impacted his or her leadership practices?

Description of Terms

It is important to communicate clearly for maximum understanding. The following terms have been defined to assist in providing a deeper perspective into the study.

Alternative Authorization Certification- temporary authorization given to individuals who complete an alternate education program to become a certified teacher to fill a staffing need within districts who lack teacher applicants (Regional Educational Laboratory Northwest, 2016).

ESSA (Every Student Succeeds Act) – a revision of the *No Child Left Behind Act* that gives states the responsibility to articulate student outcomes, assessment accountability, and plans to close achievement gaps in K-12 education (Espinoza, 2017).

Instructional Leader- the term used to refer to the role in leadership devoted to school curriculum, assessment, and best practices (Fuentes & Jimerson, 2020; Lyons, 2019; Pannell & Sergi-McBrayer, 2020; Waters & Cameron, 2007).

Mentoring- support programs in place to provide educators with ongoing training and networks in leadership best practices (Bravender & Staub, 2018; Carpenter & Krutka, 2018; Cieminski, 2018).

Organizational Manager- the role of the principal dealing with discipline, parental concerns, and building and facility management (Martin, 2018; Hoyer et al., 2017; Waters et al., 2004)

Professional Development- the process by which educators receive on-going training in best practices (Bravender & Staub, 2018; Bouffard, 2019; Carpenter & Krutka, 2018; Cieminski, 2018; DeJong & Grundmeyer, 2018; Hildreth et al., 2018; Nava et al., 2020; Pannell & Sergi-McBayer, 2020; Szczesiul, 2014).

Professional Learning Network- a network of educators formed to collaborate around best practices and provide practitioner support (Carpenter & Krutka, 2018).

Relational Trust- a type of trust that is built when both parties depend on one another and establish means to achieve outcomes (Bryk & Schneider, 2003).

Rural District- small districts where there are fewer students enrolled within a district per square mile and is within a small community as defined by a state's census data (Idaho State Department of Education, 2019).

School Climate- The overall feeling within the school that is affected by staff and student morale and culture (Moore et al., 2016; Ross & Cozzens, 2016; Allen et al., 2015).

Servant Leadership- A leadership style where the leader focuses first on the needs of the people within the organization and how best to serve them (Shaw & Newton, 2014; Tait, 2020).

Stakeholders- those invested in the school ranging from teachers, parents, and community members (Hauseman et al., 2017; Snyder, 2018)

Student Achievement- The academic success of the student body of any given school (Tan, 2016; Ross & Cozzens, 2016; Allen et al., 2015; Lyons, 2019).

Suburban District- an area located outside a urban, or city, area with populations ranging from less than 100,000-more than 250,000 (The National Center for Education Statistics, 2006).

Significance of the Study

The role of the principal is a vast one that requires a well-developed skill set in today's educational landscape (Bravender & Staub, 2018; Bouffard, 2019; Pannell et al., 2015; Pannell & Sergi-McBrayer, 2020; Schrik & Wasonga, 2019; Waters & Cameron, 2007). Instructional leadership has a meaningful impact on student achievement and influences the overall climate and culture (Baptiste, 2019; Lyons, 2019; Hansen & Larusdottir, 2015; Hutton, 2019; Pannell et al., 2015; Tan, 2016; Waters & Cameron, 2007). For instructional leaders to grow, mentoring and networking programs can provide important feedback and enhance the learning process regarding best practices (Carpenter & Krutka, 2018; Drummond & Halsey, 2014; Hildreth et al., 2018; Liang & Augustine-Shaw, 2016; Nava et al., 2020).

The purpose of this study is to examine what types of ongoing professional growth support and mentoring opportunities are available to small, rural school principals to address their specific identified challenges, the potential barriers that exist for participation in these programs, and the perception of administrators regarding the impact on their leadership practices. Rural schools have been found to have specific challenges due to smaller enrollment and limited resources, which can create more barriers and leadership challenges for principals (Hohner & Riveros, 2017; Hutton, 2019; Parson & Hunter, 2019; Stewart & Matthews, 2015). Yet, rural principals are held to the same standards of expectation to meet federal and state requirements as urban districts (Wallin et al., 2019; Wood et al., 2013). This study provides information to school, district, and state-level leaders regarding the importance and impact of ongoing

professional support for rural school administrators to positively impact the retention of quality school leaders in sometimes hard-to-fill positions (Baptiste, 2019; Hughes et al., 2015; Hutton, 2019; Shaw & Newton, 2014; Wood et al., 2013). Additionally, it highlights the need to provide ongoing training in the area of instructional leadership to support rural school administrators in this highly important aspect of educational leadership (Bravender & Staub, 2018; Bouffard, 2019; Carpenter & Krutka, 2018; Cieminski, 2018; Hildreth et al., 2018; Nava et al., 2020; Pannell & Sergi-McBayer, 2020; Szczesiul, 2014). Possible benefits of this study may be to work to remove the barriers for rural administrators to participate in state programs to address the lack of retention and potential burnout of rural school administrators. Additionally, it can provide more insight into the needs of rural principals and allow programs to be developed to target the leadership support to address these needs. This study will contribute to an understanding of the importance of mentoring and professional support for school administrators and highlight the need to ensure equal access to these opportunities for small, rural districts given the often-unique set of challenges they face.

Overview of Research Methods

The goal of this study was to highlight the identified leadership challenges and needs of principals in small rural districts, how they access training and support for these challenges and needs, and what barriers may exist to access the training and support that best meets these needs. The researcher used a qualitative design with a narrative inquiry approach. This approach let the researcher study the daily experiences of a group to gain an understanding of a larger issue (Creswell & Guetterman, 2019; Marshall & Rossman, 2016). For this study, narrative inquiry was most appropriate because it gave the researcher the opportunity to examine the lived experiences of multiple rural school principals to obtain an understanding of the access and

utilization of training and support to grow their leadership practices. This study included (a) reflective journaling by the selected participants regarding their daily experiences as an instructional leader (b) semi-structured interviews with the selected principals, and (c) field observations of the principals' day-to-day activities, providing a contextual understanding of the reflections expressed in the journals as well as the interviews.

The researcher utilized purposeful, homogeneous sampling to select principals that qualified for the study. First, the researcher contacted each principal, sending the research proposal and informed consent. Upon receiving consent, the researcher sent each principal a digital copy of the reflective journal prompts to complete each month of the study. Next, individual semi-structured interviews took place with these principals at various checkpoints within the study to gain more insight into their articulated challenges and needs. This process of interviewing provided a more in-depth understanding to the researcher on the lived challenges and daily interactions of the individuals being studied (Marshall & Rossman, 2016). Finally, field observations were conducted by the researcher with each principal involved in the study regarding their day-to-day experiences within their context. Observations allow the researcher to study information as it occurs in the setting, giving deeper context to the lived experiences within the narrative inquiry (Creswell & Guetterman, 2019). Principal interviews were conducted virtually, recorded, and transcribed. Those transcriptions were then member-checked and analyzed for themes. Field notes were coded and analyzed for trends and themes (Creswell & Guetterman, 2016; Marshall & Rossman, 2016; Saldana, 2016).

Chapter II

Review of Literature

Introduction

Essential instructional leadership functions have been identified as the ability to clearly communicate the goals and vision of the school organization, act as a supervisor and evaluator of classroom instruction, evaluate curriculum and its usage, develop high academic standards, monitor student progress, invest in the growth of teacher practice through sound professional development, and develop means by which to recognize the accomplishments of both students and teachers (Buyukgoze, 2016; Clark, 2017; Rouleau, 2021; Waters & Cameron, 2007). Additionally, along with these functions of leadership, there are a variety of processes that enact these functions. Leaders must be proficient with clear communication, the ability to make decisions, and the ability to manage conflict at various levels and with various stakeholders in the organization (Buyukgoze, 2016; Clark, 2017; Rouleau, 2021; Waters & Cameron, 2007). School leadership is a significant factor in student achievement, along with classroom instruction (Hansen & Larusdottir, 2015; Lyons, 2019; Mallory et al., 2017; Marshall & Fisher, 2018; Pannell et al., 2015; Rogers et al., 2016; Tan 2016; Rouleau, 2021; Waters & Cameron, 2007). Principals play an important part in supporting teachers' instructional practices, developing school culture, and promoting overall school achievement (Gurley et al., 2016; Weber et al., 2014; Rouleau, 2021; Waters & Cameron, 2007). With this wide range of skills and responsibilities attributed to the role of an instructional leader, the building of the leadership capacity cannot solely rest within university preparation programs and requires on-going support (Lyons, 2019; Mestry, 2017).

In today's educational landscape, the school administrator is required to be a proficient and effective instructional leader (Pannell et al., 2015; Rouleau, 2021; Waters & Cameron, 2007). However, sometimes only a small amount of overall time is spent focused on instruction due to increased demands in all areas (Hoyer et al., 2017; Jenkins, 2009; Onganga & Stallings, 2020). One of the reasons cited for this is a lack of in-depth training and time (Jenkins, 2009; Levin et al., 2020). Additionally, many principals work within districts that have not sufficiently defined the role of the instructional leader or provided support in developing as such (Fink & Silverman, 2014; Levin et al., 2020). With the significant impact on overall student achievement, it has become more and more apparent that there must be ways in which to evaluate the effectiveness of principals in their roles as accountability increases (Pannell et al., 2015; Rouleau, 2021; Waters & Cameron, 2007). Additionally, this means that there must be sound preparation for these principals as they enter into their administrative roles that carry such pressures and accountability (Komives et al., 2005; Pannell et al., 2015).

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework utilized for this study is McREL's Balanced Leadership Framework. Beginning in 1998, McREL began to pull together the vast body of research regarding practices that impact school effectiveness (Rouleau, 2021; Waters & Cameron, 2007; Waters et al., 2004). While the first two meta-analyses provided guidance on curricular and instructional practices that impact student achievement, the third meta-analysis focused on instructional leadership qualities specifically (Rouleau, 2021; Waters & Cameron, 2007; Waters et al., 2004). From the analysis of these studies, 21 leadership responsibilities, which include 66 leadership practices to carry out these responsibilities, were highlighted that have a significant impact on student learning and school improvement.

Table 1

McREL's 21 Leadership Responsibilities that Impact Student Achievement

Table 1. The 21 Leadership Responsibilities

Areas of Responsibility (Note: Some responsibility names have been updated; original names in parentheses)	Avg. r	Description of the Areas of Responsibility: The extent to which the principal . . .
Acknowledgement (Affirmation)	.19	Recognizes and celebrates school accomplishments and acknowledges failures
Adaptability (Flexibility)	.28	Adapts his or her leadership behavior to the needs of the current situation and is comfortable with dissent
Advocacy (Outreach)	.27	Is an advocate and spokesperson for the school to all stakeholders
Celebrates (Contingent Rewards)	.24	Recognizes and honors individual accomplishments
Change agent	.25	Is willing to and actively challenges the status quo
Communication	.23	Establishes strong lines of communication with teachers and among students
Community (Culture)	.25	Fosters shared beliefs and a sense of community and cooperation
Focus	.24	Establishes clear goals and keeps those goals in the forefront of the school's attention
Ideals/Beliefs	.22	Communicates and operates from strong ideals and beliefs about schooling
Input	.25	Involves teachers in the design and implementation of important decisions
Inspire (Optimize)	.20	Inspires and leads new and challenging innovations
Intellectual Stimulation	.24	Ensures that the faculty and staff are aware of the most current theories and practices and makes the discussion of these a regular aspect of the school culture
Involvement in Teaching & Learning (Curriculum, Instruction & Assessment)	.20	Is directly involved in the design and implementation of curriculum, instruction, and assessment practices
Knowledge of Teaching & Learning (Curriculum, Instruction & Assessment)	.25	Is knowledgeable about current pedagogies, curriculum, instruction, and assessment practices
Monitor/Evaluate	.27	Monitors the effectiveness of school teaching and learning practices and their impact on student learning
Protects (Discipline)	.27	Protects teachers from issues and influences that would detract from their teaching time or focus
Relationships	.18	Demonstrates awareness of the personal aspects of teachers and staff
Resources	.25	Provides teachers with materials and professional development necessary for the successful execution of their jobs
Situational Awareness	.33	Is aware of the details and the undercurrents in the running of the school and uses this information to address current and potential problems
Structures & Routines (Order)	.25	Establishes a set of standard operating procedures and routines
Visibility	.20	Has quality contacts and interactions with teachers and students

The 21 leadership responsibilities are the ways in which principals implement the correct focus, build a purposeful community, and manage change efforts (Cetin, 2017; James-Ward & Abuyen, 2017; Rouleau, 2021; Waters & Cameron, 2007). Each identified area of responsibility has an average effect upon student achievement, as measured through the McREL study in the meta-analysis (Cetin, 2017; Rouleau, 2021; Waters & Cameron, 2007). The framework involves three main components in which the 21 leadership responsibilities fall, all with the central focus of student learning.

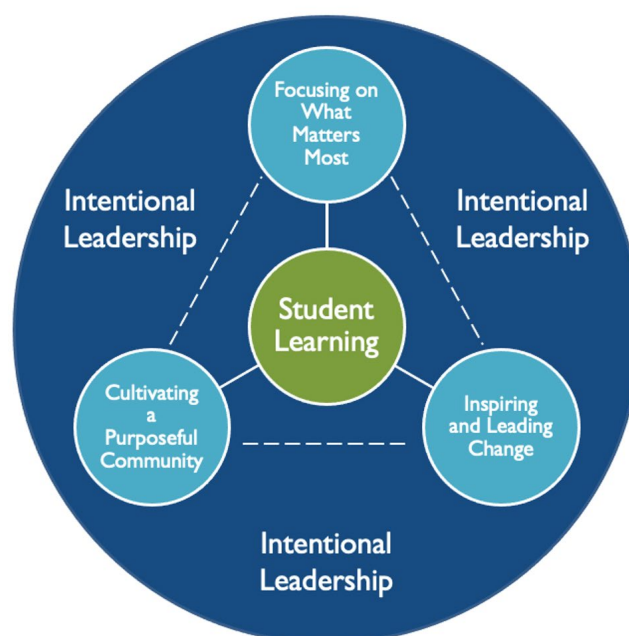


Figure 1 The Revised Balanced Leadership Framework

The first main component in the framework deals with the concept of a Purposeful Community (Cetin, 2017; Rouleau, 2021; Waters & Cameron, 2007). Purposeful Community is defined as, “one with the collective efficacy and capability to use all available assets to accomplish purposes and produce outcomes that matter to all community members through agreed-upon processes” (Waters & Cameron, 2007, p. 46). Within this Purposeful Community,

leaders work intentionally with teachers and stakeholders to create optimum learning environments through the collaborative and purposeful work within a shared vision (Rouleau, 2021; Waters & Cameron, 2007; Waters et al., 2004). An important aspect is the development of culture within the purposeful community (Cetin et al., 2016; Rouleau, 2021; Waters & Cameron, 2007). Within this culture, it is important to teachers to be able to share their ideas in a safe environment (Cetin et al., 2016; Rouleau, 2021; Waters & Cameron, 2007). Additionally, communicating effectively is important to develop student success within the purposeful community (Cetin et al., 2016; Rouleau, 2021; Waters & Cameron, 2007). Visibility within the school and being accessible for teachers also plays an important role in developing and having an effective purposeful community (Cetin et al., 2016; Rouleau, 2021; Waters & Cameron, 2007). Overall, it is important for principals to develop this purposeful community to include teacher voice, communicate effectively, and be visible within the school (Cetin et al., 2016; Rouleau, 2021; Waters & Cameron, 2007). Developing this type of community is key to forming an organization that can be successful and intentional with its impact on student achievement (Cetin et al., 2016; Cetin, 2017; Rouleau, 2021; Waters & Cameron, 2007).

Second, the framework articulates the importance of instructional leaders Implementing the Correct Focus (Rouleau, 2021; Waters & Cameron, 2007). Within the area of focus in the framework, many leadership aspects impact the area of student achievement using data and data-driven decision making (James-Ward & Abuyen, 2015; Rouleau, 2021; Waters & Cameron, 2007). For leaders to be effective, they must intentionally engage in the data collection and communication of results (James-Ward & Abuyen, 2015; Rouleau, 2021; Waters & Cameron, 2007). Included in the task of utilizing data is providing teachers with the time and resources in which to work with the data intentionally and effectively (James-Ward & Abuyen,

2015; Rouleau, 2021; Waters & Cameron, 2007). Leaders who are effective in these practices will utilize both hard and soft data to make informed decisions regarding improvement efforts (James-Ward & Abuyen, 2015). It is also important for leaders to utilize data, and data-drive decision making, to inspire staff towards a shared vision and goals (James-Ward & Abuyen, 2015; Rouleau, 2021; Waters & Cameron, 2007). By utilizing these practices, schools can continue to grow in student achievement (James-Ward & Abuyen, 2015; Rouleau, 2021). Within the study of the leadership responsibilities, there were schools where a negative connection amongst student achievement and school leadership was found (Waters & Cameron, 2007). Upon further review, this was determined to have happened due to the instructional leader having the wrong focus on how to affect change within the organization (Waters & Cameron, 2007). Consequently, McREL articulates within the framework the leadership responsibilities that require the right focus and further research by the instructional leader for utilizing best practices with staff in these areas (Rouleau, 2021; Waters & Cameron, 2007).

Finally, the framework articulates the importance of managing and leading change efforts when in the position of leadership (Rouleau, 2021; Waters & Cameron, 2007). With instructional leadership, it is important to not only know what changes need to take place within a school, but the impact and magnitude of the change process on all the stakeholders (Rouleau, 2021; Waters & Cameron, 2007). Understanding the magnitude of change for the different individuals involved can help the leader to leverage the most impact for the organization if managed correctly (Rouleau, 2021; Waters & Cameron, 2007).

The Role of the Principal as Instructional Leader

The role of a school principal is a demanding one and requires those in the position to not only be prepared, but to continue to grow and learn in leadership (Mitchell et al., 2017; Komives

et al., 2005; Schrik & Wasonga, 2019). This role includes such important aspects as setting clear goals, maintaining high standards, and supervising curriculum and instruction towards improved practice and achievement (Balyer & Ozcan, 2020; Rouleau, 2021; Waters & Cameron, 2007; Waters et al., 2004). Principals face high amounts of pressure within the role during the current times and often go to great lengths to achieve articulated goals (Acton, 2018; Bagwell, 2019; Schrik & Wasonga, 2019). Schools contain many aspects that must be managed and implemented efficiently to have the greatest impact upon students (Acton, 2018; Buyukgoze, 2016; Hoyer et al., 2017; Pannell et al., 2015; Weber et al., 2014). There can often be a feeling that both leadership and management are important functions within a school system but finding the balance of how to address both lenses becomes complicated (Cetin & Kinik, 2016; Hoyer et al., 2017; Ongaga & Stallings, 2020; Pannell et al., 2015; Weber et al., 2014). Many principals come into the job without experience and skill development to handle the increasing demands and pressures to achieve that balance, even if they have been in a vice principal leadership role and immersed in the leadership environment at that level (Cohen & Schechter, 2019; Mestry, 2017; Komives et al., 2005; Lyons, 2019; Weber et al., 2014). It is important to select high quality instructional leaders for principal positions who possess the creativity and drive required of the role (Asif & Rodrigues, 2015; Mallory et al., 2017; Sepurur & Mohlakwana, 2020). Incorporating district leaders to recruit potential future principals from teachers within the district can have a positive impact on finding quality leaders (Mallory et al., 2017; Thessin & Seashore Louis, 2020). Having a selection of highly trained administrators to choose from when hiring a principal is ideal, and so the importance of the preparatory programs for these principals is magnified (Mallory et al., 2017; Weber et al., 2014). It is not only important for the right candidates to be selected to fill the role of an instructional leader, but the candidates must also be

well-equipped, ready for the task at hand (Sepurur & Mohlakwana, 2020; Weber et al., 2014; Wilson et al., 2020).

The challenges administrators face within the school system are issues not commonly addressed in university preparatory programs (Lyons, 2019; Mestry, 2017). With this, school leaders can feel that they are facing an uphill challenge within their school context, thus often leading to a lack of retention of school leadership (Cieminski, 2018; Hohner & Riveros, 2017; Lyons, 2019; Naidoo, 2019; Pendola & Fuller, 2018). Preparation programs for principals have shown to revolve around a selection of tasks that have not always prepared administrators for the rigors of the role (Marshall & Fisher, 2018; Pannell et al., 2015; Pannell & Sergi-McBrayer, 2020; Sepurur & Mohlakwana, 2020). As a result, administrators can end up in a position they have not anticipated or feel ready to handle (Cohen & Schechter, 2019; Marshall & Fisher, 2018; Sepurur & Mohlakwana, 2020).

School leaders develop needed leadership skills within their job setting, often within a variety of school contexts that present differing challenges (Cohen & Schechter, 2019; Lyons, 2019; Naidoo, 2019; Tan 2016). Challenges can range from a lack of resources and low socioeconomic conditions to delegating time wisely and managing the staff of teachers (Acton, 2018; Bagwell, 2019; Buyukgoze, 2016; Naidoo, 2019). Principals in high-poverty schools face even greater challenges in which to offer a high-quality education and achieve gains (Acton, 2018; Naidoo, 2019). When teachers transition into this position, there can be areas where they experience obstacles they were not prepared to face (Cohen & Schechter, 2019; Mitchell et al., 2017). It is important to understand what identified needs principals face in order to address them and assist in the development of their role as effective instructional leaders that impact growth and development with teachers (Acton, 2018; Mitchell et al., 2017). The task of selecting

qualified leaders for principal positions includes ensuring that these candidates are capable of building capacity in staff and setting a motivating vision (Thessin & Seashore Louis, 2020; Zahed-Babelan et al., 2019).

In the role of the instructional leader, principals need to be more intentional in the development of teachers' learning and growth and in creating a purposeful learning community in which teachers can thrive (Cetin & Kinik, 2016; Gurley et al., 2016; Hansen & Larusdottir, 2015; Rouleau, 2021; Sanford et al., 2019; Tilford, 2010; Waters & Cameron, 2007). It is important that the leader builds a relationship with staff, rather than using top-down management, to create a collaborative, productive culture towards this purposeful community (Bryk & Schneider, 2003; Cranston, 2011; Hansen & Larusdottir, 2015; Rouleau, 2021; Sanford et al., 2019; Tilford, 2010; Waters & Cameron, 2007). A purposeful community is one in which outcomes matter to everyone, and assets are available to accomplish the purpose that was agreed upon by all stakeholders (Cetin & Kinik, 2016; Rouleau, 2021; Waters & Cameron, 2007; Waters et al., 2004). To address the needs of teachers, principals must be willing to stretch themselves and adapt to the changing times and modes of delivering meaningful training to staff (Sanford et al., 2019; Tilford, 2010). Teachers desire the leader to share ideas and offer chances for participation in professional development (Cetin & Kinik, 2016; Gurley et al., 2016; Tilford, 2010).

The role of supporting teachers and providing meaningful professional development can especially be a challenge with the increase of teachers on an alternative certificate (Bialka & Andrus, 2017; Brenner, 2015; Wilhelm et al., 2020). These teachers may need an extra layer of support in their first years of teaching, thus requiring an instructional leader competent to fulfill this need (Bialka & Andrus, 2017; Brenner, 2015; Wilhelm et al., 2020). The level of support, or

lack thereof, can impact the development of alternatively certified teachers and their professional identity (Bialka & Andrus, 2017; Wilhelm et al., 2020). The Idaho State Department of Education (n.d.) shows that for the 2020-2021 school year, 4.12% of teachers were given an Alternative Authorization. This is an increase from the 2015-16 school year when the percentage of teachers on Alternative Authorization was at 3.18%, with each subsequent year seeing an increase in percentage as well (Idaho State Department of Education, n.d.).

An important role of an instructional leader is to supervise and evaluate curriculum and instruction (Bagwell, 2019; Fuentes & Jimerson, 2020; Neumerski et al., 2018; Rouleau, 2021; Waters & Cameron, 2007). Being an instructional leader means guiding and leading staff through the important nuances of best practices in education and content (Fuentes & Jimerson, 2020; Marzano, 2005; Waters et al., 2004). However, at times this effort can be hindered by the constraints that principals can find themselves under due to the large number of other responsibilities (Hansen, 2018; Fuentes & Jimerson, 2020; Ongaga & Stallings, 2020). To effectively focus on instruction, there need to be regular conversations around goals, data, and the on-going process of analyzing the data (Bagwell, 2019; Fuentes & Jimerson, 2020; Rouleau, 2021; Waters & Cameron, 2007). When principals are not actively involved in observing teachers, it is difficult to engage in effective conversations surrounding best practices (Hansen, 2018; Hansen & Larusdottir, 2015). Collaboration is recognized by both teachers and principals as an important aspect of helping to move the organization forward and improve student achievement (Bagwell, 2019; Fuentes & Jimerson, 2020; Gurley et al., 2016; Rouleau, 2021; Waters & Cameron, 2007). Teachers need the time structured into their schedules so that it is possible to engage in these conversations and planning sessions (Bagwell, 2019; Marzano, 2015; Waters et al. 2004). Through these interactions with teachers, the observation and evaluation

cycle become a critical role of the instructional leader in which to provide valuable feedback (Balyer & Ozcan, 2020; Neumerski et al., 2018; Rouleau, 2021; Waters & Cameron, 2007). To give valuable and timely feedback as part of the supervision process, principals need to be strong in content area knowledge as well as be up to date on best practices in teaching (Balyer & Ozcan, 2020; Fuentes & Jimerson, 2020). Principals provide important guidance and coaching for teachers as evaluators of classroom instruction and practice and need to ensure that, as the instructional leader, they are properly prepared to do this effectively (Balyer & Ozcan, 2020; Fuentes & Jimerson, 2020). School leaders are tasked with conducting a more in-depth process of evaluation as part of effective leadership practices (Bouffard, 2019; Martin, 2018; Neumerski et al., 2018). These systems have afforded principals more frequent and specific observation times with teachers, involved evidence-based observations that could be used to help make data-driven staffing decisions, and provided specific feedback to the teacher for learning and growth (Balyer & Ozcan, 2020; Neumerski et al., 2018). Principals need to ensure they are giving timely and specific feedback that addresses what each teacher needs (Balyer & Ozcan, 2020; Neumerski et al., 2018). However, the challenges within these systems include a lack of time to accomplish the required elements of the observation cycle, a sense of decreased visibility within the school, and perceived negative impacts on teacher relationships (Bouffard, 2019; Martin, 2018; Neumerski et al., 2018). All of this underscores the challenges facing administrators to successfully lead their staff instructionally and have a meaningful impact (Hansen & Larusdottir, 2015; Neumerski et al., 2018).

The Impact of an Instructional Leader

The Impact on Teachers

Teachers' impressions of principals' leadership style and actions influence and impact their success in the classroom (Kars & Inandi, 2018; Munir & Khalil, 2016; Webster & Litchka, 2020). Principals who participate in established training programs are perceived positively in regards to leadership abilities by their teachers (Gurley et al., 2016; Naidoo, 2019; Webster & Litchka, 2020). Principals can significantly impact the retention of teachers simply by the leadership style they choose to enact within their organization (Baptiste, 2019; Jones & Watson, 2017). It is highly important for administrators to recruit and retain the best teachers, and this is especially the case in smaller schools (Jones & Watson, 2017; Shaw & Newton, 2014). Research has shown that smaller schools can be even more likely than larger schools to experience turnover (Jones & Watson, 2017; Shaw & Newton, 2014). The qualities of servant leadership found in school administrators have an impact on the retention of teachers in the profession (Jones & Watson, 2017; Shaw & Newton, 2014).

It is important for principals to balance the relational needs of their staff, along with building a well-functioning structure within their environment of clear, consistent communication and vision (Bryk & Schneider, 2003; Jones & Watson, 2017). Principals' efforts to improve academic performance involve working with teachers to communicate the goals of the organization clearly, motivate the staff to work collectively towards those goals, provide needed resources, and build trust and confidence (Balyer, 2017; Balyer & Ozcan, 2020; Gurley et al., 2016; Munir & Khalil, 2016). Trust is an important factor within the school setting between an educational leader and the staff (Balyer, 2017; Bryk & Schneider, 2003; Gocen, 2021; Munir & Khalil, 2016; Webster & Litchka, 2020). The element of trust in an organization

can mean the difference between effectiveness and ineffectiveness (Balyer, 2017; Kars & Inandi, 2018; Webster & Litchka, 2020). The development of trust becomes vitally important to an organization (Balyer, 2017; Kars & Inandi, 2018). The level of trust that is built contributes to the overall professionalism of teachers in general (Balyer, 2017; Webster & Litchka, 2020). One type of trust that is built throughout school partnerships is that of relational trust (Bryk & Schneider, 2003; Cranston, 2011). This type of trust exists within the context of parties who are in relationship with one another, such as teachers and principals (Bryk & Schneider, 2003; Cranston, 2011). The basic idea of relational trust is that each party depends on the other to reach articulated goals and vision (Bryk & Schneider, 2003; Cranston, 2011). A key factor to building trust is to establish safe environments in which teachers feel they can take risks and share ideas openly (Bryk & Schneider, 2003; Cranston, 2011). Principals that invest in the staff, and engage in the building of relational trust, can produce high levels of confidence within the organization, thus moving it forward (Balyer, 2017; Bryk & Schneider, 2003; Kars & Inandi, 2018). Teachers desire leadership behaviors such as shared vision, responsibility, and commitment. They want to be appreciated with recognition and want to perceive the principals' behaviors as satisfactory (Cetin & Kinik, 2016; Gocen, 2021; Hughes et al., 2015; Munir & Khalil, 2016). Teachers' perceptions are negative, and they are unsatisfied with their leader when there is an environment that lacks trust, does not recognize accomplishments, and does not consider the teachers' overall needs (Hughes et al., 2015; Munir & Khalil, 2016). Overall, principals need to be more intentional in the development of their teachers' learning and growth (Cetin & Kinik, 2016; Hansen & Larusdottir, 2015).

Teachers deal with many challenges throughout their day, both instructional and behavioral. This can be especially true in smaller schools where it is challenging to find teachers

to fill instructional roles (Hughes et al., 2015; Mitchell, 2018). Principals must work to support teachers in a variety of ways, from emotional to environmental (Hughes et al., 2015; Munir & Khalil, 2016). Teachers find environmental and emotional support the most important within their setting (Fuentes & Jimerson, 2020; Gocen, 2021; Hughes et al., 2015). Teachers who receive recognition for doing well and receive the resources needed to support their ideas tend to stay in their positions in challenging schools (Hansen & Larusdottir, 2015; Hughes et al., 2015). Teachers value more time to collaborate with peers, more professional development opportunities, and more positive feedback (Cetin & Kinik, 2016; Fuentes & Jimerson, 2020; Hughes et al., 2015). The engagement of teachers with the administrator through collaborative work can provide a sense of ownership of the shared mission and vision, as well as influence their overall perception of the administrator (Bryk & Schneider, 2003; Snyder, 2018). Overall, principals should establish collaborative relationships and be mindful of addressing teacher needs (Bryk & Schneider, 2003; Gocen, 2021; Hughes et al., 2015). Smaller, hard-to-staff schools should be equipped with more resources and administrators to help address these issues and provide the opportunities for principals to focus on the teachers and their needs (Hughes et al., 2015; Mitchell, 2018).

There is great importance in the leader building a relationship with staff rather than using top-down management to create a collaborative, productive culture (Cetin & Kinik, 2016; Hansen & Larusdottir, 2015; Hughes et al., 2015). It is important in a school environment that teachers feel valued and supported, especially by their administrator (Bryk & Schneider, 2003; Cetin & Kinik, 2016; Kars & Inandi, 2018). Unfortunately, teachers are leaving the profession within a short amount of time in their career, which demonstrates a need to examine what factors may be influencing this pattern (Mitchell, 2018; Shaw & Newton, 2014). School principals who

embody servant leadership qualities may have the ability to increase the retention and overall job satisfaction of teachers (Gocen, 2021; Jones & Watson, 2017; Shaw & Newton, 2014).

