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An Examination of Secondary School Principal Leadership Practices in High-Achieving, High-Needs Rural Schools in New York State

Abstract

Through Kouzes and Posner's transformational leadership framework, this study examined the perceived leadership practices of secondary school principals in New York State's high-achieving, high-needs rural schools. New York State's rural principals face a variety of challenges to meet students' needs. Rural principals are often members of smaller leadership teams, and assume varying leadership responsibilities with fewer opportunities to collaborate with peers. The peer-reviewed literature focusing on principal leadership practices is extensive but lacks a focus on high-needs, rural secondary schools. The study was qualitative, as data were collected using semistructured interviews of six rural secondary school principals. Each principal in the study led a high-needs rural school that the New York State Education Department awarded Recognition School status. Using Kouzes and Posner's (2017) five transformational leadership practices as a framework, the study explored the perceived leadership practices as outlined by the participants during the interviews. Data analysis identified commonalities among the participants' responses. These similarities resulted in three findings. First, rural secondary school principals that inspire a shared vision focused on student needs are able to cultivate student success. Second, the ability of rural principals to challenge the process is paramount when addressing difficulties in rural school settings. Third, meeting student needs takes an educational community that must be nurtured, developed, and empowered. The study affirmed that secondary school principals in high-needs rural schools can positively impact organizations by demonstrating transformational leadership.

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An Examination of Secondary School Principal Leadership Practices in
High-Achieving, High-Needs Rural Schools in New York State

By

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Submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree
Ed.D. in Executive Leadership

Supervised by

Dr. Marie Cianca

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Ralph C. Wilson, Jr. School of Education

St. John Fisher College

August 2021

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2021

Dedication

As an educator in rural New York State for the past 20 years, I have had the opportunity to work alongside leaders who are dedicated to the success of their students and the community. This focus has fueled me as I worked to become a better educator, coach, and administrator. The dissertation process allowed me to converse with leaders who have transformed the educational process to benefit students and change lives. Several of their comments reminded me of Mr. Harold DeCook, one of the most outstanding rural principals I have had the pleasure of working with during my career in education. Many people have mentioned his unique eye for talent, especially when hiring young social studies teachers.

The dissertation process is like no other. With the support of Dr. Marie Cianca and Dr. Linda McGinley, I have developed my skills as a researcher, writer, and scholar. Although I befuddled them at times, their unwavering support throughout this journey has been an asset in my personal and professional growth. My sincerest thanks to them, as they were my north stars in this endeavor. Additionally, my Cohort 14 family has been truly inspirational. We supported each other as we completed this journey through a global pandemic. Finally, I feel fortunate to have shared this experience with the members of Team OZ: Terry, Amanda, Chantz, and Corey. The meetings, projects, and presentations that we collaborated on were some of my best memories of the program. Sharing laughs and celebrating accomplishments has been a true pleasure.

The support I have received as a member of the Wayne-Finger Lakes BOCES and Lyons Central School District has pushed me to be an advocate for students. For an educator to best meet the needs of the students, one must work with colleagues who share the commitment to student success. I was fortunate to work alongside phenomenal educators at all stages of my professional career. When I look back on my time as a teacher and principal, I know that we have helped make success possible for so many. A special thank you to Dr. Vicma Ramos and Ms. Erin Fairben for their support and encouragement throughout this endeavor. As this dissertation details, quality leaders can make all the difference.

Finally, and most importantly, I want to thank my family. My parents have always modeled hard work, perseverance, and selflessness. Hopefully, I have learned a few of those traits along the way. My wife, Bridgette, has encouraged me through every aspect of this journey. Her support has made all the difference. Lastly, to Jackson and Ryan, thank you. Your graciousness when coursework interfered with family events was appreciated. I love you all more than I could ever express.

Biographical Sketch

Matthew Barr is currently the Principal at the Finger Lakes Technical and Career Center, a school in the Wayne-Finger Lakes Board of Educational Cooperative Services. Previously, he worked in the Lyons Central School District as a secondary school educator for 17 years. The Lyons Central School District is classified as a high-needs rural school by the New York State Education Department.