Additionally, shared vision and leadership with teachers build bonds of trust that play a role in teacher retention (Bryk & Schneider, 2003; Cetin & Kinik, 2016; Hughes et al., 2015). It is important, therefore, to examine how teachers regard the perceived servant leadership style of their principal, and if this does impact their retention within their school setting and in the teaching profession in general (Gocen, 2021; Jones & Watson, 2017; Shaw & Newton, 2014). The more that a teacher views his or her principal as a strong servant leader, the more likely they are to stay and work for them (Jones & Watson, 2017; Shaw & Newton, 2014). Leadership style can greatly impact teachers, thus impacting student achievement (Asif & Rodrigues, 2015; Baptiste, 2019; Hansen & Larusdottir, 2015; Kars & Inandi, 2018).

The Impact on Student Achievement and Climate

Instructional leaders affect both the achievement of students and the climate within the school setting (Allen et al., 2015; Lyons, 2019; Marzano, 2005; Rogers et al., 2016; Tan, 2016; Waters et al., 2004). Instructional leadership in a school is highly influential on student achievement, following quality classroom instruction (Lyons, 2019; Rogers et al., 2016; Tan, 2016; Waters et al., 2004). The Marzano Research Laboratory (2012) found that instructional leadership had a .25 correlation to student achievement, which is statistically significant (Marzano, 2005; Marzano Research Laboratory, 2012; Waters et al, 2004). This correlation increases as the instructional leader improves their own leadership practices in 21 identified areas, such as sound knowledge in curriculum and instruction, and developing healthy culture (Marzano, 2005; Marzano Research Laboratory, 2012; Waters et al, 2004). Principals often indirectly influence achievement through their implementation of professional learning

communities, use of professional development, and effort to improve teacher morale. These are the aspects that, in turn, affect school climate (Allen et al., 2015; Maponya, 2020; Marzano, 2005; Ross & Cozzens, 2016; Waters et al., 2004). Principals who are more consistent in defining the school mission and developing the learning climate have a more positive influence on the organization (Moore et al., 2016; Ross & Cozzens, 2016; Waters et al., 2004). The five most significant leadership behaviors observed by teachers in their principals are having a solid knowledge in the areas of curriculum and assessment, maintaining high levels of professionalism, honoring diversity, and prioritizing collaboration (Maponya, 2020; Ross & Cozzens, 2016). Teachers' perceptions of the school leader, and the competency with which they lead, also affect school climate and student achievement (Hansen & Larusdottir, 2015; Kars & Inandi, 2018; Moore et al., 2016). By examining the aspects of both teacher perception and student achievement, instructional leaders can possibly adjust leadership approaches to better affect student achievement (Hansen & Larusdottir, 2015; Kars & Inandi, 2018; Moore et al., 2016). A school setting that builds opportunities for teachers to collaborate around best practices and developing effective curriculum has been shown to positively impact student achievement (Marzano, 2005; Marzano, 2012; Waters et al., 2004). A principal's ability to support teachers in these areas creates a positive perception amongst the staff regarding his or her leadership capabilities, thus contributing to a more positive school climate (Maponya, 2020; Moore et al., 2016; Ross & Cozzens, 2016). Instructional leaders who focus on these aspects can help to expand the knowledge of school leadership to positively impact student achievement, teacher efficacy, and school climate (Allen et al., 2015; Hansen & Larusdottir, 2015; Kars & Inandi, 2018; Maponya, 2020; Marzano, 2012; Moore et al., 2016; Ross & Cozzens, 2016).

Public schools are under continual pressure to improve, especially with federal mandates put into place (Allen et al., 2015; Clark, 2017). The school leader and staff impact school achievement through developing a shared vision, establishing clear goals and committing to the continual improvement process (Allen et al., 2015; Ross & Cozzens, 2016; Schrik & Wasonga, 2019; Waters et al., 2003). Leaders who exhibit consistent positive outlooks, possess motivation for setting goals and vision, and show value in teacher innovation and creativity greatly impact school climate (Allen et al., 2015; Schrik & Wasonga, 2019). Instructional leadership has a positive connection to all student classes, especially with students in disadvantaged groups (Acton, 2018; Bagwell, 2019; Tan, 2016).

The task of closing the gap of learning within schools is a large one put upon principals (Bagwell, 2019; Marzano, 2005). This is not an easy task in any school context, but it is especially challenging in schools that are more diverse in their socio-economic and cultural populations (Acton, 2018; Bagwell, 2019; Tan, 2016). Principals recognize that to effectively focus on instruction, there needs to be regular conversations around goals, data, and the ongoing process of analyzing the data (Bagwell, 2019; Marzano, 2005; Marzano Research Laboratory, 2012). Additionally, it is important to implement regular class visits to monitor the instruction and have important conversations with teachers around best practices (Bagwell, 2019; Marzano Research Laboratory, 2012; Osborne-Lampkin et al., 2015). Classroom visits and observation can involve fellow teachers to engage in observing one another to glean valuable skills and strategies (Marzano Research Laboratory, 2012; Waters et al., 2004). Collaboration is an important aspect of helping to move the organization forward and improve student achievement overall (Bagwell, 2019; Osborne-Lampkin et al., 2015). When examining leadership behaviors,

studies found that principals evaluating learning and giving the teachers feedback had a positive effect on student achievement (Bagwell, 2019; Osborne-Lampkin et al., 2015).

The organizational health of schools is known to impact the success of students and instructional effectiveness (Marzano, 2005; Parlar & Cansoy, 2017; Waters et al., 2004). Instructional leadership that is focused on the right practices to have maximum impact is an important component of an organization (Parlar & Cansoy, 2017; Marzano Research Laboratory, 2012; Waters & Cameron, 2007; Waters et al., 2004). It is important to examine how the leadership actions of a principal can affect the overall organizational health of a school (Parlar & Cansoy, 2017; Waters & Cameron, 2007; Waters et al., 2004). The leadership style of a principal can be linked to teacher job satisfaction and productivity, which can directly impact student achievement (Baptiste, 2019; Reardon et al., 2019). It is necessary and vital for the administrator to have a personal knowledge of his or her own style of leadership to intentionally reflect on its effectiveness (Baptiste, 2019; Reardon et al., 2019). By examining both the style in which a principal leads and the overall health and achievement of their schools, it can be possible to improve the quality of education in those schools (Parlar & Cansoy, 2017; Waters & Cameron, 2007).

Along with the organizational health of schools, the emotional health of the principal can impact their ability to make sound decisions (Mahfouz, 2018; Smit, 2017). To impact school climate and culture positively, school administrators must learn self-awareness and manage the stress accordingly (Mahfouz, 2018; Smit, 2017). It is important to ensure that the support of the leader's needs is considered as it can have an impact on the overall health of the organization as well (Mahfouz, 2018; Smit, 2017). Stakeholder input, parental involvement, and supportive leadership styles all were found to be important and effective means of improving student

achievement (Bryk & Schneider, 2003; Cranston, 2011; Maponya, 2020). In the end, the most vital part of what the instructional leader can do is to foster a positive environment that supports the instructional practices of teachers and the deeper learning of students (Maponya, 2020; Waters et al., 2003).

The Impact on the Community

Yet another impact that an instructional leader has is as a relational agent in the community at large, building strong relationships with the community and other stakeholders (Hauseman et al., 2017; Snyder, 2018). There is a responsibility to navigate through interactions with various stakeholders, such as parents and other community members (Hauseman et al., 2017; Snyder, 2018). These valuable individuals provide input and critical feedback to an administrator, so knowing how to interact with them is vitally important (Hauseman et al., 2017; Snyder, 2018). These partnerships can greatly benefit students in a variety of ways (Hauseman et al., 2017; Snyder, 2018). While this task is important, it can also add to an already exhaustive list of tasks put upon an administrator (Buyukgoze, 2016; Hauseman et al., 2017). This one aspect of an instructional leader's position shows the challenge of balance as an instructional leader, and it emphasizes the need for additional support with these efforts (Buyukgoze, 2016; Hauseman et al., 2017).

Support for Instructional Leaders

The responsibilities entailed with the job of a principal have shifted from managerial focus to that of instructional leadership (Howley et al., 2019; Waters & Cameron, 2007). With that development, a recognition has emerged that there are certain limitations on administrators as they attempt to fulfill this more instructionally focused role, which can range from a lack of needed resources to challenging community contexts in which they function (Acton, 2018;

Chand & Mohan, 2019; Howley et al., 2019; Naidoo, 2019). Some principals attempt to balance both the managerial and instructional aspects of their role while others focus on the accountability demands put upon them (Howley et al., 2019; Naidoo, 2019). Still others focus their efforts to train their teachers on educational practices that ensure effective instruction for all students, regardless of ability or access (Howley et al., 2019; Naidoo, 2019). In order to lead a staff instructionally, one must develop professional practice regarding content knowledge and instructional practices in order to be most effective in helping teaching staff (Balyer & Ozcan, 2020; Howley et al., 2019; Rogers et al., 2016). It is important that they receive on-going professional development and training in order to ensure that they can effectively lead (Balyer & Ozcan, 2020; DeJong & Grundmeyer, 2018; Howley et al., 2019; Naidoo, 2019; Rogers et al., 2016). While many principals have undergone leadership preparation, there is also a sense that many come into a role and depend on common sense and previous experiences to deal with the new role (Marshall & Fisher, 2018; Mestry, 2017; Mitchell et al., 2017; Sepuru & Mohlakwana, 2020). As principals pursue continued higher education and advanced degrees, many are more equipped to deal with leadership roles, and responsibilities and the knowledge they had entered the position with is enhanced greatly (Mestry, 2017; Williams & Enright, 2020).

Principals need the opportunity to continue to grow as leaders through professional development (Parson & Hunter, 2016; Rogers et al., 2016). Professional development is found to be most effective when it addresses specific needs of the leaders and can be transferred to new situations as they arise (Parson & Hunter, 2016; Rogers et al., 2016). Studies have shown that principals prefer professional development delivered in meaningful and useful ways through workshops and coaching (Parson & Hunter, 2016; Rogers et al., 2016). Intentional preparation and continual professional development of leadership are vital to school improvement and

principal effectiveness (DeJong & Grundmeyer, 2018; Hildreth, 2018; Mestry, 2017; Rogers et al., 2016).

Principals navigate many responsibilities within their leadership role, and the wide range of tasks requires a diverse skill set to be effective in the role (Bravender & Staub, 2018; Cowin & Newcomer, 2019). Most leaders tend to focus on organizational management rather than the instructional leadership of staff. This indicates that many university programs do not always provide sufficient focus on instruction over organizational management (Marshall & Fisher, 2018; Mestry, 2017; Lyons, 2019). Colleges and universities can provide the foundational training for those going into the role of educational leadership, but there is still a need to examine the opportunities for hands-on training and knowledge building (Bravender & Staub, 2018; Cowin & Newcomer, 2019; Lyons, 2019; Wilson et al., 2020). When leaders are going through university programs to prepare them for their role, there is a need to develop partnerships with districts in order to provide some hands-on experiences (Bravender & Staub, 2018; Hildreth, 2018). These experiences can provide an opportunity to learn beyond theory to practical application (Bravender & Staub, 2018; Hildreth, 2018). These programs should also be specific to the needs of administrators to create meaningful partnerships that benefit the candidate (Bravender & Staub, 2018; Hildreth, 2018). It is best to partner with a post-secondary institution to tap into resources for creating strong programs of mentoring (Bravender & Staub, 2018; Cowin & Newcomer, 2019; Hildreth, 2018).

As a result of the increased pressure on administrators, there can often be a higher turnover rate for principals than has been seen previously (Cieminski, 2018; Hansen, 2018; Hohner & Riveros, 2017; Levin et al., 2020; Pendola & Fuller, 2018). In recent years, principals have been leaving their roles due to the conditions of the environment, salaries, increased

accountability measures, and professional development needs (Hansen, 2018; Levin et al., 2020). When there is high principal turnover, there also tends to be high teacher turnover, thus potentially having great impact on student achievement (Levin et al., 2020; Mitchell, 2018). It is important to examine the options that are available to recruit and retain school leaders to benefit the overall school organizations and student outcomes (Cieminski, 2018; Levin et al., 2020; Mitchell, 2018). It is important to train and foster developing leaders to ensure their longevity in the profession, and to involve stakeholders and teachers in the recruitment and hiring of principals (Bouffard, 2019; Cieminski, 2018). Additionally, it is important to foster relationships and collaboration between principals and stakeholders, principals and teachers, and principals with fellow administrators (Bouffard, 2019; Cieminski, 2018). Continual training and support is needed even after the recruitment and hiring of an administrator in order to ensure success and retain him or her in the position successfully (Bouffard, 2019; Cieminski, 2018). Principals should have mentors that they can meet with regularly and utilize for this support (Bouffard, 2019; Cieminski, 2018).

Principals, regardless of school context, find benefit in participating in a mentorship program, utilizing the knowledge of trusted colleagues to help develop their leadership skills (Bouffard, 2019; Lyons, 2019). For example, principals mainly function as the instructional leader in a building, but there can also be an assistant principal that can share in the leadership responsibilities (Cohen & Schechter, 2019; Searby et al., 2017). When assistant principals are given opportunities in their current role to take on instructional duties normally performed by a principal, this gives them a stronger foundation of readiness and is another strong form of mentoring and professional support to prepare for an instructional leadership role (Cohen & Schechter, 2019; Searby et al., 2017). Assistant principals can be highly influenced by their

principal, and the relationship is vital to development as a leader (Cohen & Schechter, 2019; Searby et al., 2017). The initial stages of an assistant principal's career are very important, and so this should be a key time to mentor and train them within the context of a good, healthy relationship with the principal (Cohen & Schechter, 2019; Searby et al., 2017). Overall, it is important to invest in opportunities to train up new assistant principals and foster a healthy professional relationship in which to do this (Cohen & Schechter, 2019; Searby et al., 2017).

Mentoring can play a vital role in leadership growth and has often been cited by educators as an important aspect of their overall growth and learning process on the job (Cowin & Newcomer, 2019; Liang & Augustine-Shaw, 2016). For the mentorship program to be successful, the relationship between the mentor and mentee has to be one of trust. It is also important that there is an aspect of reciprocal learning (Liang & Augustine-Shaw, 2016; Nava et al., 2020). However, it is also important that there are some differences between the mentor and mentee in order to expose them to different perspectives and viewpoints within the coaching process (Liang & Augustine-Shaw, 2016; Nava et al., 2020). Personalized help and continual feedback from a mentor are highly beneficial. Understanding how traits of leadership are identified and developed in people helps to create meaningful training to foster those qualities and grow leadership capacity through mentoring programs (Komives et al., 2005; Nava et al., 2020). A quality mentoring program for new administrators is just as vital as what is provided to new teachers in order to improve and grow in their craft and help them feel connected to a supportive network (Liang & Augustine-Shaw, 2016; Nava et al., 2020). Additionally, studies have shown that principals prefer professional development and leadership training delivered in meaningful and useful ways through workshops and coaching (DeJong & Grundmeyer, 2018; Rogers et al., 2016).

Educational leaders can be isolated in their positions and can struggle to find professional connections that enrich leadership practices (Carpenter & Krutka, 2018; Hildreth, 2018). The use of collaborative learning communities has long been a method of engaging in on-going professional development for educators (Bedford, 2019; Duncan-Howell, 2010; Oddone et al., 2019). In an age where technology is more prevalent, and social media is in greater use to connect, the development of Professional Learning Networks (PLN's) and online learning communities is becoming more common (Bedford 2019; Duncan-Howell, 2010; Evans, 2015; Carpenter & Krutka, 2018). It can bring together professionals to share resources and ideas, providing a more flexible option of professional development (Edwards, 2019; Oddone et al., 2019). The structure of a PLN offers both principals and teachers a wide variety of opportunities that meet their needs, and within the contexts that are meaningful to them (Carpenter & Krutka, 2018; Edwards 2019; Oddone et al., 2019). Additionally, principals can grow in their practice by cultivating a variety of tools, people, and resources as part of their PLN. These networks help principals to interact outside of their immediate area, addressing the potential barrier of isolation (Carpenter & Krutka, 2018; Duncan-Howell, 2010; Hildreth, 2018). This ability to access the knowledge of multiple educational experts outside of the geographical area provides immense benefits to educators regardless of location (Carpenter & Krutka, 2018; Duncan-Howell, 2010; Hildreth, 2018). Research has shown that those who engage in this type of professional development as a regular means of collaboration show growth in their skill development and knowledge (Edwards, 2019; Oddone et al., 2019). Overall, the implications are that PLNs can provide meaningful professional development and growth opportunities to administrators and are a viable method to be used in all contexts (Carpenter & Krutka, 2018; Duncan-Howell, 2010).

In the process of change and improvement efforts, the role of the district office to facilitate leadership teams can be an important one as well (Bouffard, 2019; Mallory et al., 2017; Szczesiul, 2014). Districts can create more cohesive efforts when facilitating these teams in their efforts to effect change (Bouffard, 2019; Szczesiul, 2014). The leadership teams that are formed at the district level can provide coherence amongst schools in the district, therefore helping to drive bigger changes together (Bouffard, 2019; Szczesiul, 2014). An important role of a superintendent is the evaluation of principals, ideally fostered within a collaborative relationship (Hvidston & McKim, 2019; Szczesiul, 2014). With quality effort in this area, principals can be equipped as effective instruction leaders, thus helping the organization to move forward in the area of improved student achievement (Hvidston & McKim, 2019; Szczesiul, 2014). Overall, the process of collaboration between administrators at the district level is an important one to provide continual support to these administrators who are implementing potential changes efforts (Bouffard, 2019; Szczesiul, 2014).

Some states do have requirements for mentoring new principals (Bravender & Staub, 2018; Howley et al., 2019; Nava et al., 2020). Such mentoring programs can provide opportunities for principals to develop a network of support (Bravender & Staub, 2018; Howley et al., 2019; Nava et al., 2020). Regular mentoring and coaching can be used as diverse training tools to help new administrators and other staff develop important skillsets while engaged in their job setting, thus helping them to apply the knowledge in a timely and effective manner (Bravender & Staub, 2018; Nava et al., 2020). Sound training programs for leaders that have dedicated funding from the state to support its efforts, have specially designed training to meet needs, work to continually evaluate the effectiveness of the program itself, and dedicate the time needed to effectively carry out this type of training can be highly impactful (Howley et al., 2019;

Nava et al., 2020). Principals need guidance and training in their practice in order to be as effective as possible for their schools and staff (Hansen & Larusdottir, 2015; Nava et al., 2020). Given this, the efforts to invest in the development of leadership and building their capacity as leaders becomes especially important (Nava et al., 2020).

Idaho Mentoring and Support Programs

Idaho is among several states who utilize federal Title funds in order to develop programs to support developing principal leadership under *Every Student Succeeds Act*, or *ESSA* (Espinoza et al., 2017; Idaho State Department of Education, n.d.). The Idaho State Department of Education provides two support programs, the Idaho Principals Network and the Idaho Principal Mentoring Project (Espinoza et al., 2017; Idaho State Department of Education, n.d.). In addition to this, the Idaho Association of School Administrators (2017) provides a program called Project Leadership. The Idaho Principals Network (IPN) is one that is mainly tailored for schools that are identified as in specific school improvement categories and focuses on educating leaders on important aspects of effective instruction (Espinoza, 2017; Idaho State Department of Education, n.d.). The Idaho Principal Mentoring Project is one that supports principals new to their position in the first one to two years (Espinoza, 2017; Idaho State Department of Education, n.d.).

Instructional Leadership and the Rural Principal

While there have been large amounts of research examining the overall qualities of successful administrators, there has not been much research in the specific area of rural principals. Students in rural areas can make up a significant portion of a district's enrollment, so it is important to examine how the principals of these schools can be equipped to be the most effective in their positions, thus having a positive impact on the district as a whole (Preston & Barnes, 2017; Sanchez et al., 2017; Tieken & Montgomery, 2021). Information in this area can

help principals focus on specific areas that will maximize leadership capabilities, and therefore impact student achievement and school climate (Preston & Barnes, 2017; Waters & Cameron, 2007). A successful rural principal will utilize opportunities for teachers to meet regularly together and collaborate for student success. This can often be easier in rural schools with smaller staff numbers (Preston & Barnes, 2017; Sanchez et al., 2017). Additionally, the school principal collaborates along with the staff, community, and stakeholders (Hatton et al., 2017; Preston & Barnes, 2017). These leaders act as change agents, finding a balance between meeting needs in the local context while balancing the demands of the district and state (Hatton et al., 2017; Preston & Barnes, 2017). The success of the rural principal is found in their collaborative leadership that balances the needs and challenges within their unique context (Preston & Barnes, 2017; Sanchez et al., 2017). Rural principals tend to demonstrate more grit and determination throughout the challenges that they encounter within their context (Brenner et al., 2015; Klocko & Justis, 2019). With such an influence in the areas of student achievement and climate, it is important to examine the types of leadership behaviors that contribute to high performing rural schools (Hutton, 2019; Waters & Cameron, 2007). Rural schools often face unique barriers, such as socioeconomic challenges within their community and parents that do not always place a high priority on the value of education (Brenner et al., 2015; Chand & Mohan, 2019; Hatton et al., 2017; Hutton, 2019). Yet another challenge can be recruiting and retaining highly qualified teachers (Brenner et al., 2015; Hutton, 2019; Kaden et al., 2016; Mitchell, 2018; Tieken & Montgomery, 2021). Many of the barriers to recruiting and retaining teachers are due to lack of resources, lower salaries, and misperceptions regarding rural communities (Brenner et al., 2015; Mitchell, 2018; Tieken & Montgomery, 2021). All of these challenges require leadership that can adapt to the context and persevere for success. Overall, it is important to note that while rural

principals may address more challenges than their urban or suburban counterparts, they often develop more skills of adaptation and resilience in doing so (Brenner et al., 2015; Klocko & Justis, 2019). While these identified qualities lead to success, rural principals do not always have access to ways in which to grow these skills (Chand & Mohan, 2019; Parson & Hunter, 2016; Sanchez et al., 2017).

Role Challenges

There are differences in the roles of principals in rural versus suburban schools (Parson & Hunter, 2016; Zhixin et al., 2019). Principals in the rural settings identify the ability to lead instructionally as a highly important part of their role, but most of their time is spent on management duties instead (Parson & Hunter, 2016; Swapp, 2020). It has been found that the daily unplanned issues that arise, such as unexpected discipline, parent concerns, and various management tasks, contributes to not being able to devote substantial time to instructional leadership (Hatton et al., 2017; Parson & Hunter, 2016; Swapp, 2020). Another factor that is challenging to these rural principals can be geographic isolation, when schools are in more remote areas (Chand & Mohan, 2019; Parson & Hunter, 2016; Sanchez et al., 2017). When located in more remote settings, there may be limited access to needed resources and support services (Chand & Mohan, 2019; Parson & Hunter, 2016; Sanchez et al., 2017). Given all of this, it becomes especially important to ensure that specific supports are tailored to rural administrators to help them know how to manage the challenges of their role and grow as instructional leaders.

The size of a rural school has an impact upon the leadership within the school (Parson & Hunter, 2016; Wiczorek & Manard, 2018). In rural districts, teacher leaders or superintendents may need to take on the role of the principal due to a lack of staffing options to fill

administrative positions (Hohner & Riveros, 2017; Parson & Hunter, 2019; Rasmussen et al., 2018). This strategy is an effort to consolidate due to financial constraints that exist in many small, rural districts (Mitchell, 2018; Parson & Hunter, 2019; Rasmussen et al., 2018). This can, however, create a position that incorporates even more challenges due to the increase in workload demands (Mitchell, 2018; Parson & Hunter, 2019; Rasmussen et al., 2018). By combining the role of two people into one person, it can be difficult to then be successful in both roles due to the increased challenges (Parson & Hunter, 2019; Rasmussen et al., 2018). These administrators can have various challenges to taking on the position that is unique to rural principals and by filling multiple roles (Hohner & Riveros, 2017; Parson & Hunter, 2019; Rasmussen et al., 2018). Among these challenges is the fact that there can be a feeling of isolation and loneliness (Chand & Mohan, 2019; Hohner & Riveros, 2017). These types of positions require an established level of support unique to rural districts (Hohner & Riveros, 2017; Wallin et al., 2019). Principals who also teach in the classroom can feel inadequate in their ability to effectively evaluate their teachers due to the limited time to do classroom visits and engage in quality conversations around instruction (Parson & Hunter, 2016; Wallin et al., 2019). Lack of resources and stress of federal mandate expectations can impact a principal's effectiveness (Grissom et al., 2019; Wallin et al., 2019). These multiple roles can also restrict a principal's ability to focus on instructional leadership and coaching teachers towards improved classroom instruction (Parson & Hunter, 2016; Wallin et al., 2019). There is a need to positively support and empower the rural principal who fulfills multiple roles and adequately prepare them for the unique dynamics of their position (Hohner & Riveros, 2017; Wallin et al., 2019). It is also important to examine the leadership style of a principal to determine if they are really leading, or simply managing their staff (Mitchell, 2018; Parson & Hunter, 2016). This distinction can mean

the difference between a competent and exceptional leader. With the divergent roles that many principals fill, along with the budgetary and resource constraints faced, the leadership role in the rural district requires specific support (Parson & Hunter, 2016; Rogers et al., 2016).

Funding Challenges

Funding for schools comes from a mix of sources which include federal, state, and local revenue (Bluum, 2016; Seeling, 2017; The J.A. & Kathryn Albertson Foundation, 2014; Tieken & Montgomery, 2021). In the area of local revenue, states may draw from property taxes as a source of funding (Bluum, 2016; Seeling, 2017; The J.A. & Kathryn Albertson Foundation, 2014; Tieken & Montgomery, 2021) However, when there is high poverty within a small rural district, this funding source can end up being limited due to low property values (Bluum, 2016; Seeling, 2017; The J.A. & Kathryn Albertson Foundation, 2014; Tieken & Montgomery, 2021). In some states, school districts must attempt to make up the budget shortfall by passing local levies, which place a burden on the taxpayer (Bluum, 2016; Richert, 2015; Seeling, 2017). In the state of Idaho, taxes are paid by its residents to help contribute to the state education budget (Bluum, 2016; The J.A. & Kathryn Albertson Foundation, 2014). Idaho relies more heavily on its state revenue for education funding than many other states with it representing 63% of its total revenue (Bluum, 2016; Idaho State Department of Education, n.d.; The J.A. & Kathryn Albertson Foundation, 2014). Its reliance on property taxes has proven to be unequal across districts due to the variance in property values (Bluum, 2016; The J.A. & Kathryn Albertson Foundation, 2014). These property values can vary drastically based upon the current economy and assessed market value in the current year (Bluum, 2016; Idaho State Department of Education, n.d.; The J.A. & Kathryn Albertson Foundation, 2014).

Often in small rural school districts, there is a constraint on resources due to a lack of adequate funding (Hatton et al., 2017; Mitchell, 2018; Wieczorek & Manard, 2018; Tieken & Montgomery, 2021). These resources can include personnel, curriculum, supplies, and social services (Hatton et al., 2017; Wieczorek & Manard, 2018; Tieken & Montgomery, 2021). This creates a limited capacity to reach the vision and goals that have been established (Hatton et al., 2017; Wieczorek & Manard, 2018). The constraint on resources can often mean a consolidation of responsibilities, and principals are often asked to fill many different roles, spreading them too thin (Parson & Hunter, 2019; Rasmussen et al., 2018; Wieczorek & Manard, 2018). Training for principals may need to be more specific to include issues that pertain specifically to rural settings, and the support that those settings require (Parson & Hunter, 2019; Rogers et al., 2016).

The Context Comparison

The difference between the stresses for a rural principal compared to those in other contexts is noteworthy (Brenner et al., 2015; Klocko & Justis, 2019). While all principals deal with the pressure of managing finances, staffing, and curriculum, rural principals often face additional challenges due to their small size and limited resources (Brenner et al., 2015; Hatton et al., 2017; Klocko & Justis, 2019; Mitchell, 2018; Sanchez et al., 2017; Swapp, 2020). In a suburban setting, schools are generally set in higher income areas with more resources at their disposal, such as attracting and retaining highly qualified staff (Logan & Burdick-Will, 2017; Mitchell, 2018; Sulak, 2016). By contrast, the rural context contains unique barriers, and often limited resources to address the challenges (Brenner et al., 2015; Hatton et al., 2017; Klocko & Justis, 2019; Mitchell, 2018; Sanchez et al., 2017). This can range from a lack of needed social service supports or curriculum, to struggling to hire staff to fill needed positions (Hatton et al., 2017; Mitchell, 2018; Tieken & Montgomery, 2021). Yet another contrast between small rural

districts and larger suburban counterparts is within the area of technology (Mitchell, 2018; Tiekens & Montgomery, 2021). While suburban districts can often easily equip all schools with high-speed internet access and technological resources, rural schools often struggle to obtain and provide this needed educational resource (Mitchell, 2018; Tiekens & Montgomery, 2021).

Within rural communities, the school is seen as a center of the culture, and the principal a key player within the community (Davies & Halsey, 2019; Hatton et al., 2017). The expectations for school leaders within a small rural community are often high and require the leaders to engage multiple stakeholders in their efforts (Hatton et al., 2017; Wieczorek & Manard, 2018). Rural school principals have a variety of expectations and constraints that make their leadership assignment challenging. Among these are the pressure to be notably visible and involved within the community itself (Hatton et al., 2017; Wieczorek & Manard, 2018). They are looked at as not only the leader of the school, but also an important member of the community (Hatton et al., 2017; Wieczorek & Manard, 2018). There is often an expectation to be involved and present, which increases the pressure felt as a school leader (Hatton et al., 2017; Wieczorek & Manard, 2018). Rural principals deal with significant differences from their suburban counterparts through functioning as the sole leader, filling multiple roles, and dealing with increased levels of stress due to the challenging constraints (Hatton et al., 2017; Wieczorek & Manard, 2018).

Retention Challenges

With all the challenges unique to rural schools, it has been found that rural principals have the shortest time of retention compared to principals in other contexts (Hansen, 2018; Hohner & Riveros, 2017; Pendola & Fuller, 2018; Sanchez et al., 2017; Seeling, 2017). Most of these principals were found not to have stayed in the position for extended lengths of time, often leaving for higher performing schools or districts with larger opportunities, or leaving the

profession (Hansen, 2018; Pendola & Fuller, 2018; The National Center for Education Statistics, 2019). The National Center for Education Statistics (2019) found that in 2016-2017, while only 8-9% of principals in suburban and town schools left a principal position, 12% of rural principals left the position. Principals in schools with fewer resources and higher poverty, such as those that can be found in rural communities, have a higher turnover rate than those who serve in schools with lower poverty, like those found in suburban areas (Hansen, 2018; Levin et al., 2019; The National Center for Education Statistics, 2019). It is important to examine what factors contribute to principal longevity to ensure that principals are supported in their roles (Drummond & Halsey, 2014; Levin et al., 2019; Pendola & Fuller, 2018). Additionally, it has been found that lower salaries of rural principals play a role in retaining them for longer periods of time (Hansen, 2018; Pendola & Fuller, 2018; Wood et al., 2013). The isolation of a rural setting can be a large reason for failing to retain rural principals (Hansen, 2018; Sanchez et al., 2017; Wood et al., 2013). This is especially true in rural districts that are farther removed from nearby urban areas (Hansen, 2018; Wood et al., 2013). District leaders need to take into consideration a variety of factors that could affect the long-term vesting of a principal in a rural district. Addressing these factors could aid in retaining principals for a longer duration, thus adding to the stability and achievement of a school (Hvidston & McKim, 2019; Levin et al., 2019; Pendola & Fuller, 2018). With the importance of effective schools resting on principals, the issue of job satisfaction becomes one to receive a closer examination (Drummond & Halsey, 2014; Levin et al., 2019). Rural schools tend to have fewer applicants for principal positions (Drummond & Halsey, 2014; Hansen, 2018). Once principals in rural districts are hired, many come in unprepared for the demands of a rural principal position (Drummond & Halsey, 2014; Hansen, 2018). When principals feel underprepared for a position, this can lead to lower job satisfaction (Drummond &

Halsey, 2014; Levin et al., 2019; Hansen, 2018). The retainment of effective principals can become challenging, especially in rural areas (Hansen, 2018; Wood et al., 2013).