Mr. Barr graduated from St. John Fisher College with a Bachelor of Arts degree in History, with a minor in Education. Mr. Barr continued his educational endeavors, earning a Master of Arts/Sciences degree from the University of Phoenix, and he earned a Certificate of Advanced Study in Educational Administration from the State University of New York at Oswego.

Mr. Barr began the Executive Leadership Program at St. John Fisher College in the spring of 2019. His research focused on the perceived leadership practices of secondary school principals in high-achieving, high-needs rural schools. Mr. Barr completed his studies under the direction of Dr. Marie Cianca and Dr. Linda McGinley.

Abstract

Through Kouzes and Posner's transformational leadership framework, this study examined the perceived leadership practices of secondary school principals in New York State's high-achieving, high-needs rural schools. New York State's rural principals face a variety of challenges to meet students' needs. Rural principals are often members of smaller leadership teams, and assume varying leadership responsibilities with fewer opportunities to collaborate with peers. The peer-reviewed literature focusing on principal leadership practices is extensive but lacks a focus on high-needs, rural secondary schools. The study was qualitative, as data were collected using semi-structured interviews of six rural secondary school principals. Each principal in the study led a high-needs rural school that the New York State Education Department awarded Recognition School status. Using Kouzes and Posner's (2017) five transformational leadership practices as a framework, the study explored the perceived leadership practices as outlined by the participants during the interviews. Data analysis identified commonalities among the participants' responses. These similarities resulted in three findings. First, rural secondary school principals that inspire a shared vision focused on student needs are able to cultivate student success. Second, the ability of rural principals to challenge the process is paramount when addressing difficulties in rural school settings. Third, meeting student needs takes an educational community that must be nurtured, developed, and empowered. The study affirmed that secondary school

principals in high-needs rural schools can positively impact organizations by demonstrating transformational leadership.

Table of Contents

Dedication	iii
Biographical Sketch	v
Abstract	vi
Table of Contents	viii
List of Tables	xi
List of Figures	xii
Chapter 1: Introduction	1
Educational Leadership and Rural Schools	1
Issues Facing Rural Schools	4
Influence of Poverty on Learning	7
Role of School Principals.....	9
Rural School Principals.....	12
Problem Statement	14
Theoretical Rationale	15
Statement of Purpose	18
Research Questions	19
Potential Significance of the Study.....	20
Definitions of Terms	21
Chapter Summary	22
Chapter 2: Review of the Literature.....	24

Introduction and Purpose	24
Rural School Leadership.....	25
Leadership Practices in High-Performing Schools.....	28
High-Poverty or High Needs Schools.....	30
Successful Principals in High-Achieving, High-Needs Schools	31
Transformational Leadership	37
Transformational Leadership and Schools.....	39
Gaps In the Literature	43
Chapter Summary	44
Chapter 3: Research Design Methodology	47
Introduction.....	47
Purpose of the Study	48
Research Questions.....	48
Research Context	49
Research Methodology	50
Research Participants	51
Participant Recruitment	53
Researcher.....	54
Data Collection	54
Data Analysis	56
Procedures for Data Collection and Analysis	57
Summary.....	58
Chapter 4: Results.....	60

Introduction.....	60
Data Analysis and Procedures	61
Summary of Results	96
Chapter 5: Discussion	100
Introduction.....	100
Implication of Findings.....	103
Limitations	114
Recommendations for Future Research.....	114
Recommendations for Practice	115
Conclusion	120
References.....	127
Appendix A.....	136
Appendix B.....	139
Appendix C.....	141
Appendix D.....	143

List of Tables

Item	Title	Page
Table 3.1	Research Participants	52
Table 4.1	Research Question 1 – Themes and Subthemes	62
Table 4.2	Research Question 2 – Themes and Subthemes	77
Table 4.3	Research Question 3 – Themes and Subthemes	86

List of Figures

Item	Title	Page
Figure 1.1	New York State Graduation Rates 2010–2011 through 2018–2019 for Low-Needs Schools and Rural High-Needs Schools	3
Figure 1.2	New York State Recognition Schools by Need Resource Categories, School Years 2018–2019 and 2019–2020 Error! Bookmark not defined.	
Figure 1.3	The Impact on Student Learning by School Leaders	11

Chapter 1: Introduction

Educational Leadership and Rural Schools

In 2019, approximately 2.5 million students attended the 4,433 public schools located in New York State. New York's towns and rural areas host over 1,000 of those schools (New York State Education Department [NYSED], 2019; United States Census Bureau, 2020). Public school districts serve students from a variety of backgrounds. In New York City Schools, there are over one million students, while some small rural districts report serving fewer than 10 total students. However, over 465,000 students are educated in New York State's rural or small-town schools (National Center of Education Statistics [NCES], 2019b).