Many rural principals have different identified needs than those of larger schools and need more specific professional development and training to enhance their leadership skills (Stewart & Matthews, 2015; Wallin et al., 2019). Rural school principals identified one of the best ways to receive professional development was through higher education courses (Mestry, 2017; Stewart & Matthews, 2015; Williams & Enright, 2020). The availability of online courses could prove to be a valuable resource for administrators in more remote areas (Carpenter & Krutka, 2018; Duncan-Howell, 2010; Hildreth, 2018; Stewart & Matthews, 2015). The research also found that rural school principals spent less time collaborating with and mentoring teachers, which could be due to their more varied and increased responsibilities versus those in larger schools (Stewart & Matthews, 2015; Wallin et al., 2019). Overall, the needs of rural principals can be greater due to increased responsibilities, lack of accessibility to other schools to build partnerships with, and fewer networking opportunities (Stewart & Matthews, 2015; Wood et al., 2013). For rural districts, it is important to invest in the growth and training of administrators and to possibly look to do this with leaders who are tied to the community (Wallin et al., 2019; Wood et al., 2013).

Conclusion

The role of the principal is a dynamic one and requires a diverse skillset that needs to be continually developed (Bravender & Staub, 2018; Schrick & Wasonga, 2019; Waters & Cameron, 2007). The challenges faced by principals range from having enough background preparation to balancing the demands of the job with the limited scope of time within a day and school year (Hauseman et al., 2017; Hoyer et al., 2017; Jenkins, 2009; Neumerski et al., 2018;

Weber et al., 2014). A vital role of an administrator is to not only impact student achievement and school climate but to positively impact teachers in such ways that motivate them to remain committed to the schools' vision and mission (Jones & Watson, 2017; Lyons, 2019; Munir & Khalil, 2016; Naidoo, 2019; Tan, 2016). In order to develop as an instructional leader, principals require on-going professional development and training in which to grow leadership knowledge and skills (Liang & Augustine-Shaw, 2016; Lyons, 2019; Mestry, 2017)

The role of the rural principal comes with even greater challenges requiring support as they also encompass such things as lower salaries, staff shortages and lack of retention, and a general lack of resources (Parson & Hunter, 2019; Wieczorek & Manard, 2018; Seeling, 2017; Tieken & Montgomery, 2021). Rural principals are held to the same standards as urban principals, but often lack the ability to tap into needed supports (Klocko & Justis, 2019; Parson & Hunter, 2016; Stewart & Matthews, 2015). Rural principals do not always have easy access to mentoring supports to improve and grow leadership practices due to geographical isolation and lack of availability (Stewart & Matthews, 2015; Wood et al., 2013). Given the identified large scope of the role of the principal and the importance of on-going professional development and training, it is important to examine what principals in small, rural districts use to support leadership growth and how barriers to access these opportunities can be removed to meet their unique challenges.

Chapter III

Design and Methodology

Introduction

Research has shown that the demands on principals to be effective instructional leaders are many (Bravender & Staub, 2018; Schrik & Wasonga, 2019). The aspects of the role are often challenging to balance. All these responsibilities require dedicated time, which often spread the school principal thin, causing him or her to potentially not address areas such as curriculum and instruction with consistency (Bouffard, 2019; Buyukgoze, 2016; Hoyer et al., 2017; Martin, 2018). Additionally, with the noted impact on student achievement and school climate, the need for school leaders to be sufficiently prepared for their role as instructional leaders becomes highly evident. However, many principals come into their role without enough experience or skill development to handle the increasing pressures or to effectively impact the organization's improvement efforts (Hildreth et al., 2018; Lyons, 2019; Mestry, 2017). Mentoring and on-going professional development have been shown to improve the practice of school administrators who participate in such opportunities when they are available (Howley et al., 2019; Hvidston & McKim, 2019; Liang & Augustine-Shaw, 2016; Mestry, 2017). Rural schools have been found to have unique challenges due to their smaller enrollment and limited resources, which can create more barriers and leadership challenges for these principals in their efforts towards success (Hohner & Riveros, 2017; Hutton, 2019; Parson & Hunter, 2019; Stewart & Matthews, 2015).

Leadership practices of principals have been shown to have a significant impact on students and the levels of achievement they demonstrate (Baptiste, 2019; Lyons, 2019; Hansen & Larusdottir, 2015; Hutton, 2019; Pannell et al., 2015; Rouleau, 2021; Tan, 2016; Waters & Cameron, 2007). To understand the depth and breadth of the role of an instructional leader, the

impact of that role, and the need to foster the development of its identified leadership practices, the theoretical framework used in this study is the Balanced Leadership Framework developed by Mid-continent Research for Education and Learning, or McREL (Rouleau, 2021; Waters & Cameron, 2007). The framework itself is a compiling of vast amounts of research that indicates and demonstrates the level of impact an instructional leader has on student achievement (Cetin et al., 2016; Rouleau, 2021; Waters & Cameron, 2007; Waters et al., 2004). With this research, the role of the instructional leader is more well-defined and provides a framework from which to implement research-based practices towards more effective leadership (Rouleau, 2021; Waters & Cameron, 2007; Waters et al., 2004). By understanding effective leadership, the need to provide means by which to develop these leadership practices becomes more important.

Though there has been much research to detail the challenges faced by rural administrators (Hauseman et al., 2017; Hoyer et al., 2017; Jenkins, 2009; Neumerski et al., 2018; Weber et al., 2014), the research is limited on how rural school administrators utilize professional support to enhance leadership practices given identified unique challenges and a rural context. The researcher endeavored to examine the access available to mentoring and professional training supports for rural school administrators based on their identified needs and its impact on their leadership practice. This was based on the lived experiences of these rural school administrators who deal with wide arrays of challenges and how they receive training and support for these issues to improve their leadership practice.

Research Questions

This study was conducted for the purpose of highlighting the impact of continual training and mentoring systems on rural school leadership and examining the importance of ensuring

access to these supports for continual growth and improvement. The study focused on the following research questions:

1. What are the lived experiences that principals in small, rural schools encounter that they feel require support and training as a leader?
2. What support do principals in small, rural schools currently access, and what is the reflection on how this support has impacted his or her leadership practices?
3. What are the barriers principals in small, rural districts encounter that impede the ability to participate in leadership support programs or opportunities to address specific leadership challenges, and how has this impacted his or her leadership practices?

Research Design

A narrative inquiry approach was used to conduct the study. This design allows the researcher to collect narratives about people's lived experiences, recording their stories into a broader collection (Creswell & Guetterman, 2019; Maxwell, 2013). Using a narrative inquiry approach allows the researcher to use personal stories in order to make groups feel as if their stories are being heard and considered in regard to a relevant issue (Creswell & Guetterman, 2019). In addition, narrative inquiry can offer "practical, specific insights" (Creswell & Guetterman, 2019, p. 513). For this study, narrative inquiry gave the researcher the opportunity to study the story of rural principals regarding the challenges they encounter and the potential barriers to receiving support for identified needs. It also allowed the researcher to delve into the personal experiences of these principals and their reflections of their own leadership practices considering support, or lack thereof, they receive to grow as a leader.

At the outset of the research, a pilot study was utilized to verify the reliability and validity of the interview questions and journal prompts (Creswell & Guetterman, 2019). Pilot testing of the questions and journal prompts helped the researcher to determine if the questions were understandable to those being interviewed and if they could be completed in a timely manner (Creswell & Guetterman, 2019; Maxwell, 2013). In addition, utilizing pilot interviews allows the researcher to confirm that the interview questions will attain the aim and purpose they are intended to achieve (Maxwell, 2013). This method also helps the researcher to determine areas that may present barriers or issues within the chosen design of research (Marshall & Rossman, 2016).

The researcher developed a set of journal prompts to be used with the participants (see Appendix H). Additionally, a preliminary principal interview protocol was developed by modifying an existing protocol (see Appendix I) with permission from a previous doctoral study (Russell, 2018, see Appendix L), as well as a principal observation protocol (see Appendix J). After the development of these protocols and IRB approval, the researcher contacted three principals within rural settings who would not be participating within the study to conduct pilot interviews. The purpose of the pilot interviews was to engage in the practice of interviewing, gaining experience with developing rapport and interviewing techniques, and to receive feedback on the questions themselves in relation to clarity and connection to the overall research questions. The researcher went through the protocol questions with each principal, and then asked follow up questions regarding the clarity of the protocol, order of the questions, and requested general feedback as to the interview itself. The researcher took memo notes of all feedback from each pilot participant and utilized the feedback to adjust the interview questions accordingly. Additionally, the researcher sent a copy of the journal prompts to three

administrators who possess a doctoral degree to conduct a review of the face validity of the prompts, requesting written feedback as to the wording of each question and its ability to measure what was intended. Establishing validity through an external audit, such as used in the process in establishing face validity, allows an outside individual to offer a report of strengths, weaknesses, and overall relation of the content to the research questions (Creswell & Guetterman, 2019). Feedback was collected through use of a Google form and the researcher then utilized this feedback to adjust the wording of questions as suggested. By utilizing this pilot study process, the researcher could check the integrity of the questions and journal prompts, length of the interview, how to establish rapport and appropriate interview techniques, and adjust the instruments as needed prior to administering to study participants. The pilot interviews were recorded through the recording function in the Zoom platform and by utilizing a recording app to test the functionality of that method of documenting the interview.

The instrumentation by which the researcher conducted the study was through semi-structured interviews, reflective journaling, and field observations at the identified sites. The research regarding the challenges of the rural school administrator as well as the importance of on-going professional support guided the creation of interview questions and journal prompts for reflection. The journal prompts were created to stimulate reflection regarding their leadership practice throughout the first semester of the school year and how they approach the challenges they encounter. The semi-structured interviews were conducted in a way that provided the ability for principals to articulate their lived experiences and challenges as they navigated through the first semester. The use of one-on-one interviews provided a chance for the selected principals to speak candidly regarding their experiences and to share their ideas comfortably (Creswell & Guetterman, 2019). The interviews were recorded and transcribed, with follow-up interviews

conducted as needed. Member checking was utilized to ensure the validity of the transcribed interview (Maxwell, 2013). Finally, the field observations were used as a means in which to see the context of the challenges and experiences that were articulated both in the journal entries and the interviews.

Selection of Participants

For the narrative inquiry, homogeneous, purposeful sampling was used. Purposeful sampling allows the researcher to draw from a particular and intentional set of participants to understand a central phenomenon (Creswell & Guetterman, 2019). Furthermore, homogeneous sampling allows the researcher to utilize a group that possess a similar trait (Creswell & Guetterman, 2019). In this case, all participants were sampled from five small rural school districts in Southwestern Idaho. These selected districts meet both qualifications set forth by the Idaho State Department of Education in Idaho Code §33-319 to qualify as a rural school as follows:

- (b) “There are fewer than twenty (20) enrolled students per square mile within the area encompassed by the school district's boundaries; or (b) The county in which a plurality of the school district's market value for assessment purposes is located contains less than twenty-five thousand (25,000) residents, based on the most recent decennial United States census” (Idaho State Department of Education, 2019, Idaho Code §33-319).

A population of five current principals in the identified rural school districts was sampled, one principal from each district. Principals who were selected for the study held a current state certification in administration and represented a range of administrative experience to provide a scope of perspectives to the study. Additionally, some of these principals held multiple roles within their district, highlighting a unique characteristic of small rural school district administrators. Finally, the principals were selected from traditional brick and mortar

school sites. No vice principals were utilized for this study as the focus is upon the role of the principal. Email addresses were obtained through a public records search. Each principal received an email with an electronic consent form detailing the purpose of the study and their ability to participate or opt-out should they so choose (See Appendix E and F). This was filled out and submitted through Qualtrics. Additionally, in the email there was a request for a virtual meeting to explain the study in more depth and to begin to develop a positive rapport with the principal. If, after two weeks, there was no reply to the initial inquiry, a follow up phone call was made by the primary researcher to connect with the principal (see Appendix G). The principals who chose to participate were informed that their identity would remain confidential, with the researcher assigning pseudonyms to them and their school district. At the recommendation of the IRB, site permission was intentionally not obtained from each school districts' superintendent to fully maintain a protection of confidentiality for each principal and to avoid a feeling of coercion to participate in the study by their supervisor. This also allowed principals a greater sense of openness and freedom in their responses as they were speaking to their individual experiences in all shared viewpoints, not as a representative of their school district. All interviews were recorded and transcribed. The information was kept on a computer that was password protected.

Data Collection

Narrative inquiry involves the process of collecting data that will be analyzed to retell the story of the individual in a narrative format (Creswell & Guetterman, 2019). The data is obtained through the recording of stories or narrated experiences (Creswell & Guetterman, 2019). Within this study, the researcher utilized reflective journals, semi-structured interviews, and observations in which to build the narrative story of the participants in the study.

Reflective Journals

The principals were each given journal prompts that they would reply to each month, from August-November of 2021, to enable them to paint the picture of their daily experiences and challenges throughout the first semester of the school year (see Appendix H). Among the identified 21 leadership responsibilities in McREL's Balanced Leadership Framework (Rouleau, 2021; Waters & Cameron, 2007), those of flexibility, focus, ideals/beliefs, and situational awareness are among the practices that the reflective journals touch upon. Within the journals, principals were allowed the opportunity to be reflective of their practice and communicate the current situation of their leadership along with the chance to share their ideals and beliefs about how to best strengthen their skills to grow their practice. The prompts were recorded in a shared Google document between the participant and the researcher, enabling the ability for on-going dialogue between the researcher and participant. In addition, the use of an electronic means of gathering journal responses created an ease of use to encourage the principal to stay consistent with his or her replies. Principals could submit responses within the last week of each month but were also given flexibility to reply within the next month if they had forgotten to complete the previous entry. Additionally, the use of voice-to-text was enabled within the Google document for another convenient method of completing the entry. The researcher kept each document private and worked to address any hesitancy of sharing lived experiences through this confidentiality. The researcher also provided flexibility within the window of writing for each principal, provided ease of access to complete the document from any computer by utilizing cloud-based documents, and engaged in open dialogue to assist with questions or clarifications at any time.

Semi-Structured Interviews

Within narrative inquiry, the process of collaboration and gathering the stories of the individuals is key (Creswell & Guetterman, 2019). This process of interviewing gives the researcher a deeper understanding the lived experiences of the individuals being studied (Marshall & Rossman, 2016). One-on-one interviews were scheduled with each principal three times in the first semester. The initial interview and the final interview took place over Zoom for convenience. The second interview took place during the field observation site visit, providing an opportunity to engage with each participant in person. The interviews consisted of open-ended questions regarding the current challenges faced as a principal of a small rural school, allowing the researcher to follow up and examine context and views about what had been stated within the reflective journals (See Appendix I). These interviews allowed the researcher to engage in additional leadership practices highlighted by McREL (Rouleau, 2021; Waters & Cameron, 2007) in the 21 leadership responsibilities. Specifically, principals were able to communicate how they monitor and evaluate through instructional leadership and how they can once again share ideals and beliefs connected to important leadership practices. Each interview was 30-45 minutes in length. Open-ended interviews allow the person being interviewed to voice his or her experiences without being constrained by any perspectives of the researcher (Creswell & Guetterman, 2019). All interviews were audio and video recorded on a device, which was password protected.

Field Observations

The researcher spent one day at the mid-term of the semester with each of the five principals involved in the study to conduct an observation about their daily experiences as a rural principal. Creswell and Guetterman (2019) note that functioning as a nonparticipant observer

allows the researcher to observe unobtrusively to watch and record what is being studied. Observations also allow the researcher to study information as it occurs in the setting, giving deeper context to the lived experiences within the narrative inquiry (Creswell & Guetterman, 2019). With McREL's Balanced Leadership Framework (Rouleau, 2021; Waters & Cameron, 2007), the responsibilities of being visible, communicating effectively, affirming staff and student, and maintaining effective situational awareness are highly effective, and such practices were able to be observed and discussed within the field observation. Descriptive notes were taken within the context of the observation and recorded a description of the events, activities, and people (Creswell & Guetterman, 2019). The reflective field notes were the personal thoughts related to the ideas and themes that emerged within the observation (Creswell & Guetterman, 2019).

Analytical Methods

To make sense of the qualitative data and develop a deep understanding, the researcher must engage in a meaningful analyzing process (Creswell & Guetterman, 2019). The researcher must spend a lot of time immersed in the data, often cycling back and forth between the collection of the data and its analysis (Creswell & Guetterman, 2019). The researcher also used triangulation and member checks to ensure reliability and validity (Creswell & Guetterman, 2019; Marshall & Rossman, 2016; Maxwell, 2013). To analyze the narrative inquiry data, the researcher engaged in the process of transcribing, coding, and analyzing the data for themes.

With the reflective journal entries, the researcher did a first reading of each response to generate codes and subsequently determine appropriate themes (Saldana, 2016). The researcher utilized structural coding in the initial process of examining the journal responses (Saldana, 2016). Structural coding both codes and organizes responses in relation to each research

question (Saldana, 2016). For example, each response was first categorized under the research question it addressed. Next, within each response, sections were highlighted that corresponded with an identified code connected to the research question. So, for the first research question that inquires about the lived experiences of the participants that they feel require support, the researcher coded those using the word “Challenges”, highlighting any word or phrase that applied in blue. Subsequent responses were coded similarly in relation to the other research questions. Once the overall codes had been established for all data, concept coding was utilized to determine more specific categories and themes within the data (Saldana, 2016). Concept coding allows the researcher to assign codes that represent a larger meaning or idea represented in the data, creating a broader picture (Saldana, 2016).

The researcher utilized an outside transcriptionist to transcribe the interviews. The transcriptionist signed a confidentiality agreement to protect all information that was transcribed, thus maintaining participant confidentiality. Once these were received, the researcher coded and analyzed them for themes utilizing the same structural coding and concept coding methods. The researcher read and then re-read the transcripts, checking the coding process multiple times. Finally, the observation protocols were coded using structural coding initially, and then concept coding for more specific categories and themes throughout the observation field notes. The codes generated from the field notes were combined with the codes that had been collected from both the journal entries and interviews. The frequency by which each code was referenced was recorded. The codes were then connected to the corresponding leadership responsibilities identified by McREL (2021). The codes were organized according to the research question they addressed and analyzed for frequency of reference. Next, codes were organized into categories through which the themes emerged.

To maintain reliability and validity (Creswell & Guetterman, 2013; Marshall & Rossman, 2016; Maxwell, 2013), the strategy of member checking was utilized. Each participant was sent a copy of the compiled codes as they related to each research question. They were asked to review the compiled information to ensure that they saw their voice represented in the collected data. If they did not feel they were adequately represented, they were asked to contact the researcher to provide further input. Any revisions or clarifications were encouraged to maintain a collaborative working relationship with each principal.

Using the method of triangulation, the data from the three sources was pulled together to establish the overall themes. Triangulation is the “process of corroborating evidence from different individuals, types of data, or methods of data collection.” (Creswell & Guetterman, 2019, p.630). This process allows the researcher to generate overall themes and construct a theory based upon the results of the coding and theming process from the reflective journals, interviews, and observations (Creswell & Guetterman, 2019; Marshall & Rossman, 2016; Maxwell, 2013).

Role of the Researcher

The researcher came to this study with previous background experience as a principal within a small rural school district in the state where the study took place. The researcher’s own experience is what has spurred the direction of this study. Her own experiences in a rural setting, while not as small as the sites within this study, presented challenges and support was limited. The desire of the researcher was to shed a light on the specific challenges of school principals in small, rural districts and to look at how best to meet the needs of those principals to help them grow as a leader.

In order to mitigate the potential effect on the study and avoid biased results, the researcher actively reflected on and bracketed her own experiences within the administrative setting in a rural district, allowing her to divide out her own experiences from those within the data collection (Marshall & Rossman, 2016). Additionally, the researcher disclosed her own administrative background to those involved in the study. During the interviews, the researcher followed a protocol to help guide the discussion in a structured format, probing when necessary (Creswell & Guetterman, 2019). Finally, in the observations, the researcher followed the established protocol, recording evidence and observations without any initial reflection to capture what was seen and heard from an objective point of view (Creswell & Guetterman, 2019). The researcher acknowledged that though she had experienced some of the same lived experiences as the participants, their stories were unique and individualized to their own experiences.

Limitations

The study's purpose was to examine the current challenges that rural school principals face, the mentoring and professional supports available to rural school principals, the level of participation in these supports, and the impact these supports have on leadership practices. This study used reflective journals completed by principals, one-on-one interviews with principals regarding their lived experiences, and field observations of each principal. As in any study, there are limitations that can occur. Creswell (2019) notes that one of the drawbacks of one-on-one interviews can be the extensive time, travel, and potential cost of endeavoring in such interviews. In order to reduce these limitations, the researcher used a virtual platform to conduct interviews. Another limitation within the study is the chance that participants may not answer questions fully or may not respond to the journal prompts with full candor and honesty. The

researcher sought to build trust with all participants in the study, yet by nature, there can be a hesitancy to speak openly about one's job experiences. Additionally, it was challenging to locate and engage enough participants to create a large sample size during the study itself. Finally, the researcher has past personal experience in the role of a rural school administrator. This experience had the potential of influencing the researcher's bias, so she had to remain very conscientious of this in order to keep unintended bias from affecting any portion of the research design

Chapter IV

Results

Introduction

This chapter presents the results of the narrative inquiry that examines the current challenges facing rural school administrators and their access to support to address these challenges. It also examines potential barriers that may exist to receiving this support and the impact that has upon leadership practices of the administrators. This chapter is divided into three sections: participant profiles, findings in relation to each research question, and a summary. The researcher utilized narrative inquiry in this qualitative study, and so direct quotes related to the common themes discovered in relation to each research question will be used. Narrative inquiry allows the voice of the participants to come through, expressing their lived experiences in relation to the issue being researched (Marshall & Rossman, 2016). Using a narrative inquiry approach allows the researcher to use personal stories in order to make groups feel as if their stories are being heard and considered (Creswell & Guetterman, 2019). In addition, McREL's Balanced Leadership Framework (Rouleau, 2021; Waters & Cameron, 2007) was used as a theoretical framework to establish the depth of the principal's role as an effective leader, highlighting the importance of supporting this role. The main sources of data for this study came from reflective journal entries completed by participants, semi-structured interviews, and field observations of each principal in context. Several themes emerged from these data sources regarding the challenges participants experience, current support they receive and its impact on leadership practices, and barriers they experience to accessing support and impact on leadership practices.

Each participant completed monthly journal entries, providing them the opportunity by which to express, in their own words, challenges that they were facing and any support they were accessing to address those challenges. Additionally, they were able to articulate barriers that they experienced to receiving or accessing support for their leadership role. This recording of personal stories and experiences is an important aspect of the narrative inquiry research design (Creswell & Guetterman, 2019). An initial semi-structured interview using an interview protocol (see Appendix H) was conducted to obtain demographic information as well as to establish initial thoughts and answers to questions regarding challenges, current support, and barriers to support. This process of interviewing gives the researcher a deeper understanding of the lived experiences of the individuals being studied (Marshall & Rossman, 2016). Two subsequent interviews were conducted with each participant to follow up on responses within the journal entries in order to gain a fuller and richer narrative picture. Finally, field observations were conducted with each participant to gain contextual examples of the challenges and impacts on leadership that were articulated through journal entries and interviews. Observations allow the researcher to study information as it occurs in the setting, giving deeper context to the lived experiences within the narrative inquiry (Creswell & Guetterman, 2019).

As part of the narrative inquiry design in which personal stories and lived experiences are gathered, direct quotes from each participant are included regarding the results and themes of the research questions. These quotes provide rich context and articulation of how each participant experienced and reflected upon each research question through the journals, interviews, and field observations. The use of their own words paints the picture of their lived experiences in relation to their multi-layered roles and responsibilities of being a small, rural

school principal. To understand the context in which these participants serve, a profile of each participant is also provided. To protect confidentiality, pseudonyms are used in lieu of actual participant names, and the names of each school have been changed.

Participant Profiles

Participant	School	Years of Experience	Role(s)
Sandy	Eastview Elementary	16 years	Principal
Janice	North Canyon Elementary	24 years	Principal
Frank	South Valley Elementary	29 years	Principal Superintendent
Phil	Sunnyslope Middle/High School	21 years	MS/HS Principal Teacher Athletic Director
John	Northridge Middle/High School	11 years	MS/HS Principal

Sandy

Sandy is 44 years old and has a bachelor's degree in English and English Education with a minor in Reading and a Master's in Educational Leadership. She has nine years of experience as a teacher, and seven years as an administrator. After spending her first-year teaching in a larger, urban district, Sandy came to her current district to teach 3rd and 4th grade Reading for a year and then secondary English after that. After a seven-year hiatus to stay home with young children, Sandy returned to the classroom as a Kindergarten and 1st Grade teacher. After five years in her teaching positions at the elementary level, Sandy transitioned into the role of Elementary Principal in the Eastview School District. Sandy's school, Eastview Elementary, has a total enrollment of 95 students. The total district enrollment, elementary and secondary, is 220

students (Idaho State Department of Education, 2021). Eastview Elementary is recognized as a Top Performer and Goal Maker by the state for ranking in the 90th percentile on core indicators and for meeting annual progress markers towards state goal indicators (Idaho State Department of Education, 2021). Eastview Elementary is situated within the town of Eastview, which has a population of approximately 800 residents and is located 27 miles from a larger urban area (World Population Review, 2021). While some staff live within the community of Eastview, a good portion of teachers commute from the larger urban area.

Sandy pursued a career in education to help others and continue her love of learning. She states:

“I love to learn, I like to, I felt successful in school, and so I think it’s a place where I’m comfortable too and I just kind of want to be able to provide that for other kids. I just think it’s the place I’m most comfortable.”

She articulates her motivation each day as that of giving back to her community, one that she has been a member of her entire life:

“I grew up here, my family homesteaded here in the 1870s, and the community was super good to me all growing up. And I always just felt like it’s a community that has so much potential and so many really good things and I just wanted to give it back. Like I said earlier, I wanted to continue to have that community, I have a lot of pride in the community, I really want it to be a good, strong community, strong kids becoming good citizens and strong families. So, I don’t know that it’s necessarily that it’s a small community, but it’s my small community, you know?”

Janice

Janice is 47 years old and holds a bachelor's degree in Elementary Education and Special Education, a minor in Math, and a master's degree in Educational Leadership and Special Education. She has six years of experience as a teacher and 18 years of experience as an administrator. She has been at her current school, North Canyon Elementary in the North Canyon School District, for seven years. North Canyon Elementary has a total enrollment of 395 students, with the total district enrollment of 1,249 students (Idaho State Department of Education, 2021). North Canyon Elementary is recognized as a Top Performer and Goal Maker by the state for ranking in the 90th percentile on core indicators and for meeting annual progress markers towards state goal indicators. North Canyon School District is situated in the small mountain resort community of North Canyon. The current population of North Canyon is approximately 3,800 residents (World Population Review, 2021). It is located 107 miles from a larger, urban area. This resort setting creates some unique opportunities and funding sources enabling its schools to experience meaningful learning opportunities. Janice shared:

“We do all our science lessons in conjunction with an Outdoor Science School, that most people in the Valley pay for, for, like, a week camp. We're blessed with that on a daily basis just because the staff, which are usually U of I students or AmeriCorps workers come over and they essentially co-teach Science with my classroom teachers. So just the level of science my kids get is so different than any other school I've been a part of. Field trips, we don't even call them field trips, they're just called educational connections. Money's not an object here, so that's also unique, I think.”

Janice decided to pursue a career in education due to growing up with a parent who was a teacher. Spending so much time in the world of education influenced Janice to want to become

an educator herself. In addition, Janice was able to experience a connection with students who have special needs as she was growing up. This experience pushed her to pursue a degree in Special Education to work with students who struggle in a variety of areas. She states:

“In high school, I kind of fell for Special Ed because I was partnered up with a little first grader and I was a sophomore, junior, and a senior. So it was like my buddy, I think it was called the Buddy Program. My little buddy. Kind of like a big sister program, and then she had Down Syndrome and I, just that was, so I went to college saying I’m going into Special Ed, I was going to be a Special Ed teacher.”

Janice’s first job was in a one-room schoolhouse in a very remote and rural area.

Through this experience, Janice gained valuable insight and was encouraged by those around her to pursue a path in education towards leadership. She shared:

“My first year was a hard year because I think just living alone out in the boonies of Montana by myself was scary enough. And then I knew I was kind of the leader, the principal, essentially by default. Because there was nobody else with me. I had a mom volunteer, and that was it, that would come help me prepare the lunches for kids at lunchtime. And she was always the one telling me, like, you would be such a good principal, you run the show.”

Through her own experience growing up and going to school in a rural district, Janice felt the pull to return to a rural setting as a principal after serving in larger districts in more urban and suburban settings.

Frank

Frank is 54 years old and holds a bachelor’s degree in Education and General Studies with an emphasis in Physical Therapy. Additionally, he holds a master’s degree in Athletic

Administration, an Educational Specialist Degree in Educational Leadership, and a Doctorate in Educational Leadership. He has seven years of teaching experience and 22 years of administrative experience. Currently, Frank is the principal of South Valley Elementary School and the superintendent of the South Valley School District. He has held these positions for the past two years. Prior to coming to the South Valley School District, he was an administrator in a larger suburban district 34 miles away. South Valley school district has a total student population of 297 students, K-12 (Idaho State Department of Education, 2021). The town of South Valley has an approximate population of 900 residents (World Population Review, 2021). It is situated 37 miles from the closest larger suburban district and 98 miles from the closest urban district. Frank did not originally intend to enter the career of education. Frank shared:

“So, my initial goal was to become a physical therapist and when I went to apply, you had to have a lot of hours, volunteer hours, which I didn’t have. And so that was frustrating to me. And so, I was asked to guest teach and coach because I played ball in college. So, I really loved it, it was fun, and so that kind of led me down the path, the administrators at that time said man, you’re a natural, you ought to go into education. So that’s kind of what redirected my whole path.”

Frank has found many years of fulfillment and love of his roles from teaching to administration in this chosen path. When asked what motivates him in his current role as an elementary principal and superintendent in the South Valley School District, Frank stated:

“I think just making a difference. I love a challenge and I was brought on in this district to enhance the culture. And it was a culture that was kind of divided, and it was very, kind of a do your own thing type of environment. And so, we’ve brought on this whole idea of teaming and collaborating and working together and bringing on book studies

and trying to get the right staff in the right spots. And those that aren't the best fit, they're on the road. And so, to me, that's exciting and it's fun and I love the small town."

Frank finds a lot of community involvement and support within the town of South Valley, and he has worked to engage the community and parents as much as possible. Overall, Frank finds satisfaction and opportunities within the smaller setting, saying:

"So I love the small town. And I've been in small districts and I've been in large districts. And in my opinion, I think a smaller district, pros outweigh a larger district. I just think that the individual connectedness and opportunities to participate in more extracurricular activities are so much more prevalent in a small district. That is my preference."

Phil

Phil is 46 years old and holds a bachelor's degree in History and Secondary Education and a master's degree in Educational Leadership. Phil has 21 years of experience in the classroom with 13 of those years also serving in an administrative role. Phil is currently the principal of Sunnyslope Middle/High School in the Sunnyslope School District. Phil also teaches one class per day of Government and serves as the Athletic Director. Sunnyslope Middle/High school has a current enrollment of 159 students, with total district enrollment at 319 students. Sunnyslope is a small mountain community with an approximate population of 450 residents and is situated 54 miles from the closest urban area (World Population Review, 2021). The geographic location that makes up the enrollment of Sunnyslope is spread out over a large area, proving to be problematic at times. Phil stated:

“I think we are unique because we have such a large geographic area that it is, at times, our kids can be pretty isolated. Some of them, it’s a forty-five-minute bus ride to get to school every day. We’re not a rural school where the whole city, or the whole town lives within a few blocks of each other. We are spread out, isolated, and really cover a large geographic area.”

Phil’s desire to make education a career stemmed out of a knowledge that he truly enjoyed working with kids. Phil said:

“Oh boy. I think I just knew; I had always known that I enjoyed being around kids, working with kids. My education career really started as a coach. I coached at a high school, well the high school I graduated from. I started coaching about three, no about four years after I graduated. Just as a walk-on coach. I did a lot of subbing while I was going to school, at that school. And so that’s where it really started.”

While Phil started out in a larger, urban district, he soon was given an opportunity to come to the small rural community of Sunnyslope. Phil explains:

“My experience had always been with larger schools. And really, when I took my first teaching job up here, my, well both the intention of my wife and I, who were still living in Boise at the time, it was going to be a one-year gig. Like just getting my, getting that first year out of the way so that, I was hired super late, and this was the first job that I was offered.”

However, Phil came to love the community, and the smaller atmosphere, so he has remained within his district for his 21-year career. He captured this by saying:

“Because I think there’s a, it is more important in a small school, and we have the opportunity to make a bigger positive impact because we do know our kids so well. And I just don’t think those, just not the same opportunities in a larger setting.”

John

John is 36 years old and holds a bachelor’s degree in Psychology, Social Studies, and Secondary Education. He also holds a master’s degree in Curriculum and Instruction, and an Educational Specialist degree in Building Administration. He is currently working on an additional Educational Specialist degree in Superintendency. John has five years of experience as a teacher, and six years of experience as an administrator. He is currently the principal for the middle and high school in the Northridge School District. He has been in an administrative position in this district for the past six years, but just recently combined his role from being the middle school principal to being both the middle and high school principal. Northridge Middle School has a total enrollment of 228 students and Northridge High School has a total enrollment of 219 students. The total district enrollment is 828 students (Idaho State Department of Education, 2021). The town of Northridge has an approximate population of 1,300 residents (World Population Review, 2021). It is located 16 miles from the nearest suburban area and 35 miles from the nearest urban area.

John did not originally think he would go into the field of education. He articulated this through the following:

“So I never intended on going into education. My mom was a teacher, my grandpa was a teacher. I swore I would never go into education and never become a teacher. It took me quite a while in my undergrad to figure out what direction to go. Bounced all over a bunch of different places from Pre-Med to different Sciences and things like that, and

then I got a coaching job at Bear High School, coaching football. And really, probably after the first week or two, I knew that I needed to work with kids. It just, it made sense, I enjoyed it. And so at that point, I kind of switched what I was doing and put more of that focus into education.”

He shared that his biggest motivation in coming to work every day is his connection with the students. In working with students in 6th-12th grade, he can see growth and development over time. He finds satisfaction from this and enjoys playing a role in student’s lives. When considering a position in a rural district, John articulated the following:

“So I grew up in a rural district. It wasn’t anywhere near as small as where I taught and now where I’m currently at, but it was much more spread out, covered a lot of area. And so I grew up with that, grew up on a farm and a dairy, and I never initially planned on being in a rural district. I did my student teaching at a 5A school. But after being in a place like that, I found out that it was too big for me. I didn’t have, I mean, I knew, I got to know the people that were in my wing in the building and nobody else. And that was, I didn’t like that aspect. I didn’t like that feel because I knew if that was the case with the staff, it’d probably be pretty difficult from a student perspective too of getting to know all the kids. I mean, I can walk through the halls here and I know every kid from sixth grade to twelfth grade. And getting to talk to every single teacher every day, it’s so important in that relationship piece and I know I wouldn’t get that, or it would be extremely difficult, in a much larger setting and larger school.”

Ultimately, the smaller setting and opportunity for building meaningful relationships has kept John serving in his role, finding it meaningful and impactful.

Findings in Relation to Research Questions and Themes

Themes emerged across the three research questions for this study through the journal entries, semi-structured interviews, and field observations. The journal entries and semi-structured interviews connected to each of the three research questions and provided emerging themes for each. The field observations provided in-context evidence related specifically to the current lived experiences of each participant, as investigated through the first research question, and evidence of how current support systems are impacting their leadership practices, as investigated through the second research question.

A variety of analytical methods were used to identify the overall themes present for each research question. Interviews, journal entries, and field observations used structural coding and concept coding (Saldana, 2016). Structural coding was used because each question in both the journals and interviews was connected to a research question (Saldana, 2016). Responses were categorized under each research question, and then concept coding was used to extract main ideas represented in each response. For field observations, both structural and concept codes were assigned in the same manner by extracting main ideas notes in descriptive and reflective field notes. For all data sources, concept codes were combined into categories and patterns, and patterns were condensed into overall themes. Emerging themes related to each research question are detailed in Table 2.

The use of narrative inquiry allows the participants' voices to be highlighted to bring attention to a need or important issue at hand (Creswell & Guetterman, 2019). The researcher chose to use direct quotes within the results of this study to do this, letting the words of the participants show the depth and scope of the results themselves. Portions of quotes have been highlighted in bold font to show the sections of the narrative data that bring to life the emerging

themes connected to each research question. These bolded sections emphasize the most salient thoughts and main ideas expressed by participants, allowing the themes to speak through their words.

Table 2

Research Questions and Emerging Themes

Research Questions	Emerging Themes
<p>1. What are the lived experiences that principals in small, rural schools encounter that they feel require support and training as a leader?</p>	<p>Lived Experiences & Challenges: Meeting student Needs Instructionally and Behaviorally, Community and Staff Relations, Balance of Leadership Roles and Responsibilities, Staffing & Resource Accessibility</p>
<p>2. What support do they currently access and what is their reflection on how this support has impacted their leadership practices?</p>	<p>Current Support: Personal Network & Experiences, School-Based Network, State & Professional Resources</p> <p>Impact on Practice: Shared Resources, Personal & Leadership Growth, Impact on Culture and Climate</p>
<p>3. What are the barriers, given their rurality, to participating in leadership support programs or opportunities to address their specific leadership challenges and how has this impacted their leadership practices?</p>	<p>Barriers: Logistics & Impact, Resources & Relevancy to Position/Role</p> <p>Impact on Practice: Hinderance on Leadership & Personal Growth</p>

Results Summary

Research Question #1

What are the lived experiences that principals in small, rural schools encounter that they feel require support and training as a leader?

Participants' responses through the reflective journals and semi-structured interviews, along with the researcher's field observations, revealed that the lived experiences principals encounter that require support and present a challenge fall into four main themes: Balance of Leadership Roles and Responsibilities, Meeting Student Needs Instructionally and Behaviorally, Staffing and Resource Accessibility, and Community and Staff Relationships. To arrive at these themes, the codes generated from the reflective journal entries, semi-structured interviews, and field notes were all combined and the frequency by which each code was referenced was recorded. Finally, codes were organized into categories through which the identified themes emerged. These themes are listed in Table 3 with the frequency with which they were noted across interviews, journal responses, and field observations.

Table 3

Research Question #1 Themes

Research Question #1 Themes	Frequency
Balance of Leadership Roles and Responsibilities	148
Meeting Student Needs Instructionally and Behaviorally	144
Staffing and Resource Accessibility	125
Community and Staff Relationships	124

Within McREL's Balanced Leadership Framework (Rouleau, 2021; Waters & Cameron, 2007), these articulated challenges and lived experiences connect to several leadership responsibilities that McREL has found to have statistically significant impact on student achievement (Rouleau, 2021; Waters & Cameron, 2007). These challenges also impact the three

key areas of the Balanced Leadership Framework of focusing on what matters most, developing a purposeful community, and effectively leading change efforts (Rouleau, 2021; Waters & Cameron, 2007). Tables 4-7 display the most frequently referenced codes within each theme, along with the corresponding leadership responsibilities and identified effect size of impact.

Table 4

Research Question #1 Theme 1 and Corresponding McREL Leadership Responsibilities

Balance of Leadership Roles and Responsibilities			
McREL Leadership Responsibilities	McREL Effect Size	Corresponding Codes	References
Focus	0.24	Time	29
		Balance	27
Adaptability	0.28	Multiple Roles	38
		Flexibility	3
		Task Management	3
		Unexpected Issues	3
		Volume of Issues	2
		Discouragement	1
		Stress	1
Visibility	0.2	Spread Thin	20
		Accessibility	3
Relationships	0.18	Self-Care	14
Situational Awareness	0.33	Increased Responsibility	1
		Crisis Management	1
Change Agent	0.25	Burnout	1
Communication	0.23	Communication	1

Table 5

Research Question #1 Theme 2 and Corresponding McREL Leadership Responsibilities

Meeting Student Needs Instructionally and Behaviorally			
McREL Leadership Responsibilities	McREL Effect Size	Corresponding Codes	References
Structures & Routines (Order)	0.25	Large Class Size	3
		Scheduling	3
		Attendance	2
Resources	0.25	Instructional Needs	4
		Instructional Resources	4
Protects (Discipline)	0.27	Student Behavior	24
		Student Supervision Duties	7
		Classroom Management	1
Involvement in Teaching & Learning	0.20	Instructional Supervision	19
		Instructional Support	12
Situational Awareness	0.33	Student Needs	29
Intellectual Stimulation	0.24	Staff Instructional Training	14
Input	0.25	Student Support Services	1
Ideals/Beliefs	0.22	Instructional Focus	1
Knowledge of Teaching & Learning	0.25	Instructional Programming	20

Table 6

Research Question #1 Theme 3 and Corresponding McREL Leadership Responsibilities

Staffing and Resource Accessibility			
McREL Leadership Responsibilities	McREL Effect Size	Corresponding Codes	References
Resources	0.25	Staffing-sub	26
		Limited Applicants	20
		Lack of Resources-Staffing	11
		Small Staff Size	2
		Increased staff numbers	1
		Non-local Staff	1
		Small District/Shared Staffing Resources	13 7
Structures & Routines	0.25	Health Policy	9
		State Department Regulations	2
Adaptability	0.28	Isolation- Unique Setting/Accessibility	18
Community	0.25	Personnel Challenges	7
Involvement in Teaching & Learning	0.2	Alternatively Certified Staff	1
Situational Awareness	0.33	Building Management	7

Table 7

Research Question #1 Theme 4 and Corresponding McREL Leadership Responsibilities

Community and Staff Relationships			
McREL Leadership Responsibilities	McREL Effect Size	Corresponding Codes	References
Advocacy	0.27	Community Relations Family Relations Small Town Politics High community involvement Positive Community Relations Community Outreach Family Connection Parents	34 10 5 4 3 1 1 1
Community	0.25	Family Atmosphere Positive school climate Staff Culture/Morale Dysfunctional Teaming	1 2 8 21
Input	0.25	Lack of Collaboration Lack of Support Staff Support/Buy-In	1 1 4
Relationships	0.18	Building Relationships Positive relationships Staff Needs	6 1 16
Resources	0.25	Lack of Turnover	1
Change Agent	0.25	Negative School Board Meetings	2
Knowledge of Teaching & Learning	0.25	Limited perspective	1

Theme 1- Balance of Leadership Roles and Responsibilities

The most frequently mentioned area that presents a challenge to the participants is that of balancing leadership roles and responsibilities. This overall theme encompasses such ideas as managing and filling multiple roles such as being the principal and superintendent or a teacher. Participants also often talked about the difficulty with maintaining balance and time management due to the multiple hats they wear within their position. There was an overall common pattern within responses of being spread thin across many responsibilities and tasks.

Through this task of balancing responsibilities, this theme also touches on feelings for participants of stress, anxiety, and potential burnout.

Direct Quotes from Participants

Sandy

“I think that I wear probably more hats, although I have fewer students that I need to care for with each of those hats. I think probably more hats. So I don’t have a secretary, really, I mean there’s kind of a secretary, but she’s the middle school and she does kind of help with elementary things but it’s not like a true secretary. So I don’t have like an office staff everything comes to me, there’s no filter in any way. So I have to kind of be my own filter. I do all the testing coordinating, so like all the roster file uploads, that’s me. I try and go through the CSV files and get into our student information system and get it all together. Then I order all the school supplies for the whole district and get those all in and sorted and given out to all those staff members who ordered. Because we provide all the school supplies for all the kids too, so it’s all under that and it’s huge, it’s like several thousand dollars of stuff and it’s a lot of work. It’s probably three solid weeks in the summer. So, and I think that’s not normal for, you know, for a typical principal.”

“But it is hard to balance, I think part of it’s because of my personality type and my tendencies, and I like to be really thorough, and I really like to focus on one thing and do it really well. So, I struggle when I have a lot of things that, I guess I struggle when I’m trying to wear multiple hats at one time. So, I have to just try and prioritize and try to tell myself I’m going to work on this right now, but then when I’m done, I’m going to move on to something else. It’s definitely a struggle.”

“So, my summertime and then the Christmas Break is the only one that’s kind of long enough that my brain will let down because I’m kind of high-strung about stuff. **And I think I have a little bit of, I probably have a lot of anxiety. Like, it’s low-key and it’s high-functioning anxiety, but it’s just like I’m always kind of up, up, up, up, up, up and then my brain is, you know, not, like I said, I don’t really access those parts of my brain that reach that inspiring long-term planning.** So I think that, you know, I do consciously try to make those two times of the year help me out in that respect.”

Janice

“**You’re essentially by yourself. Like, I’m the Dual Programs, I’m Title I, English Language, I don’t even know what to call, Assessment Coordinator, Curriculum Director, you’re all of it.** We don’t have an HR Department, we have literally one Superintendent, one office assistant for him, or the District Office, one lady who does all the financials, payroll, and that’s it. We do have one guy in IT, which has helped a lot. I think we’re going to get a second because we’re all feeling like, like I’m tech support for my whole building. And that’s, I mean, obviously in the last year, that was really a hard role because I felt old and frumpy and even Team, like Zoom, I know Teams, but I don’t know Zoom. There’s just so many things to learn.”

“**I find it really hard to balance, like how to keep up with just the emails and the demands of deadlines and oh my gosh, continuous improvement plans due, and state audits are due on evaluations right now.** But I’m never, I’m not at my desk enough to be able, I don’t feel like I can pull from kids to come do that kind of work. So then you end up doing that at, you know, eleven p.m. And that’s just an issue I forever have struggled with in the profession. **I cannot seem to find a balance to get through it**”

all. And it's easy to say, oh, I put my in the students first, which I felt pretty strong that I do. But like right now, I know there's two teachers who desperately wanted to talk to for two days and I still haven't got to them. And then I'm putting parents first because I think there's nine parents to call back because I don't take calls during kid time. So then at the end of the day, I pay for that."

Frank

"You wear more hats without a doubt. So, one is my role is multi, so I'm a principal at the elementary school, and that takes all my time. And in addition to that, then I'm also the Superintendent. So, you know, it's a balancing act. My primary focus was really being the principal my first year. And now I'm getting more into the Superintendent arena, seeing all these other things that need addressed and corrected. But you can't just do it all at once, so it's a process, and so I've had to try to lay out some focus areas. And a lot of that has to do with relaying that out to the administrative team because they were very green as well and just didn't have a plan. And because they also are wearing so many hats, for example, right now we have a principal who is also the A.D. (Athletic Director), which is not a good plan. **It's too much for one person to do a good job in either area.**"

Phil

"I still teach. I teach one period a day. When I started as Principal, I was teaching two periods a day. I am also the Athletic Director still. And so things that, in a perfect world, if I were just able to focus on this office, I know that things like data review and data analysis, those things take a backseat as opposed to dealing with discipline, as opposed to making sure our teachers have what they need. And again,

I think that is a process, certainly trying to improve on that. But yea, I think that's a difference. Where in a big school, they have a team, even our internet access and our computers, when I talk to principals at bigger schools and ask them questions, a lot of the time I get the response, "Well, our IT guy takes care of that". Well, we don't have an IT guy. So that just leaves us to troubleshoot and handle those problems on our own, or those challenges on our own."

"I am only in the classroom one period a day. That tends to, I think that's the one that probably receives the least amount of attention. And probably the one that should receive the most amount of my attention. And to be honest, there are days where I go, getting to go to my classroom is the best part of my day. It gets me out of here, even just for that forty-seven-minute period where I just get to be around kids. And I get to go teach. I value that very much."

"And then the AD stuff, so much of that is on the weekends, it's after schools, it's, I have coached for twenty-five years. I still get to coach, but it's just in a different way. I'm not at practice at 3:30 every day. I'm at practice at 5, or I'm not there."

John

"So again, in talking with colleagues of mine that work in bigger districts, the hats I wear, I have a lot more of them. **And I think that's probably the biggest thing is that my role is not just, I'm the leader of the building, but yesterday I was cleaning up the bathrooms and, you know, the last week and a half, I've been in the classrooms teaching because we haven't had enough subs. And it just, you've got to have the mindset of this is not just my role, it's more of a team aspect where things are needed and people are needed, you just step in and do that.** And I know in talking

with my colleagues, they typically have one or two or multiple people for those various roles. And so obviously they have a significant more amount of kids, but I think it's just all relative. **But I would say that's probably the biggest aspect is that I've got more hats that I've got to kind of juggle around and work with."**

"That's probably one of the more difficult things, especially having taken on the role of high school principal too. **I don't want to say it was easier, but it was definitely more manageable just being over one school and having to look at and deal with all of these kids and all of the events, things that come up within the one school.** Whereas now, it's juggling both sets, both staffs, and trying to figure out do these concerns and these issues come to me? Do they go to my VP? Do they go the counselors? **And so, trying to figure out that balance I think is still, it's still pretty fluid. It's not perfect by any means and I think it's just a constant learning cycle for me as well as the whole staff of how everything kind of fits together."**

"There's just, there's not very much and as an administrator, we know that it's lonely at the top. And we don't always get the support and the development that we need, which I think is a large part why we see so much turnover in administration is just, you go into it with this thought and thinking this, and whether you don't have the support from other admin, superintendent, certain situations, you're done. I've definitely been lucky from that aspect."

Theme 2- Meeting Student Needs Instructionally and Behaviorally

The second theme that was mentioned most frequently is that of meeting student needs, both in the areas of instruction and behavior. Participants mentioned difficulties in addressing an increase in behavioral issues this school year, at times connected to some students who had not

been in a traditional school environment for the past year to 18 months. Additionally, there was an articulated challenge with implementing effective instruction and supports for students academically. Finally, this theme also encompassed responses about the challenge to monitor and evaluate instructional practices of teachers and provide meaningful support on a consistent basis.

Direct Quotes from Participants

Sandy

“Probably the most challenging thing currently is trying to provide intervention for some of our students who desperately need it. **I am pretty worried about the kids who need that extra support. I don’t know what to do about it, though, because I can’t sacrifice the core instruction.**”

“One other thing that has been a little bit unique this month is determining proper grade level placement for a few students. Each situation is different, but it has been a little bit time consuming.”

“**Professional development training for teachers this month was rough because it was a virtual training, and the internet provider company was down for the first half of the day. Teachers were frustrated and rightfully so. I was disappointed that the training wasn’t as impactful as it could have been.** I then struggled internally with hearing some of the negative feedback from staff members. I totally get it, though. I just wanted it to be so good.”

“**I plan and provide almost all the professional development for the year. I do research, pretty much I can do presentations, or I’ll bring someone in, so like that’s a little what I do for the district and, you know, as I’m doing that, I share what we**

do. Let's see, I also, I oversee all the professional growth plans for the whole district. And then I follow through on those of all the different staff members, help them write their proposal, if they need any assistance, and then stay in touch with them throughout the year to make sure that they don't need any support. Or if they do need support, I can help provide that for them. If they need to observe something, I try to reach out and observe or just try to support in that. **I spend quite a bit of time trying to make sure, trying to support teachers so that they spend their energy doing what really matters, which is the teaching."**

Janice

"Student behaviors have been the most challenging this month. Larger class sizes (double to what we had a year ago due to hybrid every other day schedule) makes it harder for teachers to manage their class; and they need support for many students who are simply melting down and feeling the stress of it all."

"I feel like if I'm not out there, that's when things happen, and then I end up just cleaning up. So it's easier to just be proactive and social and see kids and talk to kids and help them problem solve every little, you know, cutting in line situation that is very traumatic for children. **This year, it's just, I would say the staff mental state of just keeping them optimistic. And just the challenges we're dealing with. High numbers, like, we don't get to turn away kids, so we started the year at like twenty-four, twenty-five in every classroom, now we're at thirty, thirty-one already, in just two weeks. They just keep coming. And the kids we're getting right now are just super challenging because they haven't been in the system. So for two years, they've been,**

who knows where they've been, but they haven't been in any school system. So we're just cleaning up and lots of mental breakdowns of kids and staff.”

“So, the challenge here is **we're such a high academic school and so they were like what about our math scores at the end of the year? And I was like, you've got to put math aside right now. There's no way you can teach math until you get these behaviors figured out.** You have four criers, one hitter, one kid under a desk, like, not okay. So really that's the new focus is we're using our existing materials because we don't think, like, there's not a plethora of new stuff out there, and that these behaviors are just new to us that we've got to put more emphasis on them.”

“**I feel like I'm always missing classroom time.** I do on my, I have it set today at ten, so every day, I just pick a different hour of the day, so it's a pattern, so every Friday is at ten. I don't know if my staff knows it's a pattern, but from ten to eleven, I just go walk around and I just sit in the back of rooms. And I often just, well not often, always have my laptop, and I just work. But I'm just in the rooms, just in the presences of the kids, helps my mindset a little bit. And I at least feel like I instructionally know what's happening. **But I'm not coaching them, I'm not giving them any feedback.** I don't observe that hour. So I do fifteen minutes in three rooms, basically, and then my hour is up and I just finish my walk and come back.”

Frank

“**So, I'm an advocate for teaming, so I attend all of our team meetings. And we team every week for K-3 and for 4-6. We also collaborate.** We have a collaboration time every week with the teachers and the parents for K-3 and 4-6, and that's a time for them to plan for their interventions. So, we have an hour of interventions in K-3 and in

4-6, a half hour for reading and a half hour for math. **So those are really critical for them to plan so that those interventions are effective.** And then we also have a behavior action team once a week. And that's where we just address any IEP referrals, 504's, misbehavior from the students that we need to follow up on or create an action plan or bring parents in. And so that's a lot of the time. **I also try to be in the classrooms every week. And so to me, if you really want to have a grip on what's happening in your school, you got to be in the classroom. And you've got to attend those teaming meetings. And they will keep you abreast of what's happening, what's good, what do we need to adjust. And so that takes the bulk of my time, without a doubt."**

Phil

"I would say between, the majority of my time would be in instructional leadership. And really, for us, a lot of that was supporting teachers and not necessarily curriculum delivery, but really just supporting teachers."

"We see a real, we have seen a really high population of transient kids. So, kids that will come up and they'll be here in August or September living in a camper trailer on grandma's lot some place, or at the gas station. And then when winter comes, they're gone or we're really struggling to find them resources so that their kids can keep coming to school. So, I think that transient population is really difficult. Those are hands down, that population of students, they're usually coming because they're not in a great situation. And so, they're, whether it's homelessness, whether it's lack of resources, whether it's mom and dad are divorcing, whatever it is, those kids tend to take up the majority of our resources and our time. And unfortunately, as a

principal, I don't feel like we get the return on our resources for that. Just because we don't get to keep them long enough to see them doing better, or to see them succeed in high school or whatever level. So, I would say that that is a change for us, and a huge shock.”

“First, the biggest challenge is that idea that we just don't have a lot of teachers to share all those jobs as far as mentoring. So we really kind of revamped our mentoring program that we have in this building to kind of make it more encompassing so that all the teachers feel comfortable. We want any of our new teachers comfortable going to any staff member, not just a specific one. They certainly have a teacher that they spend more time within their curriculum area. And then we have one teacher, staff member, kind of running that mentoring program. **So, we have, we meet twice a month. I try and be there as a support first, so I try not to go, you know, I'll go to the mentoring meetings and maybe spend the first five or ten minutes there and just kind of have a list of things on the agenda that hey, these are things that I want to make sure we get covered. But those, just making sure that those new teachers are getting the support they need to be successful for our kids. I think that's the biggest challenge.”**

John

“I would say for the most part, most of my time spent is probably just managing and coordinating various things that are happening. I'm involved in the behavior that happens, but not as much as I used to be. I've kind of delegated more of that out after taking over the high school role as well. And so, you know, I still see some of that, but it's not a huge part of my day most of the time. **I think it's more just kind of managing**

and looking at how things are going within the classrooms, what's going on with the teachers, what events or things do we have coming up, how's that going to work logistically."

"I definitely would prefer to be in the classrooms more than I am. That's a big goal I have this year is to try and get into the classrooms more than I did last year.

Obviously last year was pretty crazy, this year's, well, not turning out to be a whole lot different, so we'll kind of see how that goes. **But my preference is to be in the classroom, seeing what the kids are doing, talking with the kids, talking with the teachers because obviously that's why I got into this position, to be able to make more changes and more significant changes for the kids. But sometimes those daily things end up taking priority over that, unfortunately."**

Theme 3- Staffing and Resource Accessibility

The next theme that was identified most frequently was issues with staffing and access to needed resources. The most common staffing issue was a lack of substitutes to fill needed positions when staff were absent, often creating issues to spread out other staff members to provide the coverage. Another issue that was articulated overall was a lack of applicants for positions, often presenting a hiring challenge at the beginning of a school year. A frequently articulated aspect of this challenge was that since their districts are smaller and cannot always compete financially for applicants, the hiring pool is smaller. Finally, there was the voiced challenge by participants of having access to enough needed resources, whether that relates to curriculum or needed trainings. These challenges often related to the geographic isolation of the community in which the schools reside. At times, the unique setting of the participants and an

overabundance of funding presents its own challenge. Overall, managing resources effectively and having sufficient staffing needs met is a challenging lived experience for participants.

Direct Quotes from Participants

Sandy

“Subs, sub coverage is big. That’s a big challenge, and you know all about that, but where we don’t have a pool, we don’t have a lot of people in our community to start with and then there aren’t a lot who would be interested in subbing or even okay to be subbing, you know?”

“The staff members that I have for providing intervention are almost constantly subbing for classroom teachers who are out, mostly, due to COVID-related issues. We have a very shallow substitute pool and those who are willing to sub aren’t familiar with our core curriculum and, honestly, are not really capable of teaching well.”

“The hiring piece is challenging because people, even people who live in the Valley, often think that that hill between there and our area is insurmountable. It’s like that’s such a long way to go, and really, it’s not. I’d rather drive that than go across the Valley, you know, it probably is quicker. So, we used to really struggle to find people when we were trying to hire and you kind of had to go with the best of the options and just try to help grow the person. That definitely is a challenge when we’re just trying to attract, like, Special Education teachers or those hard to fill positions. Those are tough.”

“One of the teacher’s SmartBoards broke and we heavily rely on the SmartBoards for most of the day. It was a huge pain to try and get a replacement board.

Shipping was a nightmare. Trying to support that teacher through that challenge was difficult. She was a great sport, I just felt badly.”

“I do try to help save the district money by doing what I can and trying to bring good resources like books and we do personalized professional development where they get to do their own thing too. So, but that’s challenging.”

“Being an administrator in a small rural district is a fairly lonely position because there aren’t a lot of other administrators that you have easy access to.”

Janice

“Staff absenteeism has been my biggest struggle. It often influences my at home time as I get the text/notices that a staff member will be out without a notice and am scrambling to find coverage as subs are hard to find. It affects my whole staff too as often I have to pull and re-arrange staff to cover many different roles. It is a benefit for staff for days off; and knowing it DOES impact our students is just hard for me to understand and balance.”

“I was so busy subbing every day and feeling frustrated with teachers taking days off, me being stuck subbing, and then realizing in the end, I couldn’t fill all the vacancies myself. So, I had to just step back and say, like, I mean, we had a week of we cancelled classes in kindergarten because we couldn’t fill the positions.”

“Field trips, we don’t even call them field trips, they’re just called educational connections. I have almost a grade level out daily. And that’s unique to me. Money’s not an object here, so that’s also unique, I think. I’m embarrassed to say that, but I don’t know how else to explain it. It’s really sad to tell someone in the private sector

though. You guys work really hard to get a dollar and ours is like, oh my gosh, I work really hard to spend it all. And so, most of our money is spent on these educational opportunities that the kids go on.”

Frank

“Staffing challenges have been the most difficult. Personnel issues in my book present the most stress and difficulty. In addition, we are battling a large number of staff out due to sickness or Covid-19. **This impacts interventions, duties, coverage, and adds stress to everyone involved.** I have sure appreciated, however, the willingness to help out from the staff here.”

“Well, I think the biggest challenge in any district is staffing. And **I don’t mean just hiring staffing, but if you have staffing challenges where either they’re not doing the job that you see is the way it should be done or if they’re just a little bit more difficult to work with.** Maybe not the strongest team player, so I think in any job – whether you’re in a large district or small district – staffing challenges are the biggest. They’re the most stressful, I think.”

“So, I think our pool is limited. You know, just this last year, we thought we were losing our entire math department at the high school. We ended up losing one of the two. In the meantime, we’d already hired to replace this person who told us she was leaving and then when she agreed to come back, you know, we had to shuffle. So of course, we wanted her back because she’s a veteran master teacher, but it required some shuffling last minute to make it work. And I think that’s a big challenge, is the getting the candidate pool there.”

“So, some of the staffing, we’ve been short with paras, and so having to hire paras. And then we would have paras that would leave, so they found a better job or what was that other one? One of them, they got removed from their home and they didn’t want to leave, but they had to go find a different job that would pay more because they have to make more money to make rent and they couldn’t stay here. And then we had another one that’s leaving because they’re going back to school, so we’ve lost a few paras in the process. One of them, right off the bat, they didn’t give us any notice. Right before school started, they said I can’t afford to come to work, and with gas prices, I’m losing money.”

Phil

“I think we are unique because we have such a large geographic area that it is, at times, our kids can be pretty isolated. Some of them, it’s a forty-five-minute bus ride to get to school every day. So, it makes them appreciate being around each other, I think, a little more. We’re not a rural school where the whole city, or the whole town lives within a few blocks of each other. We are spread out, isolated, and really cover a large geographic area.”

“We don’t get a ton of applications for openings; we are lucky to get what we get. And I like that challenge of realizing that I don’t get to get a JC transfer in, you know, I need to do the best job I can to help who we have in our building be the very best teacher and instructor that they can be.”

“We don’t have an IT guy. So that just leaves us to troubleshoot and handle those problems on our own, or those challenges on our own.”

“So, finding adequate subs. We all know teachers have whole other lives outside of the school building and sometimes things just come up. And so having an effective and efficient way to cover those necessary absences for staff.”

“Several of the substitutes that we had been relying on as a secondary building have now been hired in the elementary building to fill some other roles. So that’s been extremely difficult. I think part of just how our community is is that we used to have a pretty strong group of older retired community members who were very good about coming in on short notice and going forward or being able to help us out. And those community members are just not available right now. For whatever reason, they are not. Whether it’s the Covid, yea, I guess that’s my assumption. I really hope it’s not because they’re not comfortable coming into our school. But I think it’s, there’s just that uneasiness about exposure for everyone right now, I think.”

“It was super close to whether we were going to be able to have, to keep some of the programs. Specifically, our music program, I really didn’t have a music teacher. I did not have anyone apply, well, we had one application. And so it just ended up that I ran into a former student who has moved back to the community, she is late twenties, but had been a music, very involved in our music program here in her time. Went to school initially for music education and then it just didn’t work out. She ended up changing and getting her Bachelor’s in Social Studies. But just happened to run into her, she was playing, her and her husband were playing music at another former student’s wedding. And I just said hey, we have an opening. And she was very close with the music teacher who just retired. And so she was able to kind of slide in and she’s doing, pursuing her Masters in teaching as a way to get her teaching credential and her Masters at the same

time. So we just kind of lucked out with that. But really limited applicants, not a lot of interviews. **The Science position was also pretty hard and we ended up going with another former student who is working on her alternative certification. So the hiring process up here is just, it's always difficult. It seems like we do more recruiting than actual hiring.**"

John

"It seems to be an issue that will not go away. **Staffing! Difficult to find subs or we are asking other staff to sub for staff.**"

"Our school in particular, I think that for my time that I've been here, you know, within the six years, I think I've hired four teachers. And so we have a lot of buy-in, we've got a lot of people in the right places, they want to stay here, they want to continue to be here. And that consistency is just so important in education with the kids, you know, and I would say that that's definitely something pretty unique that we're, the turnover we have is pretty minimal. Especially where we're not in an urban place, and there's a lot more potential opportunities as well from financial standpoint and other things at larger districts or different places. But they still want to be here and they still want to come here."