Rural school leaders today need to be aware of federal and state mandates designed to ensure schools meet the educational needs of students in the United States. In 2002, the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act became federal law. State governments were directed to align with established educational standards and ensure adequate yearly progress in a variety of categories. Additionally, governmental funding was tied to student performance with the possibility of diminished funding for schools that underperformed (Dee & Jacob, 2011). With 13.6% of New Yorkers living below the poverty line, schools must meet the needs of students living in economically disadvantaged households (United States Census Bureau, 2020). It is the responsibility of school leaders to ensure academic improvement while developing effective strategies that

address the unique requirements of high-poverty or high-needs rural students (Klar & Brewer, 2013).

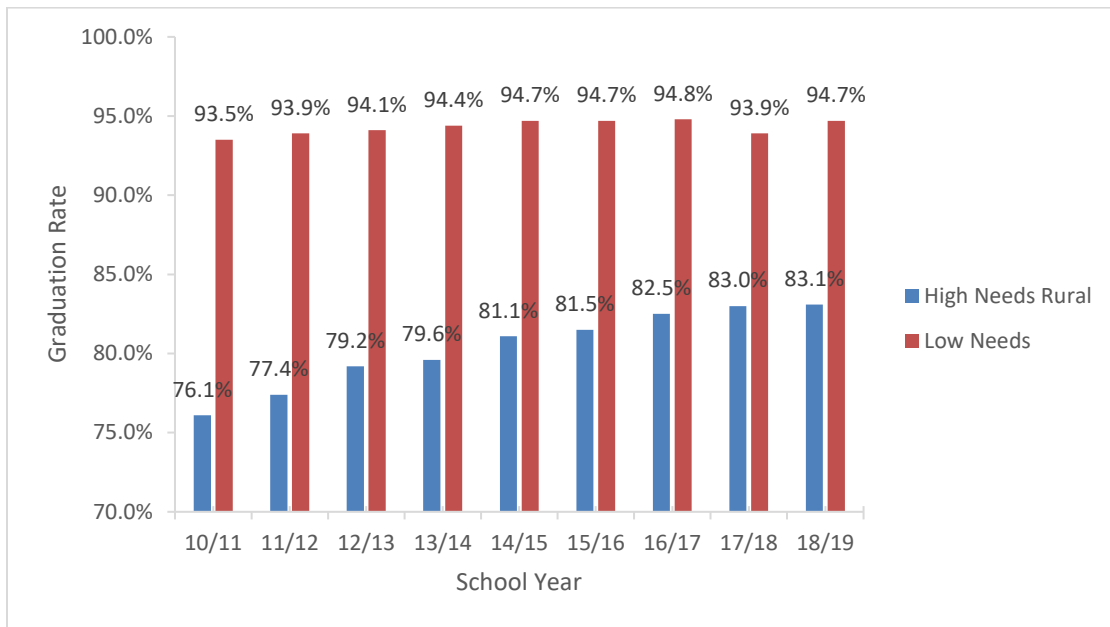
As a method of mitigating the perceived deficiencies of NCLB, the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) became federal law in December of 2015. ESSA essentially replaced the NCLB guidelines with an attempt to meet two additional goals (Every Student Succeeds Act [ESSA], 2015). The first goal was to ensure all states implement quality educational programs in line with college and career standards. Districts must ensure that students are college and career ready by the time each student graduates. The second goal was to ensure the equity of resources for poor students, students of color, English-language learner (ELL) students, and students with disabilities. (ESSA, 2015; Jennings & Laeun, 2016).