"I would say currently, one of the biggest challenges is resources from a personnel standpoint. That's been extremely difficult this year and trying to kind of navigate through that piece, that's been, haven't had to deal with it to this extent in my career before. And so that's been a large challenge. I think we've definitely weathered the first storm, but obviously I don't know how or what that will look like going forward.

But we did make it through the first one. So that would definitely be the biggest challenge right now.”

“Well, I mean, we’ve always had issues with subs just because of our location and having that consistency if you go, you know, a little way down the road and the pay is different than we have here and the potential to get work every day is much higher because of the size of the district. But I would say that because of where things are at and how things are going right now, that has been a drastic increase this year. I mean, there’d be the occasion in years past where we’d have to step in for a sub because we didn’t have a sub or something, you know, once or twice a year. And now we’re looking at that easily once to every day a week where administration, counselors, office staff, paraprofessionals, the guy we see walking down the street, I mean, who can we get to help cover? It has, in the beginning of the year, it was way worse, it just seemed like everybody got sick at the same time. And so now, it’s just kind of pockets here and there of staff being in and out. And I was joking last week with our staff member that’s basically runs our substitute app and is kind of in charge of that. And I said I don’t even remember the last day that we had all of our staff here, which kind of making a light-hearted joke of it, but it’s true. **I don’t think there’s been a single day this year where our entire staff has been here. And that’, I mean, obviously that affects more than just having an individual in the building. But we all know when you have a sub in a classroom, the difference in the learning that takes place and the other negatives that come along with not having your typical teacher in there.”**

Theme 4- Community and Staff Relationships

The final theme that emerged from the data was that of community and staff relationships. Many participants articulated challenges with community relationships due in large part to policy mandates outside of their control, such as mask mandates due to Covid. Additionally, some communities presented challenges in passing needed levy measures due to a lack of connection with the schools themselves. Finally, participants also noted some challenge in building positive staff culture and climate, as well as meeting the needs of their staff members overall. While these challenges can present themselves in larger districts as well, participants spoke to the unique challenge this presents when serving in a small community where relationships and interactions within the community are more personal and involved.

Direct Quotes from Participants

Sandy

“Some parents have been frustrated with the protocols we have to use, but nothing too major. I’ve also been mentally struggling with how to show staff appreciation. I have some good ideas, but I don’t have the time/energy to make it all come together. We have over 50 staff members and it all adds up.”

“Relationships, I think the relationships are really strong here, with the staff. I feel the relationships are strong. It’s something I put a lot of thought into, relationship building with the staff, with the parents, with the community. I used to struggle with taking things personally with parents, you know, living in the same small town where you’re an administrator is not easy. For the first year, I spent a lot of time crying, you know, and looking at Facebook, the community page, and wanting to cry. What are they saying, they don’t understand, they don’t know the whole picture so they only see the

people who are making assumptions when it seems like a lot of times, when you know that the drama sells, so they don't always just go to the nice side of things. **So I had to get a lot thicker skin, but I think that's an area where it's a challenge, but I think it's always a challenge for anyone.**"

"I meet with the community school's coordinator frequently. I have a monthly meeting with her and the superintendent, and that's all those community resource things. But I also, she, that's kind of as needed. It's like, oh, Giovanni doesn't have any shoes, so let's, you know, so she comes in quite a bit."

"I have a good feel for what teachers are doing and what my concerns might be or what their strengths are. Because I've had this staff for a couple years, I don't have anybody brand new, so I'm fortunate that way too. So I guess, I always wish I did more, but I was born with a guilty conscience. I always wish I did better and more and all that. But I feel like we're all on the same page as far as we're all trying to do what's best for kids and we're all trying to teach with integrity to the program. I mean, there's, it's a little bit sometimes not as motivating as I would like but it's not egregious. It's not, like, it's not a fire-able thing or anything. **So I do try to stay, and I kind of know each teacher, so I kind of know what they need and know which ones need pretty constant assurance and like, I see you, you're doing great kind of things and some that are just doing their thing,** so, I don't know if that answers your question or not."

Janice

"Staff morale has been more difficult, especially with specific classroom teachers who have some challenging student behaviors. I think I am worn out from

handling and trying to help with the student behaviors that when the teachers come to tell me they need help and don't know how to keep going, I'm out of energy and positivity to help them."

"I felt like in the big districts, it was really hard, and it took effort to coordinate me with other principals to be kind of similar and be a team and oh, I got to meet once a week with this team, and once a week with, there was so many meetings and teamwork. And then I went from that to eh, there's no such things as a meeting up here. So, yea, it's different. **I think that's probably the biggest thing is just I miss, I mean, it's hard, I don't miss meetings. But I do miss feeling like you're a part of a team and having people to bounce ideas off of, there's really nobody."**

"It (Covid) has definitely split the community, we've seen a lot of really mean things, lots of threats on school staff. That's hard to take because we're not used to that. We've had such a supportive community. I do think we're making steps forward, like getting our volunteers back in was the right move because they were angry that we weren't allowing them in and vice versa or whatever. You know, the Covid side of the walk is they want to mandate a certain kind of mask now that only N95's can work, they want all children, all adults in those all day or we shut down. We don't have any data to support that we need to do anything more because numbers are under five at all buildings, like, so tiny. And there's four hundred kids at every building, so that's a pretty small fraction."

"I deal with one to two pretty hostile emails – it's always on email because they can easily vent. I always call. It's hard, I mean, just beats you up, but he's like, you're

dealing with one or two a day out of four hundred and ten kids. That's nothing. I'm like, ugh, but that one is hard."

"I think with the division of, we call it, our division here is, you have parent choice versus mandates. That's essentially what we're fighting over. **Our board meetings are very uncomfortable, very heated, full houses, two hundred people at every board meeting. And they go four or five hours long now because you listen to all the public comment. It's very divided, but I would say in our small town, it feels worse because you know every single person who speaks up. And there's a friendship relationship to all of these. So yea, like, I mean, I have two to three, like I would say probably my closest girlfriends are no longer even speaking to my family because of choices we've made."**

"I just need the strength to build me up to be able to counsel all these staff members who are just going through very similar feelings. **So, I definitely need the strength to just be able to deal with everyone's needs. It's hard."**

"I started the year having everyone read two trauma-based books. And I think that probably was just too much. Too much negative, it was very hard for people, including myself, to read those books. **So, I think we're getting there, but it's hard to keep staff morale up when they feel the trauma challenges that their faced."**

Frank

"Most challenging is assuring the administrative team is on the same page. **Personnel challenges are always the most difficult."**

“We’re just trying to get more opportunities for the community to be more involved and have a say and super supporters. So, we passed our last supplemental levy by a very slim margin. So, we’re hopeful that that doesn’t happen again but that it will be passed by a landslide. And I think if we can get more community involvement with more say, that will allow us to be on the same page.”

“I think in any job – whether you’re in a large district or small district – staffing challenges are the biggest. They’re the most stressful, I think. Parents and students, that’s just part of the territory and you can work through all that. But I think the key is to have a unified team, and if you can get that team to really function cohesively, man, then it’s a lot of fun. And when that’s not quite intact, it’s a little harder.”

“When you have to stop to deal with people who are negative, who are defensive about anything, don’t accept criticism, man, it slows down the bus. It holds up the process. And so that’s been my biggest frustration this year is I’m spending a lot more time dealing with that as opposed to if we were a highly functioning effective unit, we’d get that much more done. So, I feel like I’m battling when I’m trying to get started and moving in this right direction when it’s not always supported what leads, that’s hard. Whenever you’re dealing with staffing, it’s stressful, it’s unpleasant. I mean, it’s like the biggest waste of time because it takes you from your true obligation to allow the system to be more efficient, to be more effective, to meet the students’ needs, and the staff needs. And so it is just cumbersome and incredibly inconvenient and unpleasant.”

“It’s a little different when you’re in a small district like this because when you’re in a leadership role in a small district, and one of the leaders is the part of the

challenge, you can't go discuss any of this with staff. That's highly inappropriate. And so, it's just super frustrating when you're trying to move in the same direction and you're not, you know, you don't have a unified front from the leadership position. And so that is just hard. **So, if you were in a larger district, there's umpteen leadership positions and roles and so you have a lot of people you can reach out to and address and run by. And so, in this case, it's a little different.** There are other principals, there's assistant principals, there's directors from the district office, assistant directors, assistant superintendents, superintendent. **So, there's just a lot more people to run things by to get a little bit more guidance and structure and all of that. Where in a small district, you don't have that. So that's a little tougher."**

"I would say in a small rural district, you've got to realize I think everything is more political, in a small district. And again, I think in any district, in any size, regardless of the size, your leadership team is critical. **You've got to start with the leadership team that is high-functioning, unified, working together.** If you don't have that, it's kind of like a coaching staff and all the coaches are in disagreement. They can't get along and can't even agree on offense or defense schemes. That's a tough go. So, it's kind of similar to that, I would say. So, if you don't have that, I think it's really, really tough. So, I would say that's key, that's critical. **And so, part of me feels like I failed in the fact that I tried to pull together all these ideas, try to correct it, and fix it, and guide, and help in this situation. And it's been to no avail. So, it's gotten to the point now where there has to be a decision made where to go from here."**

Phil

“At this point we have a highly charged community. A small vocal minority is adamantly against requiring masks for students in our school. We have not had a mask requirement this year. School Board Meetings have turned into a four-hour political protest. First real turmoil for our school board that has lasted more than a specific board meeting.”

“I know we talk about the family aspect, and I absolutely believe that it’s true, that we are pretty close and way more family oriented than...and I love the fact, we have, you know, I have three daughters and all of my daughters have come to school with me every day. They’re hanging out at practices, they’re waiting for meetings, those kinds of things. And I think we have a lot of staff members that do that. And so it’s pretty easy for our kids to feel like everybody is family, because our families are here all the time.”

“So, it (mask mandate) does affect our community because the school is the hub of our town in so many different ways. And there is, there is just a lot of resentment. there is a lot of polarization. So that has not been good. We always hear the most from the angriest and the loudest. And that is normally, you know, for us, that is a pretty small number of people. They just are the most vocal. And we have a great community and it’s super supportive. But we don’t hear those people, you know. Our great parents and the parents who are supportive, they don’t come to the school board meetings. Why would they? They don’t want to sit through that any more than any of us. So that has been different. And really pretty, you know, you used to [inaudible]. **Because our school board meetings were boring and uneventful and they are not, or have not been that**

way the last couple months. And then how it has affected me. I hope not too much, really. But I am definitely more just worn out. I think there is a, would never say this outside of the office or outside of my own home, but just that fatigue. It is a grind. And I did not feel that way...well, I don't know. I think everybody's situation has just been kind of a grind. You know, everything is more tense, I think the staff has more issues at home. Husbands sick and kids sick, all of those things, just, I think it is, it's a heavy burden for some of our teachers, more so than normal."

"And one of the things that is certainly new for us is that in the past two months, we have been, our community and our school board has been pretty tumultuous. So there are, you know, that has been an absolute weight on my staff. Number one feeling, I think the feelings of not being appreciated, not being, parents, and the weird thing is is that most of the noise is coming from really two or three parents and then a whole bunch of these people who do not live within our community. So they're kind of rallying the troops around and that has been a drain."

"There's just not that separation. For some of our staff, those people are neighbors, they live down the road or, you know, they help each other plow snow in the winter and now they're wondering well, are they going to help me or, you know? Those kinds of things. So I just think in a small rural community, you can't get away from having different relationships with the same people, different types of relationships."

John

“Trying to keep positive attitudes and morale in a good place for students and staff.

Some days I feel adequate, other days I do not feel capable.”

“I know we’re in the process of trying to strengthen our school climate and it’s not bad, but it can be better. **And I think getting all of the staff on board and moving in the right direction with something like that is always a challenge.** And it’s kind of been in the works for the last year and a half. **And so I, there’s been a lot of challenging conversations and personal challenges, having to deal with that. And I think things are moving in the right direction, but that’s always a difficult aspect, is getting buy-in from the majority of your staff, from that piece.”**

“And I don’t know, I think the hardest thing probably about this year is, because I don’t feel like there’s any valleys whereas in previous years, there’s been hills and valleys as we’re kind of working through day-to-day, week-to-week, month-to-month. And this year, it just feels like it’s pretty stagnant and it’s just, there’s not a whole lot of let down or, you know, well we got through this thing and now it’s going to start teetering off and kind of quiet and not, it’s just we have this and we have this and we have this. **So just that constant high level of stress, anxiety, and I think is probably the most difficult part of it. I know the rest of the staff, you know, they all have the same feelings.** I’ve always thought, and continued to preach, that, you know, you’re attitude and how you come into things dictates a lot. And so trying to stay positive, being transparent but also in a positive way, and just trying to help staff focus on the things that are going right and not all the concerns or the issues that are going wrong. **Trying to kind of help guide that, but sometimes I definitely get towards the end of the day or the week that I’ve**

spent all that energy on them and I have none left for myself. And so then some of that goes home and trying to balance that at home and trying to keep that positive attitude from a personal standpoint, not just professional. It's tough."

"We definitely have those individuals that are very against having a shared principal. We have those individuals that have realized that this kind of is the change and what it looks like and so they're coming on board. But that balance piece is hard. I mean, there's definitely days where it's significantly off balance for various reasons. I try to definitely always keep that in my mind as far as where and how I'm being shared so that it doesn't, staff doesn't get the perception that they're being neglected or they're not getting support or what they need. **And I think it's just going to be a constant, ever-changing thing that I'll always have conversations with staff members about whether they just want to share how they feel and why they feel this way, or adjustments need to be made from a leadership standpoint.** I don't think that's ever going to go away, unless obviously the position changes to look a little bit different."

"I mean, I think we're seeing a lot more this year than we have in the past of challenges with staff as far as morale and positivity, energy, just all those particular things that we're all feeling every day. It just seems to be magnified this year than, more this year than it has in the past."

"I would say understanding and building relationships I think is a huge one. I've always thought that that's a big one, but I think now more than ever those relationships and those, that piece, is more important than ever. Just, I mean, just

from the sheer fact that staff members know that I am empathetic, and I do care what they're going through and what their concerns are. Because I know, now more than ever, they're at a higher level than typical, and a higher concern than has been in the past.”

“For a lot of aspects, but I also know that small districts are not, they're not for everyone and there's a certain personality and a certain culture in small districts that an individual has to fit into. And it can't always be I just want to be here. You have to be let in and accepted into the communities before you can start really building any kind of relationships and trust, things that, anything involved in that.”

Research Question #2

What support do principals in small, rural schools currently access, and what is the reflection on how this support has impacted his or her leadership practices?

The results for this research question were divided into two parts. The first set of results examines the response regarding what support the participants currently access, and the second set of results examines the impact this support has on their leadership practices. Participant's responses through reflective journal entries, semi-structured interviews, and the researcher's field notes from observations compiled identified codes related to this research question. The researcher coded the data in relation to the two parts of the question: the current support accessed by each participant and the impact that support has on his or her leadership practices. While the reflective journals and semi-structured interviews provided the voice of each participant, the field observations conducted by the researcher added context and depth to observe and record the types of support each principal can access and observed ways in which this support impacts this or her practice. These codes were categorized, and the identified themes emerged. The emerging

themes for each portion of the question are represented in Table 8 below along with the frequency they were articulated throughout the interviews, journals, and field observations.

Table 8

Research Question #2 Emerging Themes

Research Question #2 Themes- Current Support	Frequency
Personal Network and Experiences	57
School-Based Network	44
State and Professional Resources	37
Research Question #2 Themes- Impact on Leadership	Frequency
Shared Ideas/Resources	80
Personal & Leadership Growth	68
Impact on Culture & Climate	22

The impact that accessed support has on the participant's leadership practices directly connects with areas identified in McREL's Balanced Leadership Framework (Rouleau, 2021; Waters & Cameron, 2007). The types of support and the impact of that support on his or her leadership practices are shown to have a positive effect on having the correct focus, developing a more purposeful community, and managing change effectively (Rouleau, 2021; Waters & Cameron, 2007). The research has shown that when these leadership practices are fulfilled effectively 95% of the time, then there are higher levels of student achievement (Rouleau, 2021; Waters & Cameron, 2007). Tables 9-11 display the most frequently referenced codes within the theme of Current Support, along with the corresponding McREL leadership responsibilities and identified effect size. Tables 12-14 display the most frequently referenced codes within the theme of Impact on Leadership, along with the corresponding McREL leadership responsibilities and identified effect size.

Table 9

Research Question #2- Current Support Theme 1 and Corresponding McREL Leadership Responsibilities

Personal Network and Experiences			
McREL Leadership Responsibilities	McREL Effect Size	Corresponding Codes	References
Intellectual Stimulation	0.24	Job Alike Network	34
		Professional Network/Colleagues	6
		Mentor	10
Ideals & Beliefs	0.22	Self-Reflection & Experience	7

Table 10

Research Question #2- Current Support Theme 2 and Corresponding McREL Leadership Responsibilities

School-Based Network			
McREL Leadership Responsibilities	McREL Effect Size	Corresponding Codes	References
Intellectual Stimulation	0.24	Superintendent	20
		Administrative Resources	1
Input	0.25	Leadership Team	17
		Staff Members	6

Table 11

Research Question #2- Current Support Theme 3 and Corresponding McREL Leadership Responsibilities

State and Professional Resources			
McREL Leadership Responsibilities	McREL Effect Size	Corresponding Codes	References
Intellectual Stimulation	0.24	Idaho Principal Network	14
		State Department	6
		Assigned Mentor (State)	4
		Capacity Builder	2
		Idaho Superintendent's Network	2
		Project Leadership	1
		Outside Professional Resources/Services	7
		Virtual Conferences	1

Table 12

Research Question #2- Impact on Leadership Theme 1 and Corresponding McREL Leadership Responsibilities

Shared Ideas and Resources			
McREL Leadership Responsibilities	McREL Effect Size	Corresponding Codes	References
Input	0.25	Clear Guidance	1
		Collaboration	5
Intellectual Stimulation	0.24	New Perspective	16
		New Skills	2
Knowledge of Teaching & Learning	0.25	Background Experience	4
Resources	0.25	Shared Ideas/Resources	52

Table 13

Research Question #2- Impact on Leadership Theme 2 and Corresponding McREL Leadership Responsibilities

Personal and Leadership Growth			
McREL Leadership Responsibilities	McREL Effect Size	Corresponding Codes	References
Acknowledgement (Affirmation)	0.19	Leadership Growth	22
		Increased Confidence	5
Focus	0.24	Focused Leadership	9
		Increased Academic Progress	3
Input	0.25	Shared Leadership	6
		Relevant/Timely Help	4
Inspire (Optimize)	0.2	Renewed Energy	2
		Better Balance	1
		Personal Growth	1
		Role Support	1
		Vulnerable Conversations	1
Involvement in Teaching & Learning	0.2	Data Driven	2
		High Standards	2
Relationships	0.18	Improved Self Care	5
Intellectual Stimulation	0.24	Networking	2
Ideals & Beliefs	0.22	Positive Outlook	2

Table 14

Research Question #2- Impact on Leadership Theme 3 and Corresponding McREL Leadership Responsibilities

Impact on Culture and Climate			
McREL Leadership Responsibilities	McREL Effect Size	Corresponding Codes	References
Community	0.25	Impact on Teaming	5
		Staff Support	3
		Stability for Staff	1
Inspire (Optimize)	0.2	Improved Culture	2
		Improved Teaming	1
Relationships	0.18	Building Relationships	4
		Staff Trust	2
		Positive Student Relationships	1
Visibility	0.2	Positive Influence on Students	2
Acknowledgement (Affirmation)	0.19	Positive Staff Culture	1

Current Support

Theme 1- Personal Network & Experiences

The most common source of support articulated by the participants was that of collaborating with job-alike peers or colleagues from their own personal network. Participants find the most value in collaborating with those who share similar experiences in administrative roles and school characteristics. Some participants also have built up a collection of professional peers and colleagues from whom they draw support and ideas for their current roles. Finally, participants also articulated using their own past experiences and background to draw upon when addressing issues and concerns.

Direct Quotes from Participants

Sandy

“I was fortunate to be paired up with a really great mentor who helped me through some super challenging things. I have other mentors that I can talk to and they all fill different roles for me”

“I’ve talked to, there’s a principal in Brighton City and one in Log Valley, one in Longhorn, one in Treaton, that I feel like we, I just think that it would be, and I do reach out to them, but **I think that if I could say let’s us five meet three times a year and let’s, you know, maybe we have a topic, maybe we don’t.**”

“I could reach out to some of the folks that I know, some of the principals that are kind of semi-local here.”

“So, probably the biggest benefit would be the time spent with other principals. Especially connected with a few of them, like an elementary principal in a nearby district, and she and I kind of hit it off and we still stay in touch, like hey, what are you guys doing for this? This is what I’m doing, but is there a better way? Or how do you, and so, and then it’s also just kind of a little bit of moral support in that respect because it, again, in the lonely world, it’s, your kind of in the same boat and so that, I appreciate.”

Janice

“I’m learning to go back to journaling at night and reading more. Some self-help books have been helping and books specific to dealing with trauma-sensitive classrooms and families. I also love Dr. Lisa Boogren’s podcast and focus on ‘self-care for educators’ and take a lot away from her.”

“Treaton, Brighton, I, Longhorn, we’ve all kind of formed a new little posse through the Principal Network. And we were bouncing ideas off each other all day on email today, which is, I actually get super excited. Because I’m like oh my gosh, I’ve had that same question and I never even thought of asking them. I’m so used to solving it by myself. So that’s nice, but it’s different, just very different.”

“I call the Treaton principal, and the Brighton principal and I are super tight. And I use them more than anything, and we just text a lot. **They’re both in two smaller districts than me, it’s all females, which I kind of love that. We do an old practice I used to do was we all meet for breakfast one a month. And that’s huge for us. I mean, it usually takes half the day, we just sit and gab. And it is a lot about our schools, but it’s more about our own wellbeing, so I think if anything, it’s our own mental health.** Like, oh, you’ve had a teacher say that to you, what was your response? Oh, because I didn’t feel like I was in my best character mindset when I responded, so I need some tips.”

“I used to get a lot of my ideas and visions from books. And I don’t know, I’m almost like, I feel like I’ve been, I don’t know, the pendulum just swings. So a part of me is like

I already read that kind of book. Just don't want to go back, so, yea. **But I still use a lot of the foundational stuff that I've learned through the years."**

Frank

"Yes, I have a number of colleagues who are in the administrative arena (principals, V.P.'s, and superintendents) In addition, I have a mentor, former superintendent in a nearby district, who hired me back in 1993."

"I have been in the administrative arena since 1997 and have had multiple opportunities to work under highly skilled and effective administrators. That truly has been the most valuable."

"Well, the best training has clearly been the experience that I've had before I came in. So, you know, I was an A.D., I taught and coached at all levels – elementary, middle school, high school, alternative school. I've been an administrator for umpteen years, and so that and I did that under a lot of different administrators. And so I learned a great deal from each one of them as to what to do and what not to do and how I would have done it differently. And then I had a chance a lot of years as a principal role to learn and refine those schools."

"So, within our region, we have a group of superintendents that meet monthly right now. Anyway, it's a great cohort group just to, if you have ideas or challenges, to reach out to them. And they've been a great support as well."

Phil

“I have several other principals around the State that I will call at the drop of a hat. Most of the time it’s a text message. Hey, give me a call when you get a second. Or do you have time to talk.”

“I am fortunate to have several other administrators both retired and currently working. I often call for advice and counsel. I have several administrators both still working and retired that I just have developed relationships over the years. And I call those people all the time. When I have a question that I am fairly certain is not a new question, it’s just new to me, I will stop and call them in a heartbeat. And if they don’t know the answer, I usually find someone, you know, they give me a name of someone to talk to.”

“Because of my time in a bigger school district, I felt like I had a pretty good network of teachers, and through my coaching, that I had options to go.”

John

“I try to reach out to colleagues as much as possible. I meet with our conference Principal’s 3-4 times a year and will begin to meet with a neighboring Principal once a month. I am reaching out to other admin colleagues to just have a place to vent and talk. It’s definitely given me an opportunity to not be a part of an island. I’ve got other people I can reach out to. And they’re close enough, I mean, I go to their school sometimes, they come out here sometimes. ”

“I’ve reached out to my next-door neighbor district because I have a great relationship with him. And it hasn’t manifested yet because of obviously issues that have come up but planning to kind of get together and just talk about stuff.”

Theme 2- School-Based Network

The second most articulated form of support that participants access is that of their school-based leadership teams, superintendents, and other staff members. This source of support is readily accessible and provides some regular collaboration opportunities with those who are within the same setting. Participants voiced that these sources of support provide needed collaboration in areas around student instructional needs and teaming needs with fellow staff members. This source of support is readily accessible to the participants and can provide others to share the load that is presented within the multi-layered role that participants fill in each of their positions.

Direct Quotes from Participants

Sandy

“I meet with the Superintendent every single week, and I work really closely with the Superintendent. Like I mentioned, he’s also the 6-12 principal, but I meet with him as the Superintendent once a week and we accomplish a lot together, and we tag team a lot of things.”

“We have in-service once a month, so one Friday a month, we meet as a whole staff, certified, and a few of the classified staff members come too, especially the instructional ones, I usually have them join us.”

“I find that I collaborate with the Special Education director too quite a bit. She is a former principal and superintendent as well, so she is really a wealth of knowledge and I really enjoy her too. She’s just a go-getter and very creative and fun, so I see her a lot with the IEP meetings, I go to all the elementary IEP meetings and then a lot of times afterwards, you know, we’ll hang back for a minute and like, okay, what about this or, you know, she’s also on leadership team. **And so that’s another thing, leadership team meets once a month. And then we have tasks we’re doing throughout the month, but we meet once a month and that has the Art teacher who’s K-12, it has the Special Education director and that’s K-12, it has Dennis, it has the high school Math teacher, and a paraprofessional who this year is in charge of IDLA and me, so six of us.** So that’s another time where it’s kind of like, almost like department head type things meeting. That’s helpful. That’s pretty much kind of it.”

Janice

“This month I have relied on our special services administrator to help observe and create solutions for these challenging behavior students. I have also utilized supports from SESTA at the state department along with our school counselor.”

“I consult with my staff and Supt. daily and often. I have asked for a trainer to come in to work with our administrative/leadership team as our team is very isolated and doesn’t collaborate well (or at all). It is comforting with a new Supt. that he recognizes these holes and that he will help come up with solutions that might help and train our team and each of us to break down all the barriers that have evolved over the years.”

“So, I don’t know, I mean, I don’t feel like that and just rebuilding our leadership team of admin, there’s only four of us, five of us I guess, with the superintendent. And I think he’s, I feel like our team’s always dialed, like we always try to find training.”

“I would say my counselor is my right hand, like, he’s my favorite because I use him all day long every day, just as talking and as a personal counselor, like, he’s everything. I have a new intervention specialist this year with some pretty strong instructional background. So she’s leading us through, like, this is old school, but we’re reading through SIAP again, of just those strategies”

Frank

“So, we (admin team) meet every week. Once a week, we have a meeting every Thursday. And just kind of go over expectations, you know, game coverages, scheduling for PD, different things that we want to see happen, making sure we’re on the same track, reviewing if things aren’t getting done, and then of course I’ve had some separate meetings with this individual individually just to try to assist and make sure we’re on the same page.”

“So, I think that my team leader that’s 4-6 is really good. My team leader this year that’s K-3 is not the best. I need to have a different team leader. She’s young and she’s just not strong enough, not a good team leader. But I do have some really good support staff that are really strong. Former principal’s really gung-ho, positive, proactive. So that’s been really good. We’ve also brought on an instructional coach, which we’ve never had before. And the challenge with that is, this individual is only here

once a week and so they provide virtual hours every day, but I don't think it's widely used."

Phil

"So, we have, every week we have district leadership meeting. So that would be the superintendent, the elementary principal, and myself. And then we also have a leadership team, which would include the three of us and then our high school counselor, the Special Ed director. So we do those meetings each week."

"The admin time that we have, although we meet each week and there are certainly things we can work through and problem-solve, but **I rely on my teaching staff a ton to take care of those things, to come up with ideas, to figure out how best to move forward.**"

"Our staff meetings really become the leadership team for this building. I want everyone in their classrooms to feel like they have some input and that they have, and I've struggled, I shouldn't say I've struggled, I went back and forth and I just could not see a good way to move forward because we are so small in number of staff members, trying to form a staff leadership team makes me really nervous because I think it kind of sets us up for that situation where the small number of people who are not going to be involved have the potential to feel pretty isolated and left out. So, I think part of that is certainly by my choice and part of that is just because of our size."

John

“Seeking help from colleagues and trusted staff in my district. So I think in the last couple weeks, there’s been a lot of conversations with me and a lot of my office staff, as well as other people, of just trying to figure out how we can be more balanced.”

“So, we meet once a week. And typically, so my VP and I, we meet probably more often than any of the others or combined district admin. But one of the unique factors and things that we benefit from is where we’re all on the same campus.

Typically if there’s situations or things come up that we need to talk about or discuss, we all come together on it pretty easily. And so that’s a huge benefit. **So, I mean, we’re in, I would say, really good communication throughout the district from an admin perspective.** And that’s something that we all try and do a good job at just because we have, there’s kids in this building that affect them in this building that could affect them. So, I mean, we have families in all three buildings and the community is small, and so really looking at from a larger standpoint, kind of getting together and having those conversations. Some weeks are less, but there’s sometimes where we meet multiple times a day for things. And it just kind of depends what’s going on, but yea. I mean, we have pretty good communication.”

“My relationship with my middle school counselor, we started here together, and so we have the best, I probably have the best relationship with her in the district just because of us coming in and how closely we’ve worked together the past six years. And my VP and my high school counselor, we really work together all of last year and then going into this year, and so still building those relationships. You know,

about what I can discuss and what I can't discuss and being able to read them and kind of knowing where their allegiance lies, kind of a work in progress. So, you know, yea, I mean, ultimately it depends on the conversation and what we're talking about. But I would say for the most part, you know, the support is pretty good."

Theme 3- State and Professional Resources

The final area of support articulated by the participants was that of state and professional resources. Every participant is accessing state networking and mentoring supports and has been doing this for the past few years. This support has provided opportunities to learn from other educators outside of their direct area, and to also build networks with other principals and superintendents that share similar characteristics. This state provided resources have proved to be beneficial to each participant in a variety of ways. However, participants said that these resources have not always been beneficial due to format or unrelatable content for their specific positions or situations.

Direct Quotes from Participants

Sandy

"So, we were afforded a capacity builder by the State. So she came and really helped me through that transition initially. And she's a lot, like, she knows her stuff, and working with her is like drinking from a fire hose because it's just so much. And she comes on really strong and I respect her a ton and I love her. **She's helped me a lot, but it was never easy. So, like, but she helped me really understand data and the importance of good teaching and the importance of high expectations.** I was part of

the State Principal Mentor Program. And that, in that, I ended up with a great gal who lives in Arizona and she helped me through some real doozies of situations that were more like personnel things and, I mean, more emotional side of the position where, like, I grew up here and my family homesteaded here and so I love the community.”

“I went to the State Principal’s Network and did that for a couple of years. And I, the last year or so hasn’t been as helpful because it’s been virtual and so it’s not, it’s just harder for me. I like people, I’d rather be in a room where I could be picking people’s brains on the coffee breaks, like I just learn about as much that way as I did from what the content was. And so, but that program has been really good for me in a lot of ways, I think the greatest way is in the connections I have made there.”

Janice

“I have a love-hate relationship with the State Department right now. Because I feel like they obviously realize they have a ton of money from last year that they didn’t use for training, so they’re pushing out, like, a training daily. Obviously last year we did all the virtual Principal Network, the virtual State Conferences, the virtual Family Keeping Engagement Conference, some of those.”

“I just met with my Idaho Principal Network group today. We had a two-hour Zoom. And we’re a new team this year, but it definitely draws strength, like, just sharing ideas with each other and listening to all their ideas. I was like oh, why didn’t I think of that? So that’s been a really good team with some of the Marzano research gurus. You get divided into content areas that match what you’re in. So, I’m with the K-5 elementary principal group. And I think there was three of our groups because there was

quite a few elementary principals there. It's different work, it's all coming out of Marzano's, just leader work, leadership training books that he's written.

Frank

“I just started the Superintendent Network. So, I'm really curious to find out what kind of training that's going to involve. But there's so much more to the Superintendent role than just the principal role. Now I'm stepping into dealing with a Board and zones and rehiring of trustees, or not hiring, but assigning trustees whether they get voted, or elected, or moved in. Right now, all of our zones are out of compliance with regards to numbers. So, we're having to readjust lines. So, there's just a lot to the Superintendent role that is brand new to me. And so, I'm looking forward to that additional training and how to make those connections and expectations with your Board, and what is good practice and what is not good practice.”

“I've been through the Idaho Principal Network, and that was super advantageous. I thought they had some good breakout sessions and just the networking was really powerful.”

Phil

“I am very fortunate to be involved in the State Principals Network sponsored by the State Department of Education as a support, following two years of involvement with the State Principals Mentoring Program. Additionally, I am involved in RISE, which is a collection of rural school administrators/teachers that network both

virtually and in person focused on rural and small school issues and challenges.

Both of these groups have been beneficial to my professional development.”

“Attended the State Principal Network Training on Oct 14-15. Training focused on improved abilities to be a building level educational leader, including shared leadership, vision, communication and sustainability.”

“So, Rise is kind of a, it originally started as Northwest Rise, and it was this collection of rural schools from the Northwest Region. And it was really, the basis was how do we increase student engagement. And so, we had two convenings throughout the year and there was usually like in Portland, Coeur D’Alene, some place kind of central for all of the states. And you worked in these job-alike groups and originally my job-alike group, I was with the Social Studies teachers. And so I really valued that, I got to see, you know, other teachers in other states were bringing in clips of them teaching in their classroom. I got to see what other classrooms look like. And it was just super interesting. **But the Northwest Rise, so it has kind of morphed into this other thing and now we have Idaho Rise, which is a collection, right now it is really four schools. And then, so we have had in the last two years, we have had about three PD, joint PD. And we are supporting, it’s supported through the State Department. And they brought in a guest speaker for us and we have done several book studies together.**”

John

“I went to the IPN this month and was able to meet new colleagues, which I will connect with throughout the year. I am hoping that these interactions will help to keep everything in perspective.”

“I have been part of the Idaho Principal’s Network for the last five years. That is probably one of the best decisions I’ve made in my career. If for nothing else to gain colleagues out of that that we can all relate to the same types of things.”

“So, my first year when I was principal of the middle school out here, actually my first three years, we had, we were a, I don’t remember what they call it. **We were an underachieving school, and so we had mentors from the State Department here weekly kind of working with us and so I got to know, I had the same one for three years and he was phenomenal help my first three years in kind of working through and talking through a lot of different stuff.** And he actually recommended it, and so I kind of got looking into it. I didn’t do it my first year because I was trying to survive. But then my second year, I went to my superintendent, and I said, “Hey, I kind of want to do this, is that okay?” He didn’t hesitate, he was like, “Absolutely, if you want to do that, let’s get you signed up and get you started in it”. And so that was, yea, it just, it definitely worked out in a good way.”

“Training onsite, Google meets, you don’t get near what you would in person. This last year and a half, our IPM Network has been on Zoom, and it sucked. I mean, it hasn’t been good. If I’m sitting here, there’s other things that come up and distractions, and my

focus turns to them and I don't, it's how we work. **But if we're somewhere else and when we are in person with people, I think the benefit increases significantly."**

Impact on Leadership Practices

Theme 1-Shared Ideas & Resources

The most articulated benefit and impact of the current support, most closely related to networking and collaboration, is that of sharing ideas and resources. Participants especially noted the benefit of doing this with job-alike peers when possible. Participants shared that learning about new ideas and sharing resources broadened their perspective and gave them new insight into their own challenges and situations. Overall, the aspect of sharing ideas and resources provides an immense benefit to these rural administrators who can be more isolated in their unique positions.

Direct Quotes from Participants

Sandy

"I was fortunate to be paired up with a really great mentor who helped me through some super challenging things. And she had been in some rural districts too, both the capacity builder and that mentor had been in rural districts. And I spent some hours on the phone with her helping me role play and, you know, problem solve and practice the conversation, the difficult conversation I would have to have with teachers and think about helping me see other options. Just giving me more tools in my toolbox."

“I’m the type who wants to kind of think out loud a lot, to write, to process, and so they provided me a lot of, people provided me some good ears along the way. And I just think that it’s made me more aware. I just think it gives me a broader perspective. I don’t only have my trench right there, just because they share their experiences with me too and I kind of just steal their experience and try to put it in with mine.

“I just think that it’s really important to find mentors and to stay in touch with them. Because you can get a fresh perspective, it’s just like a breath of fresh air because it’s so busy that it feels like you kind of get tunnel vision and you can’t see the forest for the trees and so it’s really helpful to be able to take a step back and hear from someone who isn’t right in the middle of it and they can provide really good logic and suggestions that can help you see your situation with a fresh set of eyes. I think that’s really critical. It was for me, anyway, it continues to be, for me.”

“I do think it’s just those conversations are really helpful with people who are in the same position because then you probably are facing similar challenges that does apply to your population and students or teachers or, you know, very similar. That is the most helpful for me, but I’m a people person and I like conversation.”

Janice

“It helps that we all have a similar kind of mindset as well that we’re just, we’re kind of friends outside of the profession and trust each other. So that’s been a good outlet.”

“It just makes you feel like you’re not alone. We deal with the same stuff. Like, oh, you’ve had a teacher say that to you, what was your response? Oh, because I didn’t feel like I was in my best character mindset when I responded, so I need some tips. Yea. So I think just mental support. A lot of times it’s just basics, like, hey, did you, yesterday this was the tech one. Do any of you have a cheat sheet when you get a new student, what are the steps you make sure you enroll them in? I was like oh, I don’t have that, but I need one. And so then I took it on and said I’ll whip that up and get it started and then share it. And so we each just take different projects. And so yes, we all collected ideas from our own staffs, but they’re all the same. Like oh, you have an assembly, oh, which assembly? Let’s share that and share the cost and then have them come all the way up. So that’s been good. A lot of times we’ll share, like, what’s your to-do list look like? And we all read each other’s to-do lists and it’s funny how we can all understand what they mean. Like, oh, I was going to start doing that too, like, start thinking about SBAC already, like, yea. Or parent teacher conferences, like oh, what new idea do you have for that?”

“We (State Principal’s Network) just had an assignment to talk about a present-day problem and provide data of where we’re at and where we want to get to. And then today was kind of show-and-tell. And each of us, there was six of us, we each brought forward our data and our problem that we also shared a month ago. And then we each just sat and had a conversation, like what else other principals would be doing with that same situation. Though, I think it’s still really good. You always go backwards in relationships, like you have to start over a little bit. **I mean, I don’t know any of the people in my group. So just rebuilding those, and I don’t feel like, they’re all from pretty large districts. So there’s parts of me where I’m a little resentful, like huh, they have an**

instructional coach. Ugh, they have a special ed director to help them. I don't have those. But it is helpful to hear what others would do. So it's, I mean, it's valuable to me because I don't feel like I have a lot of that without our network."

Frank

"I learned a great deal from each one of them (network) as to what to do and what not to do and how I would have done it differently. And then I had a chance a lot of years as a principal role to learn and refine those schools. Anyway, it's a great cohort group just to, if you have ideas or challenges, to reach out to them. And they've been a great support as well."

"That's been invaluable. Just because you have, you know, a rebounding board. Somebody to say hey, how should I handle this and I've thrown out some ideas and given me some feedback and direction. And so that's been invaluable. And I think that's the toughest part about being in a small district like this is, you're just, you know, you feel a little bit more isolated. But we do have a pretty strong region of superintendents that I've reached out to and touched base with. And so that's been good as well. But I think the mentor is by far the most valuable. Just, I think, you know, confidentiality and then you have one person you go to and you don't want to, with some personnel issues, you kind of, I think you just have to be kind of leery what you share, especially how much. So I've been pretty reserved that way."

Phil

“I absolutely understand that I am not the smartest guy around and if I can beg, steal, or borrow information, ideas, or strategies, I will do that in a heartbeat. But I, the mentoring project through the State was probably the most hands-on help for me as a new administrator.”

“And you worked in these job-alike groups and originally my job-alike group, I was with the Social Studies teachers. And so I really valued that, I got to see, you know, other teachers in other states were bringing in clips of them teaching in their classroom. I got to see what other classrooms look like. And it was just super interesting. They all have the same issues we do – class sizes and rural setting – you know, so I have really valued that a ton over the years.”

“I appreciate hearing how other people are dealing with things. This, I think the biggest benefit for me is that there is that level of comfort knowing that principals all over the State deal with different issues”

John

“I have been part of the Idaho Principal’s Network for the last five years. That is probably one of the best decisions I’ve made in my career. If for nothing else to gain colleagues out of that that we can all relate to the same types of things. I probably talk to them, especially now, at least once a week, if not more touching base, seeing how things are going with them, because we’re all in different districts and everybody’s doing things differently, but we’re seeing a lot of the same situations and things that

are going on. So that networking, as well as the professional development from an admin side that came with that has been phenomenal.”

“Something else that has been very beneficial for me is travelling to other districts and schools and seeing in real life what’s going on in their building. Seeing the kids talking to the staff, just getting those different perspectives.”

“I think the most beneficial thing that comes from them is that networking piece and being able to realize and have conversations with individuals that maybe not at the same school, but are going through a lot of similar situations. And so you don’t have that feeling or notion that you’re the only one that this is happening to or your school is the only one that these things are going on it. It’s more of a mutual thing. **And also getting reassurance that what you’re doing is good, beneficial, moving in the right direction.”**

Theme 2- Leadership & Personal Growth

The second most articulated benefit or impact that current support has upon participants’ leadership practices is that of enhancing leadership as well as personal growth. Many spoke about how being connected to both job-alike networks and state supported programs has afforded them opportunities to learn from others, thus enhancing their own leadership capabilities and growing their skills as a principal. This has impacted areas that have improved instructional focus, deeper knowledge on utilizing data to drive instructional decisions, emotional and self-care support, and improvements in overall outlook.

Direct Quotes from Participants

Sandy

“I have been fortunate enough to have had some great mentors along the way that really helped me grow as a leader. “

“I feel like I have been babied all along the way, like, a lot of people had me under their wing. **I’ve just tried to soak it all in and ask a lot of questions and be open and humble enough that I can hear what they have to say and know that I can always grow and learn. And so I think that for being in a rural situation, I’ve been really blessed with a lot of support.”**

“**It was like drinking from the fire hose, but I learned a lot from her (capacity builder). I learned so much from her, I think probably the two biggest things being data, you know, pay attention to data and the high expectations for all the students.”**

“It makes me more confident and calm later because I think that I can do this, I think I can do it fairly well. I may not really have because there’s always something that comes that’s difficult, it’s not like I can conquer the world with it, but you know, like, anything, I believe, that comes my way, I can get enough help from people to figure out how to handle it. **So, I think it makes me less anxious, probably makes me more grounded, so I just don’t, bigger and stronger, just more supported. I’m not alone.”**

“Just making sure that instruction is high quality, the programs we use are high quality, look at the data, respond to the data, intervene with kids, no kid can fall through the

cracks, they can all do, we have that high expectation for all of them and that efficacy really helped me see that that's possible."

"I really appreciated her (mentor) because I could call her and talk to her because you know how lonely this is. It's a lonely profession, so you can't share with very many people because of confidentiality. And so, she would set up times where I could call and just process it all and she would ask me questions that would help me think about things from different perspectives and come up with different strategies that might be helpful in those different situations."

"So, it helps me also be a little bit stronger, I think, just because of his, seeing how he goes through things. I pick up little strategies from him (Superintendent), I don't even know I'm doing it or mean to do it, but where I would be, I just like the people and I like the parents and I like the kids and if any of them are upset over something, it used to really bother me, but now if I know there's not any validity to whatever it is, I can move on. I address it, I explain, and then I move on and I don't hold onto it a long time."

Janice

"I hope people would say I'm thoughtful, creative and strive to find the best solution while keeping student interests at the heart of it all. I care deeply. And often that's a strength and a weakness."

"I'm focused on getting into classroom and providing instructional framework feedback as a way to stay balanced from all the staff and student struggles going on around me."

“I just completed midyear check ins with all of my teams. It allowed each team to just share with me how they are doing on their 3 goals and what our focuses should be. **It was a practice of shared leadership and being vulnerable with each of them in a way to support one another with what each of us needs.**”

“So, I kind of feel just re-amped and re-excited because we’re getting, like once a month, a guy flies into town and helps us. So that’s been powerful.”

“Well, I mean, it’s just like truly being, it totally boosts you for a month. Maybe a week. Like we had one September 7th, and I feel like it’s just started fading from me. Because I felt like I was on my A-game for, like, a week straight. I was like, oh my gosh, I feel so good about my communication, and then you just get inundated with stuff and then I feel like I drown. I’m just treading water. **But I think it just helps in my taking care of myself and taking care of others**”

“**It made me do, like shared leadership visions and so we have, I actually don’t have, there used to be a leadership team in the building, which was one teacher in each grade. Now I rotate it, so every team is the leadership team for a month.**”

“I’m taking this as his (Superintendent) favorite line, is he never has the answers, but he’s there to listen and just encourage us and then he just asks me, like, what things have you done in the past that helped you get out of this feeling heavy and whatever. So I would say it starts with him.”

“I was just the other night reflecting, I’m like, the question was what are you doing different today than you were your first year as a principal? And I would say the biggest, like, buzz word that comes to me, was shared leadership. **Because I definitely have**

learned to take a lot of decisions off me. Yea, so I don't know, maybe balance, shared leadership, I think those have definitely gotten better."

Frank

"So, we (mentor) have a long-lasting working relationship. Very supportive, great go-to guy, I use him a great deal already. In fact, I had him present to our school board with a five-year strategic plan, so we currently have used a SIT plan, and we just started the process of moving into a strategic plan, five-year. And so, **I asked him to come in so we could kind of refine and create a scope and sequence, so to speak, to get this implemented whole-heartedly. Which has been great. And so, he's a great go-to guy, he's a great resource."**

"Oh, without a doubt it's changed how I operate. So, from my philosophy from when I first started in education to where I am today, it's been a one-eighty turn. So I think with experience and best practice training, it impacts your philosophy of best practices and how to best get students to learn and grow. So there's no doubt about it, it's all impacted me to be a better leader."

"So, there's just a lot to the Superintendent role that is brand new to me. And so I'm looking forward to that additional training and how to make those connections and expectations with your Board, and what is good practice and what is not good practice. I know there's a lot of areas of focus that I look forward to receiving that training. And a lot of it centers around policy and your Board and trustees' connections. I mean, you've definitely got to have a good rapport with all of them, or it's going to be tough."

“I feel like I have the skills, the resources, the knowledge, the experience to do what I do. I feel like my, and I feel really good about my decision making, I feel really good about knowing where I am and that if this is going to move forward, this is kind of where we are.”

“Well, let me first say that there’s still been some really positive things that we’re working on this year, that I’m working on with regards to a five-year strategic plan and getting that implemented and getting that in place for future. And so I feel really good about that. **I feel really good about some of the practices and our goals and focus areas for the year.**”

Phil

“But it absolutely makes me think of other ways that are more genuine to me and how I need to a better job of that. I think I am, you know, I’m forty-six, I am not old-school, but I am also not a millennial, and I don’t, I struggle with that sometimes. That idea of, yea, how do you lead people that are, that have, not good or bad, but they maybe just don’t share your same outlook on how things go or what is valued. Which is, it’s good for me, because I am probably a little more stuck in my ways than, I am not a creative thinker, I am a head down, nose to the grindstone, just get it done.”

“Our elementary school principal is top-notch, she is the prototypical elementary principal, everything is color coded, and people know where they are supposed to be by the minute, and I am just not that guy. And yea, I will ask her and she gives great advice. **She’s very thoughtful, but I don’t always, we don’t always have the same viewpoint**

on how to handle things. One of, so I would say that it impacts me in a positive way. And having other, having that input and experience from other people certainly makes me feel more confident in the decisions that we make as an administrator.”

John

“I would not be where I’m at or, yea, I wouldn’t be at where I’m at from a professional standpoint, a mental standpoint, without that training and those leaders that worked with us.”

“Looking at what people’s strengths are and utilizing those more. Utilizing individuals that feel like they’re underutilized. Taking things off of my plate and being able to hand those off to someone else. So, I think there’s been a lot of that self-reflection and just self-analyzation. You know, how can we utilize the team more and not overwhelm and put too much on certain individuals because they can’t say no or they struggle with giving pieces up because they’ve always done that – including myself. And so I think that’s probably the biggest thing that’s going on right now is just trying to look at how we can utilize the team in a better, more efficient way.”

“So, I mean, I think the professional development that I’ve had from a leadership standpoint in terms of the State Principals Network has given me a significant boost in my leadership skills and the direction that I’ve gone and kind of the leader it has built me into. I attribute a significant amount to that training and to those presenters and the colleagues that I’ve gained from that. I don’t think I would be the same leader or in the same position I am now without that program.”

Theme 3- Impact on Culture and Climate

The final emerging theme related to the impacts of current support for participants is that of seeing an impact on the climate and culture of their school. This is evident through efforts towards improved teaming, supporting staff needs, building stronger community relationships, and strengthening the climate for students. Participants articulated the benefits of the current support they receive as truly impacting this area of leadership positively, but also in ways that continue to stretch them as a leader.

Direct Quotes from Participants

Sandy

“I think we have a super solid teaching team and I think that we have high standards for kids. And we’re really, we let, we use data to help us inform what we do, so we intervene very carefully for kids. I think we’re unique because the teachers meet every Wednesday for team, they work their lunch, and we talk about any kids that we’re concerned about. I think that we’re unique in that high standards for all the kids and teachers are super strong and they genuinely care.”

“I try to be very transparent as a leader. I ask a lot of questions and I listen. I am a deep processor so, sometimes, it takes me some time to come up with a solution, but it is usually thorough. I have immense respect for what the teachers do, and I do everything I can to remove anything that might have them using energy for anything other than the actual teaching. I currently have a great team of teachers and paraprofessionals.”

“I have a ton of respect for the teachers and paraprofessionals. **I know they are in the trenches doing the most important work and can give me insight that helps me make decisions that are best for them and the students. I try to minimize anything that takes energy away from the actual act of teaching; I’m very pragmatic.** We have worked to build a really strong team and I am proud of the program we have here.”

“I continue to ask questions and actively listen to staff members to solve problems and improve. I try to be transparent and vulnerable in my interactions. I feel decent about how things are going and I’m always trying to find ways to grow and show my appreciation for others.”

“I think that their (students) academic progress is pretty great. I think that because the teaching staff is so strong and the programs we chose are strong, I think that they are learning more than they ever have coming through this building. I feel like I also, like directly, I try, I mean, I don’t know if I should say try, but social-emotional things are important to me. Partly because I love people and I see the trauma there, that kids go through. **So, I try to connect with kids all the time, I try to be present at there, I call them by their names, I want to have conversations and know a little bit about what goes on in their lives so that I can connect with kids and really help them feel like they belong.** I think that the culture that we’ve created together has had a positive impact on the staff because I really feel like we’ve gotten to a place where we all own all the data, so it’s, I feel like we’re open to, they’re all our kids and nobody’s shaming or finger pointing or anything like that. It’s, I think it seems like everyone’s willing to go the extra mile, everyone’s here for the right reasons.”

“I am really active in the community schools’ portion of our school. We have a coordinator and she’s been gone a lot for various reasons, and I’ve just tried to step up a little bit in that. So, the food, clothing, diapers, I’ve helped set up an imagination library for everyone in our zip code, and you know, programs like Give Cold Feet the Boot for all the kids, sizing all the kids’ feet to get new boots for everybody in November. So, I, those are some kind of covert ways, but also, I think it kind of comes back to those connections and those relationships that I do try to have a relationship people in the community.”

Janice

“It is comforting with a new Supt. that he recognizes these holes and that he will help come up with solutions that might help and train our team and each of us to break down all the barriers that have evolved over the years.”

“Like there’s some strong relationships. I mean, today, we have a runner – one of the hardest kids I’ve ever dealt with – I actually have my shoes off because I have so many blisters on my feet from wearing dumb shoes that can’t run in. But learning how to navigate that and then when he responds positively, I feel like then that’s where you stop and embrace it and, you know, he might tell me to F off in one breath, but then in the next breath, he’s like, “I love you, you’re the only person who’s ever loved me in my life”. I feel like those are those moments you hold onto, but that comes from somewhere. **So it’s just those relationships, but it’s so hard to invest and so much of it. Some kids need so much development.”**

“I think because I don’t do a lot of top down, we don’t have to here, they’re all professionals of their classroom, so I am very hands-off. Just teach, do your ting, holler if you need me. I feel like that’s the best relationships over time. They know I trust them and I will support them if they, we call it tap out. Like, if you’re just at capacity and you’re frustrated, just call me to come take your room and tap out. So I think just them helping each other is the empowerment that I’m not above them, we’re all equals. So I don’t know how we got there other than just a lot of work and communication. Intentional work and trust and vulnerability.”

“Now I rotate it, so every team is the leadership team for a month. So that’s a little different philosophy. We started it last year, but I’m kind of holding onto it because teams are harder to work with than others. It’s been good for me to allow maybe a team I would judge as a weaker team to be leads. So that’s where I get my strength, is I can’t make decisions without them. I take them to them and they help me and we problem solve. Very authentic, very honest conversations, so they tell things, Janice, this isn’t going well, we don’t know what you mean by this.”

“So, when I got here, I feel like my ability to connect with people outside of school and in school was a strength from the beginning. I, for whatever reason, have a gift of names and connections and I utilize that, so being just so active in the community, I feel like, I mean, every night I think oh my gosh, tonight I have two basketball games to go to, running to an Eagle Scout project present, going to an adoption ceremony, like, boom. So, I just, they’re all important to me and even though I don’t really want to spend every evening at those things, I’ve learned that I really do care about them. And as a family, like my family’s learned to just, they go with me or we just make

it a family event. **So, I think it's more than just being present in the school, it's kind of a presence stand because I feel like the relationships I've built with some of our toughest families have never happened at this school.** They happen in the grocery store, they happen in the post office, they happen everywhere. At the Food Banks, I still volunteer at the Food Bank once a week and that's something I would always recommend to somebody in a small community just because I think you get to make a connection with some of the struggling families.”

Frank

“So, we've made great strides in just letting the community see what we're doing and how we're trying to impact learning and teaming and collaborating and getting teachers on the same path with regards to curriculum.”

“I feel like I've definitely impacted the culture and the ability to connect and make coming to South Valley Elementary School a fun place and an exciting place. And so we do, we have these arc stands that we have and it's all for, they all stand for our virtues. Our positive attitude, responsibility, respect, gratitude, and honesty. And so, every month, we select arc students of the month. And every day, they can get arc stamps in class for just having good behavior – getting assignments turned, raising their hand, being respectful, being kind. And when they get three, depending on what grade level they are, or five, they get to challenge me to a game of ping pong. If they beat me, they get to be the principal for the day. And so it's just a great time to connect and inspire and keep them motivated to do well and work hard. And it's a

good time for me just to connect with them. And so some of them, they live for that, they love it. So that's a fun time."

"I can tell that they (teachers) enjoy having the structure. They like having the consistency, the collaboration time, the planning time. And even for those teachers who want to just be completely on their own still, they've come around and some of them are great teachers. And I've actually had them be some of our team leaders. **So, getting the right teachers who are really leaders, even though they weren't fully on board, man, they've really kind of taken on that role and stepped up.** And all the teachers kind of respond to them. So now that I have them on board, it's made a big impact."

"Well, we are, within our strategic plan, the biggest difference I would say right now is we're trying to get them (community) more involved. **So, we're trying to have some town hall meetings. I'm meeting with different groups, Chamber of Commerce or senior citizens, just so that they feel like they have a voice.** And we're also in the process, we have some senior classes that we offer in the morning. We're also looking at putting in a pickleball court and redoing our outside basketball courts so that they can also be utilized by our community. We also have a really, really nice weight room. Especially for a 1A Division 2 school, it's probably nicer than most, well it's way better than any 1 or 2A school, but it's better than most probably 3A schools. It's a really nice facility. And we sell key fobs to the community, and they can come in and use them any time throughout the year. **And so again, we're just trying to get more opportunities for the community to be more involved and have a say and super supporters."**

Phil

“I think that our teachers understand that as a parent and as a teacher and as an administrator, I have an understanding of all of the things in their own lives that can impact their ability to do their jobs in the classroom. I think my experience, the reality that I have been in this building for twenty years, I think my commitment to our school and how we do things, I think that is my biggest impact on my staff. ”

“I think our students feel like I hold them accountable for the most part. I think students understand that although I’m a coach and I’m an A.D., our academic success is still why we are here. **So, I think the biggest impact I would have on students is that our school is a safe place where they are welcomed to be and we like having them here.”**

“Our athletic programs are, they are the front porch to our school. And so that is where we get the best opportunities to show how good our kids are, how great our kids are. We get the opportunity to teach kids how to be good citizens. We are constantly, you know, the football team is constantly community labor, whether it’s for the senior citizen center, the community club, if we have a, if there is a funeral in the community, you know, our football players go down and set up the chairs for that. And they don’t grumble about it, it’s just what we do. Coaches make it a priority. So I feel like that’s super important. **Teachers that are able to build early positive relationships with community hands down are far more successful than those teachers who it’s a struggle for.”**

John

“I would say that one of the most important things and the pieces that I value that’s super important to me is those, building those relationships with the kids. And so, my goals on a daily basis are how much can I be out and about and talking to as many kids as I can. Some of them I know a lot better than others for various reasons. **Some I don’t, you know, and just trying to continually build those relationships from when they come to when they graduate. That’s a huge one. On the academic side of things, there’s a lot of things moving in the right direction. And I think sometimes it’s easier to be climbing the mountain than stay on top of the mountain. And so I think that’s a constant struggle, is trying to maintain where we are at with our successes. At the same time, the places that we’re working on, how are we improving those each year? Ultimately, for the goal of getting the kids the best education that we can offer them. **And whatever they go on to after high school, the most important thing is that we can give them the tools to be successful with whatever they want to do – whether it’s a trade school, whether it’s doing what the family does, whether it’s going to college – wanting them to be able to leave here with enough tools and confidence to be successful and to be a positive citizen within wherever they’re going to be. That’s just, that’s why I do it.”****

“The biggest thing that I try to do is I try to support each and every one of them (teachers). Have face-to-face conversations with them. Try and make sure that every conversation or everything that they send me or they want to have, that my focus is solely on them at that point in time. Because there’s always, I mean, there’s a thousand

things that are always going on, but for them to know that what they're doing or what they're coming to me with is the most important thing at that point."

"I think one of the biggest things and what kind of goes back to the last year and a half is working on the culture piece within the school. I was kind of describing to my counselor the other day that our school, and every school for the most part, it's like its own little city, kind of how it functions. **But in a position where we're at where we are a small community, trying to build that culture in here that then disseminates out to the community, so they see what's going on here and they see what we're trying to do here.** And it ultimately pushes out to everywhere else. **We have a pretty large population of Hispanic and migrant families. They're always a challenge to bring them in and make them feel like they're part of the school and it's a safe place and they can come in here. So that's a continual challenge that we're always trying to work on.**"

Research Question #3

What are the barriers principals in small, rural districts encounter that impede the ability to participate in leadership support programs or opportunities to address specific leadership challenges, and how has this impacted his or her leadership practices?

This third research question sought to examine what types of barriers might exist for participants, given their rural context, that would prevent them from accessing support that addresses leadership challenges. Additionally, it examined through each participant's reflection how barriers to that support impact their leadership practices. The results of this question are broken into two sections, one that addresses the articulated barriers and another that examines

the impact on leadership practices. Data from both the reflective journal entries and the semi-structured interviews were coded, and the identified codes were categorized into emerging themes, which are displayed in Table 15 below. Direct quotes from each participant are included to show, in their own words, their voice and experiences in relation to this research question.

Table 15

Research Question #3 Emerging Themes

Research Question #3 Themes- Barriers	Frequency
Logistics and Impact	73
Resources & Relevancy to Position	15
Research Question #3 Themes- Impact on Leadership	Frequency
Hinderance on Continued Leadership & Personal Growth	51

In McREL's Balanced Leadership Framework (Rouleau, 2021; Waters & Cameron, 2007); the themes that emerged regarding barriers and the impact on leadership connect to the leadership responsibilities indicated in Table 16-18 below. The table displays the McREL leadership responsibilities, and the codes connected to each responsibility, thus contributing to the overall emerging theme. Additionally, the effect size of each leadership responsibility is shown, demonstrating how the identified barriers and impacts can influence overall student achievement through their connection to these leadership responsibilities, as measured through McREL's meta-analysis (Rouleau, 2021; Waters & Cameron, 2007). The results of this research question demonstrate how barriers can affect leadership practices and the ability to truly engage in meaningful change.

Table 16

Research Question #3- Barrier Theme 1 and Corresponding McREL Leadership Responsibilities

Logistics and Impact			
McREL Leadership Responsibilities	McREL Effect Size	Corresponding Codes	References
Adaptability	0.28	Time	14
		Coverage	11
		Impact on Others	12
		Logistics	7
		Stress	2
		Anxiety	1
Community	0.25	Teaming Issues	1
		Trust	1
Resources	0.25	Access	12
		Isolation/Geographic Location	8
		Limited staffing resources	1
Protects (Discipline)	0.27	Student Issues	1
Communication	0.23	Communication	2

Table 17

Research Question #3- Barrier Theme 2 and Corresponding McREL Leadership Responsibilities

Resources and Relevancy to Position			
McREL Leadership Responsibilities	McREL Effect Size	Corresponding Codes	References
Adaptability	0.28	Consistency	1
		Relevance to Current Setting	1
		Virtual Format	2
Communication	0.23	Clear Information	1
		Irrelevant Topics	1
Resources	0.25	Funding	6
		Obstacles to Resources	1
		Resources	1
Intellectual Stimulation	0.24	Lack of Job Alike Peers	1

Table 18

Research Question #3- Impact on Leadership Theme 1 and Corresponding McREL Leadership Responsibilities

Hinderance on Continued Leadership and Personal Growth			
McREL Leadership Responsibilities	McREL Effect Size	Corresponding Codes	References
Adaptability	0.28	Challenge to leadership	2
		Virtual Training Ineffective	1
		Difficulty Coping	4
		Guilt	1
Change Agent	0.25	Difficulty in Follow Through	1
		Limited Momentum	1
		Limited opportunities	1
Communication	0.23	Lack of Guidance	3
		Lack of Connection	1
Intellectual Stimulation	0.24	Lack of Growth	10
		Limited Perspective/Understanding	9
		Limited Strategies	6
Resources	0.25	Limited access to resources	3
		Underserved	1
Focus	0.24	Unclear Focus	3
Involvement in Teaching & Learning	0.2	Impact on Instruction	4

Barriers

Theme 1- Logistics and Impact

The most articulated theme to address the type of barriers that are presented, preventing participants from accessing leadership support is that of managing logistics and the ultimate impact being away at these supports has upon their schools. The most common codes that are represented by this theme are barriers of time and logistics (20 references), impact on others through needed coverage (23 references), and easy access to these supports (20 references). The logistics of the participants' rural geographic location, often farther removed from where certain supports are offered, also played a role in what barriers were identified. Additionally, for those

participants with multiple roles in their buildings, being gone adds another layer of impact, requiring someone else to cover multiple needs and roles for them.

Direct Quotes from Participants

Sandy

“I would love to collaborate more. Time and access seem to always be a barrier.”

“Time, of course time. But in also not having anyone to cover my job if I need to leave and do those things. Not having an Assistant Principal or an office staff or anything like that who can kind of cover the basics while I’m gone is, does inhibit that. Because if I leave, then, you know, Superintendent has to do my job and so I hate that for him. I mean, he has plenty already because he’s Superintendent, 6-12 principal, athletic director, you know, it’s typical small school stuff. If I’m gone, then he’s also the Elementary Principal, head of programs, whatever else, you know, disciplinarian for the little ones, and so that definitely inhibits it. **So, I could go and do things but I just don’t like leaving things because it’s really had on everybody else.”**

“I think the biggest barriers are, I think time, finding the ability to be away if you need to go to training, you know, go to trainings or to collaborate with others. I think it’s difficult because there isn’t another person to fill in for you while you’re gone. There’s no AP or anybody else who really can fill-in. So it’s hard to be gone to get any of the time or resources or trainings or collaborations that could help inspire, inform, refresh your actions, I think, as a principal. So I would say it’s not having the people to fill in, the time to leave.”

Janice

“I think in our ruralness up here, I don’t ever feel like it’s convenient or even, it’s not that it’s not allowed because I’m sure I could ask, but we don’t go to big conferences. We do invest in a lot of that. And maybe there’s nothing out there right now, like, that very well could be the problem. But I wouldn’t even know that since I’ve been up here seven years, and in seven years, we go to the State Annual Conference and that’s it. So I just think there are really good things out there, programs and people to meet and schools to visit. **But we, it’s just very difficult, I guess, logistically to leave and to travel. So we just don’t. And I think sometimes that’s a disservice for us.”**

“I feel like they must have money made up from the previous years because, so last week, I went down for Idaho Principal Network, there was only about sixty people. In the past it was like three hundred. So super small, and I think it matches what I’ll say is it’s hard to get away. We typically, the district won’t really support us to go down the night before. They always just think you drive the morning of which just makes an early day. You stay the one night in between and then you come home right away the next day. But it’s just, it’s a lot. And then to give up this with no supports here. **Like, I have just guilt when I walk out. Feeling bad that I can’t help and be there to support people.”**

Frank

“I would say time is always a factor, right, time and money. And so you want to attend those trainings to increase your knowledge, and at the same time, the more when you’re out of the building, things can go haywire. So when you have multi hats

as a principal role, it's tough to allow yourself to be out of the building because you want to make sure things are running smoothly."

"I think absolutely they do, especially if you're not one that's been exposed to a lot of best practices and research and conferences and professional development prior to getting there. **Because larger districts, those opportunities are more prevalent. They typically have trainings that are required within the district every year for the admin team. Whereas, in a small district, you either go out and get it on your own or you don't.**"

Phil

"I have several other principals around the State that I will call at the drop of a hat. **But it takes my time, and it takes effort and there is not a principal in the State that ever picks up on the first call.**"

"The most difficult barrier is time. **Time to really commit to professional improvement, time away from the building and the impact on our building staff.** It is not often I have the time to really reflect back on decisions, processes or procedures. **I often am isolated, and it takes my time and energy to reach out to the great resources I have access to.**"

"It's not easy to get out of the building at any point in time. **Because when I'm not here, that means somebody else, who is already super busy, is having to do some of those jobs.** I still have classes to get covered, I still have, seventh graders will be jerks, you know, fifth period before lunch, those things don't just pause when I'm not here."

John

“The difficult aspects are leaving the building especially in a time of uncertainty and class coverage shortages.”

“Time is always a barrier. The other major barrier is not wanting to let my team down by being gone or taking time for myself.”

“It just largely comes back to I feel like I’m being selfish because part of the load, I can’t be there to support them with situations or problems that arise, or my superintendent has to step in and take my role in certain situations when it’s needed. For me, I just feel like I’m being selfish and I’m not being part of the team.”

“Fortunately, my staff that I lead here is, I mean, it’s a pretty oiled working machine. And I know I’m extremely fortunate in that aspect of my VP that’s here and both my counselors, both my secretaries. But I think, I know some of it is self-induced because just worrying about and thinking about those particular things that happen during the day and it never fails that there’s always a situation, or multiple ones, where my involvement has to be there because of my position. And so, you know, knowing, coming back to that after being gone is always difficult because you’re trying to play catch up and figure out who’s involved, what’s going on, where are parents, community members, X, Y, Z. So I think, you know, and especially this year too, I see a significant difference in probably student behavior when I’m out of the building. It puts extra strain and responsibility on the other ones that are here. And so, you know, things get missed or things aren’t observed as well as they could be because of a lack of individuals. So I think all of that kind of comes into play. But yea, and then just the

feeling of if I'm out letting the team down, so to speak, and not being there to support in all those situations, just I have a hard time with that."

Theme 2- Resources and Relevancy to Position

The second barrier, though not as prevalent as the issue of logistics and impact to others, was that of having the needed resources to attend trainings and finding relevancy of trainings to meet their unique needs. The role of the small rural principal often encompasses unique aspects, such as holding a dual role, that is not often easy to find relevant training and support to address. For some of the participants, they have found a lack of relevancy in what is offered, whether through the content or the format of how the training is presented. Other participants do not always have access to needed resources that provide trainings, or funding sources that cover what is needed for support.

Direct Quotes from Participants

Sandy

"Lack of partners in those kind of projects. Lack of money and resources."

"I don't have other small school principals with which to collaborate, and that would be nice."

"I went to the Idaho Principal's Network and did that for a couple of years. And I, the last year or so hasn't been as helpful because it's been virtual and so it's not, it's just harder for me. I like people, I'd rather be in a room where I could be picking people's brains on the coffee breaks, like I just learn about as much that way as I did from what the content was. When it's via Zoom, it's hard for me to connect as well

and you don't have opportunity for any sidebar conversation. Everything's more formal and a little bit more stilted. So, I would say that probably, I mean, that was probably the least helpful thing."

"I've thought about this a little bit because in some ways, **I feel a little bit like I'm outgrowing the Idaho Principal Network.** And I don't mean that in an arrogant way like I think I know everything there is that they can teach me. I don't mean that at all. **But, because every time I go to one, I learn something and I, it's the same material every year.**"

"Professional development, like providing professional development, is challenging too in that we don't have a huge PD budget because we're not a huge school or district."

Janice

"Because I feel like they obviously realize they have a ton of money from last year that they didn't use for training, so they're pushing out, like, a training daily. Which sounds beautiful in theory, they're in person. **But for us to get there, we have no substitutes, we have to pay mileage, we have to grab a hotel perhaps. It's kind of ridiculous.**"

"The State Department's stuff isn't bad, it just seems hard to get there. Obviously last year we did all the virtual Principal Network, the virtual State Conferences, the virtual Family Keeping Engagement Conference, some of those. But not a whole lot of value for me."

“So, like, the Danielson training the last two days was all virtual, so that makes it much easier, but people are so checked out. Like my last breakout groups, I was the only one in them, everybody’s gone. Like, their screens are there, but they’re not there. But then, like, Monday, Tuesday, I think there’s another family engagement conference. **And we just feel, I think by money more than, money and time, it’s very restrictive.**”

Frank

“We’ve also brought on an instructional coach, which we’ve never had before. **And the challenge with that is, this individual is only here once a week and so they provide virtual hours every day, but I don’t think it’s widely used.** I worked with a nearby district to create so many hours that she could also assist us. And so we got it worked out, so they were great to work with. But it’s not as effective as I was hoping it would be just because, you know as an instructional coach, you need to build that rapport and trust with your teachers before it’s going to be super effective.”

“I have, I mean, there’s a lot of resources out there to bring in. **A lot of stuff is virtual, I’ve noticed, which is not nearly as ideal.**”

“So, it’s costly, for sure. Which I think you have to, you know, you have to make that investment. **So I would say if we had more resources or staffing money to pay for all that, oh yea, we can utilize more services for sure.**”

“**I think absolutely that if you’re in a rural small district, it’s harder to have those, have that networking or those opportunities for advanced training that you would get in a larger district.**”

Phil

“But how information is relayed and expressed and explained to rural school districts should be done at a different level than it is to larger school districts where we do have higher turnover, and we do have the same requirements, the same deadlines, but we don’t normally have those departments. And I do think that there is not, there is, the biggest difference between the larger school districts and the smaller school districts is that in a larger school district, your processes and procedures for onboarding admin, teachers, those stayed more consistent through time. **In rural schools, all of our processes and procedures, and really how effective we are, are all determined by a few number of people that are either good at their job or bad at their job.** And that has a big, and I think we see that all the time in small schools with Superintendents not sticking around, with Principals not sticking around, those are just different.”

“When I go to the State Department and they start talking about your data analysis team, I don’t have a team. I have twelve teachers and they’re teaching four or five preps, some of them six, and so to ask them to do another thing is really, really hard for me.”

John

“I think it’s a lot more difficult to find and to connect with. Typically, those individuals that are in the dual role, they’re a principal and they’re also the superintendent. And so there’s not too many that are in the same situation as I am. So I think that’s part of, I mean, that’s also a huge struggle is there’s not a whole lot of models to figure

out or how does this look. I mean, I can look at and have conversations with some of the other smaller schools that have a principal and they're also the superintendent. But that's also a significantly different role than where I'm at and what that looks like. That's definitely a struggle."

"Training onsite, Google meets, you don't get near what you would in person. **This last year and a half, our IPM Network has been on Zoom and it sucked. I mean, it hasn't been good. If I'm sitting here, there's other things that come up and distractions, and my focus turns to them and I don't, it's how we work.** But if we're somewhere else and when we are in person with people, I think the benefit increases significantly."

Impact on Leadership Practices

Theme- Hinderance on Leadership & Personal Growth

The main theme that emerged from examining the articulated impact of the barriers to accessing leadership support was that of finding a hinderance on leadership and personal growth. For participants, this manifested in feeling that they may have a narrower perspective and understanding within their leadership context, struggles with managing the personal impact and stress of their leadership role, and struggles with managing and leading staff and teams. As articulated in their voice, these participants can feel, at times, that they lack the leadership skills and growth needed for where they are at in their current position. This can lead to feelings of inadequacy, and even discouragement. It can also lead to articulated feelings of limitations and struggles to grow as a leader to benefit their staff and school.

Direct Quotes from Participants

Sandy

“I think that makes me not as, I can’t think of the word, but I don’t have as broad of an understanding of things. **I have a more narrow understanding. Not as much variety in the strategies that I use.** And I kind of just stay focused in this area and do the best I can, but I kind of can be in a rut because I don’t know any other ways to do it. I haven’t seen any other ways to do it, so.”

“So, it’s hard to be gone to get any of the time or resources or trainings or collaborations that could help inspire, inform, refresh your actions, I think, as a principal.”

“I think with, this doesn’t really necessarily apply too much to the principal thing, but the financial side of things. I know this is more the Superintendent role because he and I talked about this, and he’s worked with me and tried to help me understand the budgeting process and all the money side and where all the pools of money come from. And I know that’s not my role necessarily as a principal, but there needs to be two people here who understand that in case he hit the lottery tomorrow or got hit by a bus or whatever, didn’t come, and there needs to be, you know. I understand that that’s not necessarily a principal type of thing, so, but that’s something that’s just been on my mind. I’m not sure, I mean, all these different time management things. But I do feel like I’ve gotten a lot better in that, but I’m sure there are better routines.”

“So just, I think making sure to not be alone in the process. It is really important because I think we can be our own worst enemies and completely spin out in our minds and if you don’t have anyone to work through that with you, then I think the burnout rate is so much higher.”

Janice

“Survival this month. I know I can’t sustain the one on one I’m doing with kids right now by myself all year; so am doing all I can to seek out resources so that I can get back to being visible and available for all students and staff.”

“I continue to schedule a lunch break, journal, not answer emails after 5:00, walk, and try to find positive messages out there to keep me in a good head space so that I have the capacity to take care of my staff needs. When I shortchange myself in any of those things, everything is just harder for me.”

“So, I don’t know, I mean, I don’t feel like that and just rebuilding our leadership team of admin, there’s only four of us, five of us I guess, with the superintendent. And I think he’s, I feel like our team’s always dialed, like we always try to find training. But some are better than others. But it’s not like we don’t have the means to bring people in. We do. **We just, I think we all struggle to step out of our buildings to focus on ourselves.**”

“So I struggle with having the wisdom to coach them (teachers) and wish that they had just more coaching accessibility, I guess more than anything.”

Frank

“So, I think that was the biggest challenge for me is, man, if I would have been able to bring on my admin team, that would have been really big. That would have been really beneficial. Because then I know, we work together well, you know, we can move mountains.”

“It’s stressful, it’s not as much fun. You know, before, when I started out, I was gung-ho, happy, excited, because I saw the potential. And now I’m battling some personnel and it’s draining, that’s a drain. That’s the hardest part of the job no matter what. I mean, I’ve been doing this for thirty years and the, and it’s not parents. The parent challenges, you know, that’s part of the job. The student challenges like this morning, that’s not a big deal. But when you have staffing challenges, that’s a drain. Kind of runs my patience.”

Phil

“I am not actively seeking support of any kind. One of the biggest concerns right now is our teaching staff is already wore out and tired. It is shaping up to be another grind of a school year.”

“I think one of the things that I struggle with the most is the processes and procedures that are handed down to us from the State Department. I certainly don’t see that ever changing or there being a fix to it. But there’s so much of this job that you do once a year, and so nearly every year when I’m doing it, it’s relearning the entire process just to get a report turned in. It has very low impact on my school. And those are the

most difficult things for me to deal with is that if I'm going to spend my limited time, energy, and enthusiasm, I want them to impact my school in a positive way."

"I understand the importance of being a reflective leader but find it extremely difficult. In general, my leadership practices are in a constant state of building and refinement, I try to intentionally improve on inadequacies and leverage my strengths whenever I can. Emerging improvement in some areas, but in general difficult to maintain momentum in a positive direction for improvement."

John

"Fake it till you make it. I am trying to keep my composure and keep a positive attitude, but it seems to become more difficult each day. In some ways they are growing and developing, but in other ways I feel like they are being neglected. I have been forced into uncomfortable situations this past month that have helped me grow, but I feel that I am becoming a more callus and less sympathetic/empathetic person."

"I think there's a lot of growth that I still look for. I don't feel like, I mean, I lead my buildings, but there's a lot of things that I think I can do much better. And I see other people that, from this aspect or that aspect, they do that better than I do. I don't know if there's a single thing I could pinpoint. I mean, I would say that just continual focus on all aspects of leadership."

"I feel like I'm in my office more this year than I ever have been and so to me, it's kind of like, well the kids don't know I'm here anyway, but they have like a sixth

sense when they know I'm not here. So that's something I've seen and I haven't been out a lot, but those few times that I have been out, it's pretty consistent that there's an uptick in behaviors.”

Summary

In this chapter, the results of this study were discussed, using the voices of each participant to articulate current lived experiences and challenges of rural school administrators, access to leadership support and how this impacts leadership practices, and any barriers they experience to accessing leadership training and support, and how this impacts leadership practices. The participants varied in years of experience and administrative roles, providing a wide scope of perspectives of the rural school administrator in relation to the questions of the study. The use of a narrative inquiry approach allowed the voices of each participant to be heard, giving each one a chance to articulate the challenges they face, how they are growing as a leader, and what aspects may present a barrier to this growth. Data was collected through the use of reflective journals, semi-structured interviews, and field observations. To ensure that the voice of each participant was represented to the fullest, the process of member checking was utilized. The researcher sent a compilation of the most frequently referenced codes connected to each research questions to the participants. They were asked to view the information and see if they felt their voice was represented in the collected information. If they had any concerns that they were not well represented, then they were asked to contact the researcher to ensure their perspective and input was included. No participants chose to change any portion of what they had contributed.

Through the voices of each participant, the most articulated challenges and lived experiences that require support as a rural school administrator were found to be balancing

multiple roles, meeting the instructional and behavior needs of students, staffing challenges and access to needed resources, and maintaining positive relationships with both the community and with staff teams in each building. The participants identified current support in the form of job-alike peer networks, school-based networks and teams, and state-provided resources. With these forms of support, the participants stated that they saw an impact with leadership practices through obtaining shared ideas and resources, growing and developing both personally and professionally, and seeing a positive impact on climate and culture overall. Participants experienced the most common barrier of challenging logistics and navigating the impact on others when attempting to access support and training, as well as sometimes finding a lack of relevancy within provided supports to relate to their current role and needs. With these barriers, participants expressed that there is an overall hinderance on their leadership and personal growth when experiencing such barriers.

Chapter V

Discussion

Chapter IV provided the results of the narrative inquiry (Creswell & Guetterman, 2019) that highlighted the experiences of small, rural school principals, current support systems they utilize, and potential barriers that stand in the way of accessing needed support and training. These results were connected to the 21 leadership responsibilities found in McREL's Balanced Leadership Framework (Rouleau, 2021; Waters & Cameron, 2007) to underscore the importance of supporting the needs of these principals as they relate to the impact on student achievement and culture. This chapter will include a summary of the results, recommendations for future study, and implications for professional practice.

Introduction

The role of the K-12 principal has been determined through various research to be one that is dynamic, encompassing vast amounts of leadership responsibilities that impact student achievement and culture (Bravender & Staub, 2018; Bouffard, 2019; Pannell et al., 2015; Pannell & Sergi-McBrayer, 2020; Rouleau, 2021; Schrik & Wasonga, 2019; Waters & Cameron, 2007). This role can be challenging to balance, and many leaders come into the role underprepared for what they encounter (Cohen & Schechter, 2019; Hildreth et al., 2018; Lyons, 2019; Mestry, 2017; Pannell & Sergi-McBayer, 2020; Sepurur & Mohlakwana, 2020). The role of the rural principal has been shown to have added layers of challenge and potential adversity due to factors such as limited resources and geographical isolation ((Hohner & Riveros, 2017; Hutton, 2019; Parson & Hunter, 2019; Stewart & Matthews, 2015). Principals in rural districts deal with significant differences through working in a more isolated leadership model, often filling multiple roles within the school setting (Hoyer et al., 2017; Parson & Hunter, 2019). With the

challenges and constraints that rural schools often face, it has been found that rural principals have the shortest time of retention compared to principals in other contexts (Hansen, 2018; Hohner & Riveros, 2017; Pendola & Fuller, 2018).

To meet the on-going needs of administrators continued leadership growth, systems of support through mentoring and professional networks have shown to have a positive effect on strengthening sound practices (Bravender & Staub, 2018; Bouffard, 2019; Carpenter & Krutka, 2018; Cieminski, 2018; DeJong & Grundmeyer, 2018; Hildreth et al., 2018; Nava et al., 2020; Pannell & Sergi-McBayer, 2020; Szczesiul, 2014). These opportunities to engage in rich dialogue with job-alike peers establishes a professional, collegiate culture and exchange of ideas and can provide important growth in the learning process of instructional leadership (Bravender & Staub, 2018; Carpenter & Krutka, 2018; DeJong & Grundmeyer, 2018; Drummond & Halsey, 2014; Hildreth et al., 2018; Liang & Augustine-Shaw, 2016; Nava et al., 2020; Sanford et al., 2019; Szczesiul, 2014). Given the potential barriers that rural principals experience to access this support, it is important to examine how specific support can be provided to meet the unique needs encountered in the rural context (Hansen, 2018; Pendola & Fuller, 2018).

The purpose of the study was to examine the challenges facing small, rural school principals, the type of support they access, and potential barriers to this support. A narrative inquiry approach (Creswell & Guetterman, 2019; Maxwell, 2013) was used where participants shared their lived experiences through reflective journal responses, semi-structured interviews, and direct field observations. The following three research questions guided the study:

1. What are the lived experiences that principals in small, rural schools encounter that they feel require support and training as a leader?

2. What support do principals in small, rural schools currently access, and what is the reflection on how this support has impacted his or her leadership practices?
3. What are the barriers principals in small, rural districts encounter that impede the ability to participate in leadership support programs or opportunities to address specific leadership challenges, and how has this impacted his or her leadership practices?

Summary of Results

For this study, narrative inquiry gave the researcher the opportunity to study the story of rural principals regarding the challenges they encounter and the potential barriers to receiving support for identified needs. It also allowed the researcher to delve into the personal experiences of these principals and their reflections of their own leadership practices considering support, or lack thereof, they receive to grow as a leader. This design allows the researcher to collect narratives about peoples' lived experiences, recording their stories into a broader collection (Creswell & Guetterman, 2019; Maxwell, 2013). This study also utilized McREL's Balanced Leadership Framework (2007, 2019) as the theoretical framework through which to establish the significant impact a principal's leadership practices have upon student achievement, as well as to demonstrate how the identified challenges, support systems, and barriers of the study participants connect to an impact these leadership responsibilities.

A population of five current principals in the identified rural school districts was sampled, one principal from each district. Principals who were selected for the study held a current state certification in administration and represented a range of administrative experience to provide a scope of perspectives to the study. Additionally, some of these principals held multiple roles within their district, highlighting a unique characteristic of small rural school

district administrators. Finally, the principals were selected from traditional brick and mortar school sites. Each participant received an email detailing the purpose of the study and a means by which to express their consent to participate.

Data for the study was collected using reflective journals, semi-structured interviews, and field observations. The reflective journals and semi-structured interviews allowed the voice of each participant to come through regarding the challenges they face, support that they currently access, and barriers they foresee to accessing needed support on a regular basis. They were also provided the opportunity to express how all of this has impacted their leadership practices and abilities. The researcher was able to visit each site once throughout the study to conduct a field observation. These observations added rich context and depth of understanding to the challenges and reflections offered throughout the journals and interviews.

The results of the study show that the lived experiences of participants that require support involve balancing multiple roles, meeting student needs both behaviorally and instructionally, having access to needed staff and resources, and developing strong relationships both within the community and the school itself. The most common sources of support that the participants currently access are personal networks and background experience, networks of those based within their school setting, and state or professional resources. These support systems impacted their leadership through providing access to shared ideas and resources, providing leadership growth, and impacting the culture and climate of their school. Finally, the participants identified the most common barriers they experience to be those of managing the logistics and impact of being away, having the necessary resources to participate, and finding relevancy in what is provided in relation to their current position. Overall, these barriers present a hinderance to their personal and leadership growth.

Lived Experiences Requiring Support

Balance of Leadership Roles and Responsibilities

In response to this first research question, participants articulated the most pressing area of need focused on how to effectively balance the scope and responsibilities of their leadership role. While all five participants balance many responsibilities, three of the five carry multiple assigned roles such as Principal/Superintendent, Middle School/High School Principal, and Principal/Teacher/Athletic Director. Within a larger district, principals would not bear the responsibility of filling these multiple roles, thus the load for the participants is at an increased level comparatively. With the multiple roles and responsibilities, participants articulated a difficulty finding balance and managing time effectively. They often feel spread too thin to be effective in their roles as they feel they need to be, and this can often lead to feelings of stress, anxiety, and burnout.

Meeting Student Needs Instructionally and Behaviorally

The next challenge that was most frequently mentioned by the participants was that of meeting student needs, both behaviorally and instructionally. Some participants mentioned an increased struggle with the amount and level of behavior issues this year. One participant made note that she had new students enroll this year that had not been in any formalized instruction over the last 18 months, and those students were presenting some of the most challenging behaviors. With more limited resources and staffing, the ability to address the behavior needs that occur more frequently has been a particular challenge. Along with this, the participants noted the challenge of meeting the needs of students instructionally and providing enough instructional support to the teachers. With the increased instructional needs, often the participants struggled to implement systems of intervention supports, correct instructional

placement, and overall support in curriculum and instruction. Due to being spread thin over multiple areas, participants also stated the challenge of effectively monitoring and evaluating the instructional practices of teachers and providing meaningful support on a consistent basis.

Staffing and Resource Accessibility

Staffing and the availability of resources was the next theme identified most frequently. Given their rurality, all the participants indicated an issue with shallow applicant pools. At times, this has meant the potential risk of losing certain programs when in danger of not being able to fill a position. This also extends into a challenge of finding teachers to for hard-to-fill positions, such as Special Education. When competing financially with larger districts, the applicant pool becomes very limited. Another large challenge, especially this school year, has been that of having enough substitutes to fill needed positions when staff are absent. All participants experienced a struggle with this challenge, often having to pull from other personnel resources on a regular basis to provide the needed coverage. Finally, there was the voiced challenge by participants of having access to enough needed resources, whether that relates to curriculum or needed trainings. These challenges often related to the geographic isolation of the community in which the schools reside.

Community and Staff Relationships

The last theme that emerged in relation to the first research question was that of community and staff relationships. Due to recent mandates and policy enforcements outside of their control, many participants articulated challenges with community relationships. Within some communities, there was the challenge of bridging relationships in order to show the importance the school plays within the community, thus enabling important levy measures to be passed. Finally, participants also noted some challenge in building positive staff culture and

climate, as well as meeting the needs of their staff members overall. While these challenges can present themselves in larger districts as well, participants spoke to the unique challenge this presents when serving in a small community where relationships and interactions within the community are more personal and involved. It creates a different dynamic that can affect not only community relationships, but staff relationships as well. Some participants have experienced strains in staff morale and the ability to maintain a positive outlook given the negative challenges connected with these current issues.

Current Support & Impact on Leadership

Support: Personal Network & Experiences

When examining the support systems that are currently accessed by the participants, the most common source of support was that of collaborating with job-alike peers or colleagues from their own personal network. These job-alike peers are ones who are in small, rural settings and can thus relate to the participants in a variety of ways. The aspect of sharing ideas and experiences with another administrator who is in their same position and similar setting provided a sense of comradery and sympathetic support that the participants felt was highly beneficial and relevant. Some participants also have built up a collection of professional peers and colleagues they have worked with in past roles from whom they draw support and ideas for their current roles. Finally, the importance of their own previous background and experiences is utilized to inform their practices currently, thus guiding decisions and outcomes.

Support: School-Based Network

Participants next identified their own school-based teams as a form of support that they regularly utilize. These teams consist of school-based leadership teams, superintendents, and

other staff members in various leadership positions. This source of support is one that is readily accessible and onsite for each participant, at varying levels. Participants expressed that these sources of support provide them with needed collaboration, especially around the areas of challenge involving student needs in behavior and instruction. Participants also voiced that they try to engage in opportunities for shared leadership, thus attempting to lighten the load attributed to the multiple roles and responsibilities they bear. Within these systems of school-based support, there are identified challenges that range from managing challenging team dynamics to accessing the teams of support on a steady and consistent basis.

Support: State and Professional Resources

Finally, participants all participate in a variety of state and professional support systems. Every participant is accessing state networking and mentoring supports and has been doing this for the past few years. This support has provided opportunities to learn from other educators outside of their direct area, and to also build networks with other principals and superintendents that share similar characteristics. The state provided resources have proved to be beneficial to each participant in a variety of ways spanning from shared ideas and resources to strengthening peer networks. However, participants said that these resources have not always been beneficial due to format or unrelatable content for their specific positions or situations. At times, these conferences and sessions have been geared more towards larger district needs and systems, so participants have felt that they cannot always relate or find meaning during those times.

Impact: Shared Ideas & Resources

The most articulated benefit and impact of the current support, most closely related to networking and collaboration, is that of sharing ideas and resources. Participants especially noted

the benefit of doing this with job-alike peers when possible. Participants shared that learning about new ideas and sharing resources broadened their perspective and gave them new insight into their own challenges and situations. They are able to be provided with more tools in their instructional toolbelt, especially given the relevancy of working with those who experience the same challenges and circumstances that larger districts and those administrators may not encounter. Overall, the aspect of sharing ideas and resources provides an immense benefit to these rural administrators who can be more isolated in their unique positions.

Impact: Leadership & Personal Growth

Participants next noted that they found benefit of personal growth and leadership growth through tapping into their current systems of support. Connected with the aspect of shared ideas and resources, this helps the participants gain new insight from others and expand their professional worldview to incorporate new ideas and strategies. This has impacted areas that have improved instructional focus, deeper knowledge on utilizing data to drive instructional decisions, emotional and self-care support, and improvements in overall outlook. In the area of personal growth, participants expressed that these collaboration opportunities help to provide them with emotional support and strategies to help enact better self-care, addressing areas of balance and stress inherent in their position. Having others to walk through challenging issues with and receive sound advice and support through mentoring, peer networks, and leadership teams provides the participants with meaningful growth opportunities.

Impact: Impact on Culture and Climate

Finally, these support systems have had a positive impact on the culture and climate within each participants' school setting. This is evident through efforts towards improved

teaming, supporting staff needs, building stronger community relationships, and strengthening the climate for students. While some work actively as a leadership team to strengthen their teaming and working relationships, others strive to persevere through challenging personnel issues, drawing upon the guidance of support systems to impact this in a positive manner. Participants articulated the benefits of the current support they receive as truly impacting this area of leadership positively, but also in ways that continue to stretch them as a leader.

Barriers & Impact on Leadership

Barrier: Logistics and Impact

The most frequently articulated theme regarding the types of barriers that participants encounter which prevent them from accessing leadership support is that of managing the logistics of participating, and the ultimate impact being away at these supports has upon their schools. The most common issue that was expressed by each participant was the issue of finding the time needed to participate in support opportunities. They also stated that being gone from their buildings presented a variety of logistical challenges, causing others to have to cover for them and take on the participants' duties in addition to their own. All participants expressed a feeling of guilt when having to do this, and this feeling often prohibited them from attempting to pursue opportunities that would take them away from their site. Additionally, there is the challenge of getting to the support opportunity if it is taking place outside their school or district due to the geographic location of each participant. Overall, these were the most significant barriers standing in the way of the participants accessing provided supports.

Barrier: Resources and Relevancy to Position

While the second barrier was not as prevalent in the discussions as the first, it was still articulated as a challenge that can prevent participation in support opportunities. This barrier is that of having the needed resources to attend trainings and finding relevancy of trainings to meet their unique needs. The role of the small rural principal often encompasses unique aspects, such as holding a dual role, that is not often easy to find relevant training and support to address. For some of the participants, they have found a lack of relevancy in what is offered, whether through the content or the format of how the training is presented. This lack of relevancy can hinder the participant from desiring to participate in these opportunities, thus furthering the issue of barriers. Other participants do not always have access to needed resources that provide trainings, or funding sources that cover what is needed for support.

Impact: Hinderance on Leadership & Personal Growth

The overall theme that emerged when examining how the barriers impact the leadership practices of the participants was an overall hinderance on leadership and personal growth. This was expressed by participants as a feeling that their perspectives within their leadership context and their understanding of effective practices is narrower and more limited. They can feel at times that they are lacking in growth and skills needed for their current context, and that they experience additional challenges with managing staff, instructional practices, and unique challenges as a result. This can lead to feelings of inadequacy, and even discouragement. It can also lead to articulated feelings of limitations and struggles to grow as a leader to benefit their staff and school.

Theoretical Framework

Research has shown that school leadership has a significant impact on student achievement, superseded in that significance only by classroom instruction (Hansen & Larusdottir, 2015; Lyons, 2019; Mallory et al., 2017; Marshall & Fisher, 2018; Pannell et al., 2015; Rogers et al., 2016; Tan 2016; Rouleau, 2021; Waters & Cameron, 2007). To examine the specific impact of instructional leadership, Mid-continent Research for Education and Learning, or McREL, conducted multiple meta-analyses to determine various factors that impact student learning and achievement (Rouleau, 2021; Waters & Cameron, 2007; Waters et al., 2004). The third in the series of the meta-analyses specifically focused on instructional leadership qualities that impact student achievement, determining 21 that have a statistically significant impact (Rouleau, 2021; Waters & Cameron, 2007; Waters et al., 2004). This meta-analysis provides a research-based framework with which to better define the depth and breadth of the instructional leadership role, underscoring the importance of the need for intentional support.

Within this study, a majority of the leadership responsibilities were connected to each subcode found within the reflective journals, semi-structured interviews, and field observation notes. These subcodes were combined to form the emerging themes for each research question. Tables 19-21 demonstrate how the leadership responsibilities identified by McREL connect to each research question and the potential impact upon student learning and achievement. The connection of the leadership responsibilities within each identified theme demonstrates how the challenges, support, and barriers to support impact leadership responsibilities that have been shown to significantly impact student achievement at a statistical level, as evidenced from the effect size found through the meta-analyses in the McREL study.

Table 19

Research Question 1- McREL Leadership Responsibilities & Impact

Research Question 1- Lived Experiences Requiring Support	
McREL Leadership Responsibilities	McREL Effect Size
Situational Awareness	0.33
Adaptability	0.28
Protects (Discipline)	0.27
Advocacy	0.27
Change Agent	0.25
Structures & Routines (Order)	0.25
Resources	0.25
Input	0.25
Knowledge of Teaching & Learning	0.25
Community	0.25
Focus	0.24
Intellectual Stimulation	0.24
Communication	0.23
Ideals/Beliefs	0.22
Visibility	0.20
Involvement in Teaching & Learning	0.20
Relationships	0.18

Through the challenges that were voiced by the participants, the study shows that these challenges connect to highly important leadership responsibilities identified by the McREL Balanced Leadership Framework. Specifically, 17 of the 21 leadership responsibilities were impacted by the challenges expressed by participants. Such responsibilities that have the highest impact and are proving to be areas of challenge for the participants, include the ability to be aware of the undercurrents of the school through situational awareness, learning to adapt leadership ability to the current needs of the school, protecting instructional time through effective discipline, and advocating for the needs of the school and staff. The scope of the challenges covers leadership responsibilities that, if not supported and grown effectively, can negatively impact student learning and achievement. Therefore, the needs of the participants are

clearly linked to statistically significant areas of effective leadership requiring meaningful and relevant support.

Table 20

Research Question 2- McREL Leadership Responsibilities & Impact

Research Question #2- Current Support and Impact on Leadership	
McREL Leadership Responsibilities	McREL Effect Size
Input	0.25
Knowledge of Teaching & Learning	0.25
Resources	0.25
Community	0.25
Intellectual Stimulation	0.24
Focus	0.24
Ideals & Beliefs	0.22
Inspire (Optimize)	0.20
Involvement in Teaching & Learning	0.20
Visibility	0.20
Acknowledgement (Affirmation)	0.19
Relationships	0.18

When examining the current support systems in place for participants and how they feel such supports impact their leadership practices, there are twelve McREL leadership responsibilities that are impacted. Ten of these leadership responsibilities also connect to the challenges that the participants voiced as challenges. This demonstrates that the participants access support that is growing and impacting important areas of leadership in an effort to address the articulated challenges. The leadership responsibilities that are being most supported are those of finding ways in which to best incorporate teacher input, expanding their knowledge of teaching and learning, finding access to important resources, and striving for ways to build positive community within each school. While these supports are found to be addressing these important responsibilities, they do not show a connection of support to the highest articulated

challenges captured within the first research question. This result demonstrates the need to ensure meaningful and relevant support that targets the highest identified needs.

Table 21

Research Question 3- McREL Leadership Responsibilities & Impact

Research Question #3- Barriers to Support and Impact on Leadership	
McREL Leadership Responsibilities	McREL Effect Size
Adaptability	0.28
Protects (Discipline)	0.27
Community	0.25
Resources	0.25
Change Agent	0.25
Intellectual Stimulation	0.24
Focus	0.24
Communication	0.23
Involvement in Teaching & Learning	0.20

Finally, the last research question examined the barriers that participants experience when attempting to access needed support and the impact they feel that has upon leadership practices. Within the themes of this research question, nine of McREL's leadership practices are impacted. Overall, the barriers that were articulated connect to important leadership responsibilities such as adapting to the needs of the current situation of the school, protecting the instructional environment through effective discipline, building positive community within the school, and accessing needed resources. This demonstrates that the current barriers for these participants are most closely connected to the leadership responsibilities that are also impacted by the challenges that they face. Thus, the need to address the barriers that are being experienced by rural administrators may help to address the most needed areas of support to positively impact student learning and foster meaningful leadership growth.

The use of McREL's Balanced Leadership Framework in connection with the research questions examined in this study provides a lens by which to understand how the lived experiences of rural school administrators in small districts can directly impact areas of leadership that are shown to have a statistically significant influence on student learning and achievement. By understanding this connection and impact, leaders in learning and those who influence change and improvement can better design means by which to support leaders as they grow in their practice. McREL has indicated some key findings through their research that underscore the importance of the impact of school leaders. The first important finding is that when school and district leaders are intentional, they are most effective. Secondly, findings showed that effective leaders develop means by which to support learners and maintains a focus on student learning. Finally, the research McREL conducted through the framework demonstrated that leadership is strengthened through systems of support (Rouleau, 2021; Waters & Cameron, 2007). Thus, the framework supports and connects with the findings of the study which demonstrates the need for rural school administrators to engage in relevant and intentional systems of support, thus impacting student learning.

Conclusion

From the results of the study, principals in small, rural districts experience significant and unique challenges within their position. These challenges relate to the multiple roles they fill, limited resources in both funding and personnel, and challenges in meeting student needs effectively within the context and parameters of their setting. While each participant has support systems in place that benefit their professional practice in the form of peer networks, mentoring connections, and state resources, they also experience barriers to continued support. These barriers take the form of limited time, logistical feasibility, and finding relevancy in what is

provided. With those barriers, they find they can experience a general lack of growth both personally and within their leadership skills. Through the lens of McREL's Balanced Leadership Framework, the study shows that these challenges and barriers are impacting identified leadership responsibilities that impact student achievement, thus demonstrating the importance of providing access to regular support systems and guidance opportunities for principals in small, rural schools.

Recommendations for Future Study

This study was designed and conducted to shed light on the challenges faced by small, rural school principals and how they access needed leadership support and training given their rural context. Within this study, the needs of these principals were highlighted in a way that not only identified the current challenges, but also how they are attempting to fill the need of support with what they can currently access, and how this effort can be hindered by various barriers that get in the way. Through this study, there is potential for other branches of research studies that can further the discussion and efforts towards the best means by which to support rural school administrators, as well as administrators in other contexts.

First, case studies can be explored to examine the effectiveness and true impact of the current state support systems offered through the Idaho Principals Network and the Idaho Principal Mentoring Project. Both systems were identified by participants as ones that they have participated in through either past involvement or current involvement. Participants all shared a level of benefit from these programs, and it would be worth exploring on a larger scale how participants in the programs find benefit and impact on leadership practices specifically. It can also be explored through this study the level of participation across the state that each program experiences, analyzing the relevance and use to its participants. Exploring this would aid the

Idaho State Department of Education in tailoring the support systems in ways that truly meet the needs of the participants, regardless of being rural or urban.

Yet another direction in relation to this study to explore is in the realm of private education. Private education administrators share many of the same characteristics and challenges found in the small, rural schools used in this study. An exploratory study could be conducted to examine how administrators in small private schools experience challenges and what means they have to access leadership support and growth, especially given the different sources of funding and lack of access to the resources typically provided to public schools from the State Department. This type of study could provide needed information for accrediting bodies and associations, such as the Association of Christian Schools International, on how best to provide support and train private school administrators to best meet the needs of their populations given the private school context.

Finally, a further exploratory study can be conducted on the current conditions that contribute the most to the burnout rate of school administrators. The literature within this study found that administrators have high burnout rates (Cieminski, 2018; Hansen, 2018; Hohner & Riveros, 2017; Levin et al., 2020; Pendola & Fuller, 2018). While this study focused on a specific population of small, rural school administrators, some of the articulated challenges are not unique to them. All administrators experience challenges on a variety of levels, with larger school administrators experiencing their own challenges unique to their context as well. Given all of the challenges inherent in the position, it is worth exploring the most significant factors that contribute to administrators leaving the profession and develop ways in which to combat these factors in order to retain high quality principals in their roles.

Implications for Professional Practice

There are a variety of implications for professional practice that can be gleaned from this study. First, universities can examine their preparation programs to ensure a diversity of experiences and a comprehensive offering of information to highlight the importance of quality support and training opportunities for administrators. School districts can examine their current practices of the professional development and support for administrators, ensuring sufficient access. Finally, states can examine the programs in place that address the needs of school administrators, seeking to ensure relevancy and access to needed supports. There are many opportunities for intentional means by which to support rural school administrators.

In university preparation programs, efforts towards examining the depth of the diversity of preparation can be pursued. Universities can seek to understand if they sufficiently cover and prepare leadership candidates for the varying contexts, they may find themselves when taking a leadership position. In relation to this study, universities can cover the complexities that come with the rural context and ways in which those taking those leadership positions can ensure systems of support from the beginning. Additionally, universities can partner with local school districts to provide needed trainings and professional development to area administrators, tailored specifically to identified needs. Ideally, university programs could seek to provide follow up support for alumni going out into leadership positions fresh from the university programs. Finally, there can be a concerted effort on the part of a university to ensure they are communicating the available resources offered within the state and local districts designed to provide support and on-going training for administrators.

Districts can look to find intentional means by which to ensure that when onboarding new administrators, they are providing the information regarding how to connect to such

support and training programs like the Idaho Principals Network or the Idaho Principal Mentoring Project. This could ensure that all new administrators are receiving the necessary information of how to tap into those support systems. Additionally, districts can devote funds necessary to facilitate programs of support designed specifically for principals and other administrative leadership positions. This support can take the form of structured mentoring programs or regular peer collaboration and networking. Small, rural districts can form coalitions designed to connect administrators who may be a singleton within a district, thus helping to foster job-alike networks. Finally, districts can foster a culture of support for administrators to participate in growth opportunities, addressing the barrier of logistics and impact and helping to ease the assumed burden of being away from a building.

Finally, the state can look to assess the programs that they do offer and ensure that they are designing meaningful and relevant opportunities for administrators as much as possible. Ideally, these programs would be able to split into divisions specific to contextual needs allowing natural networks to form of job-alike peers. The state can also partner with local districts to ensure that administrators have regular access and knowledge of these support programs to participate as fully as possible. Lastly, the state can continue to grow and implement groups designed to target the specific needs and challenges of rural administrators through local organizations.

The results of this study can be applied to other states or regions that contain small, rural school districts that experience the same conditions noted in this study. This is especially relevant in areas where these districts are more geographically isolated, and resources may be limited. Additionally, it can be utilized to examine the available support systems in other states and the impact they may have, along with the ease of accessibility to all administrators in that

area. While the results of this study focus on the conditions in small, rural districts, the challenges that were articulated may be present in larger districts as well. Examination of how the context of a larger system impacts the challenges and available support for principals is worth exploring.

The role of the principal is vast, and the challenges of the small, rural school principal are unique. These challenges require regular support and the chance for barriers not to get in the way of growth opportunities. By doing this, the ground can become fertile for the development of sound leaders, ones who will answer the call daily. As Dan B. Allender (2008) stated in his book *Leading with a Limp*, “Leadership will always require one person to stand closest to the edge and say, ‘Let’s jump’” (p.26). Supported leaders can be the ones to confidently jump into the fray and lead a staff to follow the call.

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Appendix A

Figure 2

Percentage of teachers with alternative authorization certificates

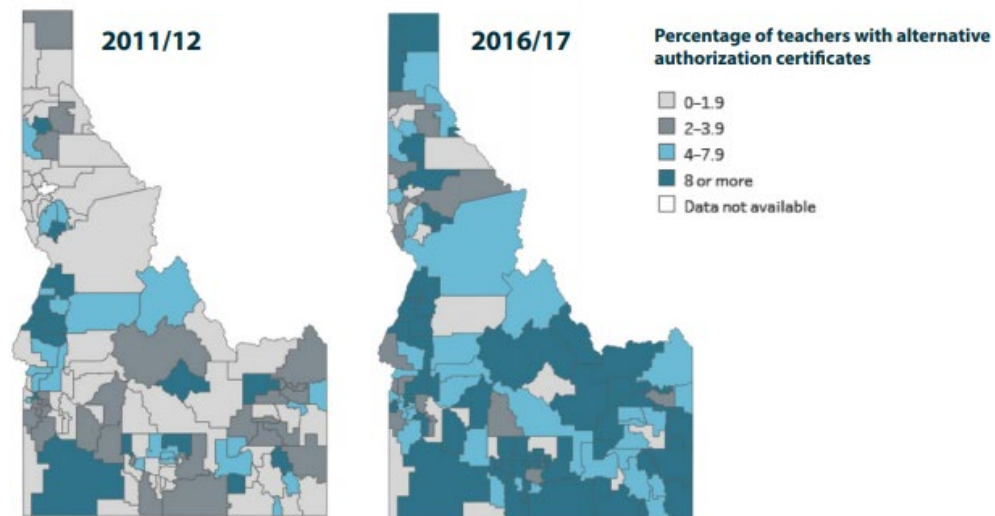


Figure 1. A visual representation of the percentage of Idaho teachers with alternative authorization certificates from 2011-12 to 2016-17 by Regional Educational Laboratory Northwest, Retrieved October 17, 2020 from <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED579892.pdf>. Copyright 2016 by Regional Educational Laboratory Northwest.

Appendix B

Figure 3

Alternative Authorizations and Non-Traditional Routes Issued

Alternative Authorizations

Alternative Authorizations are for school districts/charters looking to fill a position with a candidate that does not hold an appropriate certificate/endorsement.

The table below identifies the total numbers of employed educators working on Alternative Authorization or Emergency Provisional for each school year.

School Year	Total number of Educators with a Certificated Assignment	Total Number of Authorizations with a Certificated Assignment	Percent of Educators working with an Alternative Authorization or Emergency Provisional Certificate
2019-2020	20,458	798	3.90%
2018-2019	20,054	885	4.41%
2017-2018	19,553	786	4.02%
2016-2017	19,117	696	3.64%
2015-2016	18,442	587	3.18%

Figure 2. The total number of educators employed that are working on alternative or provisional certification over the past five years from The Idaho State Department of Education. Retrieved on April 25, 2021 from <https://www.sde.idaho.gov/cert-psc/psc/alt-auth.html>. Copyright 2020 by The Idaho State Department of Education.

Appendix C

Figure 4

Federal funding for principal preparation and training in ESSA

Federal Funding for Principal Preparation and Training in ESSA

Under ESSA, states have multiple opportunities to invest in high-quality school leadership, especially in high-need schools and communities.

1. **Title II, Part A.** States may allocate up to 5% of their Title II, Part A allocation to teacher and leader development and an additional 3% exclusively for leadership investments.¹⁴ These investments can be used to prepare aspiring school leaders, to develop current principals, or even to fund coaches or mentors who directly support principal learning.
2. **Title I, Part A School Improvement.** States are required to set aside 7% of their Title I, Part A funds to improve low-performing schools by using evidence-based strategies that increase student learning.¹⁵ States and districts have flexibility to select the mix of evidence-based strategies that best meet their contexts.¹⁶ For example, states and districts may focus on improving student outcomes by implementing research-based interventions to strengthen school leadership. Multiple school leader interventions demonstrate strong, moderate, and promising levels of evidence under ESSA's evidence-based requirements.¹⁷
3. **Competitive Federal Grants.** States, districts, and nonprofit organizations can further strengthen school leadership capacity by applying for a competitive federal grant that can be used for a range of activities that support and develop high-quality school leaders. These grants include:
 - a. *School Leader Recruitment and Support Program:* for states and districts to recruit, prepare, place, support, and retain leaders in high-need schools.¹⁸
 - b. *Supporting Effective Educator Development:* for nonprofit organizations and institutions of higher education to support educator recruitment, preparation, certification, and professional learning.¹⁹
 - c. *Teacher and School Leader Incentive Program:* formerly the Teacher Incentive Fund, this program supports state and district investments in performance-based compensation and human capital management systems for principals, other school leaders, and teachers.²⁰

d

Figure 3. Identified uses of title funds in ESSA to invest in high-quality school leadership.

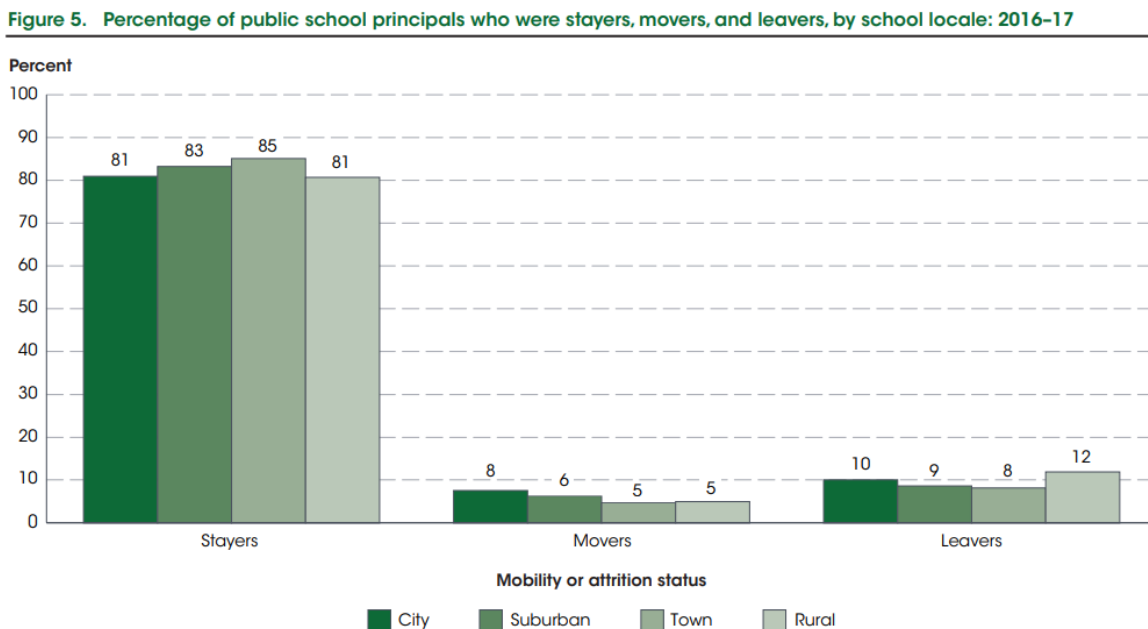
Adapted from Learning Policy Institute, Retrieved October 17, 2020 from

<https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED606815.pdf>, Copyright 2017 by Learning Policy Institute.

Appendix D

Figure 5

Percentage of public-school principals who stayed, moved, or left a principal position categorized by location: 2016-2017



NOTE: Of those who were public school principals in 2015-16, stayers were public school principals who stayed in the same position at the same school from 2015-16 to 2016-17; movers were public school principals who moved to work as a principal at a different school; and leavers were public school principals who stopped working as a principal in 2016-17. Although rounded numbers are displayed, the figures are based on unrounded data.
SOURCE: U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, National Teacher and Principal Survey (NTPS), "Public School Principal Data File," 2015-16; and NTPS Principal Follow-up Survey (PFS), "Public School Principal Status Data File," 2016-17. See *Digest of Education Statistics 2018*, table 212.20.

Figure 4. Identified percentages of principals who stayed, moved, or left their position as categorized by location in the 2016-17 school year nationally. Retrieved July 17, 2021, from <https://nces.ed.gov/programs/coe/indicator/slb>. Copyright 2019 by The National Center for Education Statistics.

Appendix E
Participant Letter
(sent via email)

Dear Principal,

My name is Jennifer Cornell, and I am a Ph.D. student in the Department of Graduate Education at Northwest Nazarene University. I am also a fellow building principal and have worked as an administrator in education for 11 of my 20 years. I am reaching out to invite you specifically to participate in a study I will conduct from July 2021-November 2021 because you are a principal in a rural school, and you have valuable insight to contribute to this study. Your participation in the study will be only known to me, permission from your district will not be sought. This is in an effort to protect high levels of confidentiality, and to foster an environment in which you can openly share about your challenges and experiences. The purpose of my study is to examine how rural school district administrators access and utilize support programs for their own growth and improvement. I am interested in the factors that create challenges for principals in small, rural school districts, their access to leadership support, and potential barriers they may experience in accessing this support.

Attached you will find a copy of the informed consent that explains the purpose of my study and a request for your participation. Please review the document, and if you desire to participate in my study, you may sign and submit it electronically. After receiving your consent, I will then contact you to set up the next steps regarding the initiation of my study. In addition, I would like to invite you to meet with me virtually to address any questions you may have pertaining to my study. You may contact me at jmccornell@nnu.edu, or at 208-258-4625 to set up a meeting if desired.

I look forward to hearing from you regarding my study.

Sincerely,

Jennifer M. Cornell

Appendix F

INFORMED CONSENT FORM

A. PURPOSE AND BACKGROUND

Jennifer Cornell, a doctoral student in the Department of Graduate Education at Northwest Nazarene University is conducting a research study related to how rural school district administrators access and utilize support programs for their own growth and improvement. She is interested in the factors that create challenges for principals in small, rural school districts, their access to leadership support, and potential barriers they may experience in accessing this support. The purpose of this study is to understand at a deeper level how these principals need to be supported as leaders and how to ensure equal access to these supports given their rurality.

You are being asked to participate in this study because you are a healthy volunteer, over the age of 18.

B. PROCEDURES

If you agree to be in the study, the following will occur:

1. You will be asked to sign an Informed Consent Form, volunteering to participate in the study.
2. Your participation in this study will be known to only the researcher. Permission from district administration will not be sought.
3. Study participation will involve responding to monthly reflective journal prompts regarding your challenges within your role as you have experienced them in that month, as well as your perspective on your leadership practices. You are not required to answer the prompts and you may pass on any prompt that creates uncomfortable feelings at any point.
4. Study participation will also involve three interviews over the course of the first semester lasting approximately one **45-60 minutes**. In the first interview, you will be asked a series of questions that delve deeper into your lived experiences as a rural administrator and how you receive leadership support. The subsequent two interviews will be follow-up questions to go deeper into the content of your journal responses over the course of the study.
5. You will not be required to answer the questions and will have the option to pass on any question in which you feel uncomfortable. The recording can be stopped at any time during the interview, or the interview can be terminated. There is no penalty for discontinuing participation.
6. In addition, the researcher will be a passive observer in your daily administrative duties for a total of **one day** to gain a deeper perspective into your lived experiences as a rural

administrator. You may indicate at any time that you would like to stop your participation in the study.

7. You will be asked to reply to an email at the conclusion of the study asking you to confirm the data that was gathered during the research process.

C. RISKS/DISCOMFORTS

1. While risk is minimal, you may find yourself uncomfortable with some of the questions. You may decline to answer any questions and can indicate your desire to cease participation at any point.
2. The researcher will be requesting demographic information for this study. Due to the make-up of Idaho's population, the combined answers to these questions may make an individual person identifiable. The researcher will make every effort to protect your confidentiality. However, if you are uncomfortable answering any of these questions, you may decline to answer.
3. There is a risk of disruption to your daily routine with allowing the researcher to observe you in context.
4. Confidentiality: Participation in research may involve a loss of privacy; however, your records will be handled as confidentially as possible. No individual identities will be used in any reports or publications that may result from this study. All data from notes, audio tapes, and disks will be kept in a locked file cabinet, password protected computer or in password protected files. In compliance with the Federal wide Assurance Code, data from this study will be kept for three years, after which all data from the study will be destroyed (45 CFR 46.117).
5. During the course of the study, only the primary researcher, the research supervisor, and the professional transcriptionist will be privy to data from this study. As researchers, all parties are bound to keep data as secure and confidential as possible. Upon publication of the study, everything will be done possible by the researcher to protect individual participants' identities and individual responses that could be traced back to participants.

D. BENEFITS

There will be no direct benefit to you from participating in this study. However, the information you provide may contribute information to the educational community about your lived experiences and challenges, and how best to meet the needs of rural school principals in their growth and development. This may assist current principals and their districts to structure their support programs in such a way to better meet these needs.

E. PAYMENTS

There are no payments for participating in this study.

F. QUESTIONS

If you have questions or concerns about participation in this study, you should first talk with the investigator. Jennifer Cornell can be contacted via email at jmccornell@nnu.edu, via telephone at 208-258-4625. If for some reason you do not wish to do this you may contact Dr. Jennifer Hill, Associate Professor in the College of Education at Northwest Nazarene University, via email at jjhill@nnu.edu via telephone at 208-467-8871 or by writing 623 S. University Blvd, Nampa, Idaho 83686.

Should you feel distressed due to participation in this, you should contact your own health care provider.

G. CONSENT

You will be given a copy of this consent form to keep.

PARTICIPATION IN RESEARCH IS VOLUNTARY. You are free to decline to be in this study, or to withdraw from it at any point. Your decision as to whether or not to participate in this study will have no influence on your present or future status as a student at Northwest Nazarene University.

I give my consent to participate in this study:

Signature of Study Participant	Date

I give my consent for the interview and discussion to be audio taped in this study:

Signature of Study Participant	Date

I give my consent for direct quotes to be used in this study:

Signature of Study Participant	Date

Signature of Person Obtaining Consent	Date

**THE NORTHWEST NAZARENE UNIVERSITY INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD
HAS REVIEWED THIS PROJECT FOR THE PROTECTION OF HUMAN
PARTICIPANTS IN RESEARCH.**

Appendix G

Follow-Up Telephone Call Script

Hi, my name is Jennifer Cornell, a doctoral student at Northwest Nazarene University. My call is in regard to an email I sent to you a few weeks ago about your consent to participate in my study on small rural school district administrators and the supports they access for leadership growth. I am also a school principal and understand the challenges and rewards of the position. I believe that you have valuable insight to contribute to my study as a rural school principal.

Have you had a chance to review the email and consent form?

If no: What is the best way that I can go over the information with you regarding the study?

If yes: Do you have any questions about the study?

If yes: Answer questions

If no: Are you willing to offer consent to participate in the study? If not, there will be no negative impact in any way. I would greatly appreciate your participation, but completely understand if you are unable to do so.

If you do consent to the study, please fill out the consent form and submit electronically by the end of this week. If you have questions, my contact information is jmccornell@nnu.edu or 208-258-4625. Thank you for your time!

Appendix H

Reflective Journal Prompts Protocol

Dear _____,

Thank you for participating in my study regarding rural school principals and how they are supported in their growth and development. Below are journal prompts that I would like you to answer at the end of each month beginning in August and concluding in December. Please reflect openly and honestly in your responses. These journal entries will be kept confidential, and you will remain anonymous throughout this study. If you have questions, please feel free to reach out to me at any point to receive clarification. I can be reached at jmcornell@nnu.edu or 208-258-4625.

August 2021

Summarize and reflect on the events in your administrative role this month.

What areas might you desire more equipping and training?

In what ways are you seeking out help and training at this moment? Are there any barriers in your way? If so, what are they and how are they impacting you?

How would you currently describe your leadership practices and abilities?

September 2021

Summarize and reflect on the events in your administrative role this month.

What areas might you desire more equipping and training?

In what ways are you seeking out help and training at this moment? Are there any barriers in your way? If so, what are they and how are they impacting you?

How would you currently describe your leadership practices and abilities?

October 2021

Summarize and reflect on the events in your administrative role this month.

What areas might you desire more equipping and training?

In what ways are you seeking out help and training at this moment? Are there any barriers in your way? If so, what are they and how are they impacting you?

How would you currently describe your leadership practices and abilities?

November 2021

Summarize and reflect on the events in your administrative role this month.

What areas might you desire more equipping and training?

In what ways are you seeking out help and training at this moment? Are there any barriers in your way? If so, what are they and how are they impacting you?

How would you currently describe your leadership practices and abilities?

Appendix I

Interview Protocol

Introduction: Hi _____,

Thank you for your participation in this interview, I am very grateful. I am going to explain the process of the interview and then we will get started.

Process: I will conduct one semi-structured, audio-recorded interview. This interview will be completed on a virtual platform at a time mutually decided by the participant and researcher. Each interview will take approximately 45-60 minutes.

This process is completely voluntary, and you can select to leave the study at any time. If you feel uncomfortable with any question you can select not to answer that question.

Do you have any questions for me?

Thank you for participating. Let's begin with the interview.

Do I have your permission to record the interview?

- 1) What is your age?
- 2) What degrees do you currently hold? What certifications do you currently hold?
- 3) How many total years of experience did you have as a teacher?
- 4) How many total years of experience do you have as an administrator?
- 5) Tell me a little about yourself as a professional educator. What is your background?
- 6) Why did you become an educator? What makes you come to work every day?
- 7) How long have you been at your school? How is your school unique?
- 8) What led you to pursue a position in a rural school district?
- 9) What are some of the differences between your role and that of a principal in a larger school district, in your opinion?
- 10) What are some of the most common challenges you deal with your current role?

- 11) In what ways have you received support and training in your role?
- 12) How do you feel that the training impacts your leadership practices?
- 13) Are there ways in which you feel that you lack some training that you may need? What inhibits that training from taking place?
- 14) As a leader, what areas do you feel you spend the most time on in your daily work?
- 15) How do you feel you are having an impact on students?
- 16) How do you feel you are having an impact on staff?
- 17) How do you feel you are having an impact on your community?
- 18) What do you feel is unique in your position that requires specialized support and training?
- 19) In your ideal scenario, what would this training look like and what potential impact would it have on your leadership?

Appendix K



Appendix L

Protocol Use Permission Email



Jennifer Cornell <jmccornell@nnu.edu>

Re: Use of protocol

1 message

Russell, Gregg <grussell@nsd131.org>
To: Jennifer Cornell <jmccornell@nnu.edu>

Mon, Nov 30, 2020 at 8:15 AM

Hi Jenn,

Sure your welcome to use what you would like. Good luck! Let me know if I can be of any assistance in the future.

Gregg

[Get Outlook for iOS](#)

From: Jennifer Cornell <jmccornell@nnu.edu>
Sent: Monday, November 30, 2020 5:57:13 AM
To: Russell, Gregg <grussell@nsd131.org>
Subject: Use of protocol

**WARNING: This email originated from a source outside of the Nampa School District.
Please only click links and attachments if you're sure they are safe.**

Good Morning,

My name is Jenn Cornell and I am currently going through my doctoral program at NNU. Dr. Curtis referred me to view your dissertation for some ideas regarding the theoretical framework and some other items. As I was viewing it, I saw your interview protocol and I wanted to get your permission to use it in my own dissertation with appropriate changes to fit my own study. I appreciate your consideration!

Sincerely,
Jenn Cornell

Appendix M

Image Use Permission Emails

Permission for Images

External Inbox x



Eric Hubler <ehubler@mcrel.org>
to me ▾

Mon, Nov 15, 2021, 1:58 PM ☆ ↶ ⋮

Hi Jennifer, wanted to let you know I'm researching your request. We'll almost certainly provide permission to use the images with credit, but there have been some changes to Balanced Leadership and I'm checking with the subject matter expert whether I should send you updated images.

Yours,

Eric Hubler
Writer/Editor
McREL International
4601 DTC Boulevard, Suite 500, Denver, CO 80237-2596
Phone: 303-632-5520
Twitter: @mcrel
LinkedIn: /company/McREL

↶ **Eric Hubler** <ehubler@mcrel.org>
to me ▾

Nov 29, 2021, 11:23 AM ☆ ↶ ⋮

Hi, Jennifer. I shared this additional info with Kristin Rouleau, who oversees Balanced Leadership development, and she said it's fine to use the images you had if you are illustrating an experience with the former version of BL. If, however, you want to represent the current state of BL, she offers these replacements.

Best,
Eric

From: Jennifer Cornell <jmccornell@nnu.edu>
Sent: Saturday, November 27, 2021 5:40 AM
To: Eric Hubler <ehubler@mcrel.org>
Subject: Re: Balanced Leadership

Good Morning,

Thank you for your help in seeking out the information for me. For more context, I am using the Balanced Framework to demonstrate and set a foundation about the scope of the role of a school principal and the impact their leadership responsibilities play in impacting their school. My goal is to show how vast those responsibilities are, how much impact they have, and then discuss the need to better support administrators in their growth and development of those leadership responsibilities. Specifically I am looking at how small, rural school district administrators are supported given their rural context. Essentially, the Balanced Leadership Framework helps to set the foundation to demonstrate how large the scope of the role of an administrator is in order to understand the need to sufficiently support it.

Again, I appreciate your help in finding the best images to use. If you need anything else, please let me know!

Sincerely,
Jennifer Cornell

On Tue, Nov 16, 2021 at 11:45 AM Eric Hubler <ehubler@mcrel.org> wrote:

Hi, I got confirmation from the person in charge of Balanced Leadership that the graphics you sent us are not current. If you used them, it might be helpful to mention that they are from an earlier version of the program. If you would like to share some context we can help you be sure you've got the right material.

Yours,

Eric Hubler
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