ESSA enhances the Rural Education Achievement Program (REAP), with an additional focus on schools in rural settings (ESSA, 2015). ESSA attempts to ensure an equal opportunity for rural school students to obtain a quality education. Federal funds are allocated to schools to offer additional supports for disadvantaged learners, school leaders, ELL students, technology, and to improve policy-driven activities (ESSA, 2015; Rude & Miller, 2018). Under ESSA statutes, school districts are measured by student performances in five areas: English language arts, mathematics, improvement of English proficiency for ELL students, the graduation rate at the high school level or growth at middle and elementary grades, and an additional measure of school quality or student success (SQSS). SQSS rates may be measured using data on student attendance, school climate, suspensions, college and career readiness, or other measures (Darling-Hammond et al., 2017). ESSA not only authorizes federal funding for schools, but it also prioritizes

equal educational opportunities for all students. This legislation governs the education of approximately 50 million students who attend school annually in the United States (ESSA, 2015; NCES, 2019b).

Figure 1.1

New York State Graduation Rates 2010–2011 through 2018–2019 for Low-Needs Schools and Rural High-Needs Schools



Information provided by the Cornell Program on Applied Demographics in cooperation with the New York State Center for Rural Schools outlines the discrepancy in graduation rates between school districts. Figure 1.1 shows data from the 2010-2011 school year to the 2018-2019 school year, highlighting how New York’s rural high-needs district graduation rates have routinely lagged behind the state’s low-needs districts (Cornell University, 2020). The vertical axis displays the graduation rates for New York State schools, with the horizontal axis identifying the school year. The red bars represent the graduation rate in low-needs schools, while the blue bars represent high-needs rural schools. In each year, the high-needs rural schools lag behind the low-needs schools. This

discrepancy across schools within the same state outlines the struggles facing school principals as they attempt to meet the needs of students in high-needs rural schools (Cornell University, 2020).

Issues Facing Rural Schools

Education is a people-based business. Schools are staffed with teachers, administrators, and various support staff. Teacher recruitment, training, and retention present specific problems in rural schools (Biddle & Azano, 2016). Staffing shortages are especially prevalent in specialty areas, making it particularly difficult to find qualified special education teachers (Brownell et al., 2018).

Additionally, parental involvement is often more difficult in rural schools due to the population being dispersed over a larger geographic area. With the majority of educational meetings taking place at the school, it can be more challenging for community members to travel to schools in rural areas than it would be in other settings. The lack of parental involvement can have negative implications for the success of students (Semke & Sheridan, 2012).

In rural areas, the taxable homes and businesses often leave or erode, causing high-needs rural districts to become disproportionately reliant on state and federal aid to fund school programming (Strange et al., 2012). The reliance on outside funding can force rural schools to encounter significant sustainability and long-term planning issues. When rural high school and college graduates obtain skills and knowledge, they are more likely to maximize those skills through employment in an urban setting. This issue leads to a systemic migration of skilled workers away from the rural setting and into urban areas (Schafft, 2016).

Due to low enrollment in rural schools, the number of faculty members in these districts is often much smaller than in urban or suburban areas (Stewart & Matthews, 2015). This challenge can make it difficult for educators to collaborate with peers. The loss of opportunity to work together, share best practices, and attend professional development can lead to stagnation and lack of improvement (Stewart & Matthews, 2015). Additional factors that lead to recruitment and retention challenges include lower salaries than urban or suburban districts, geographic isolation, social isolation, environment, working conditions, and proximity to high paying districts (Wood et al., 2013).

Rural schools today are faced with staffing issues, but they are also faced with increased financial constraints. To meet the financial constraints in rural schools, principals often have both building- and district-level job responsibilities. These additional responsibilities highlight the need to develop leaders' understandings of the expectations of rural school communities (Wieczorek & Manard, 2018). In addition to teacher turnover, principal turnover is a factor that negatively affects student success. Often, principals demonstrate a preference to work in schools that enroll high-achieving students from wealthy socioeconomic backgrounds (Béteille et al., 2012). This preference leads to frequent administrative turnover in high-needs rural schools, which in turn, couples underachieving students with inexperienced staff members, leading to a decreased probability for student success (Béteille et al., 2012).

In 2018-2019, NYSED honored 562 New York State schools as high-performing Recognition Schools, and in 2019-2020 NYSED honored 582 such schools. To be recognized, these schools had to demonstrate high academic achievement, student

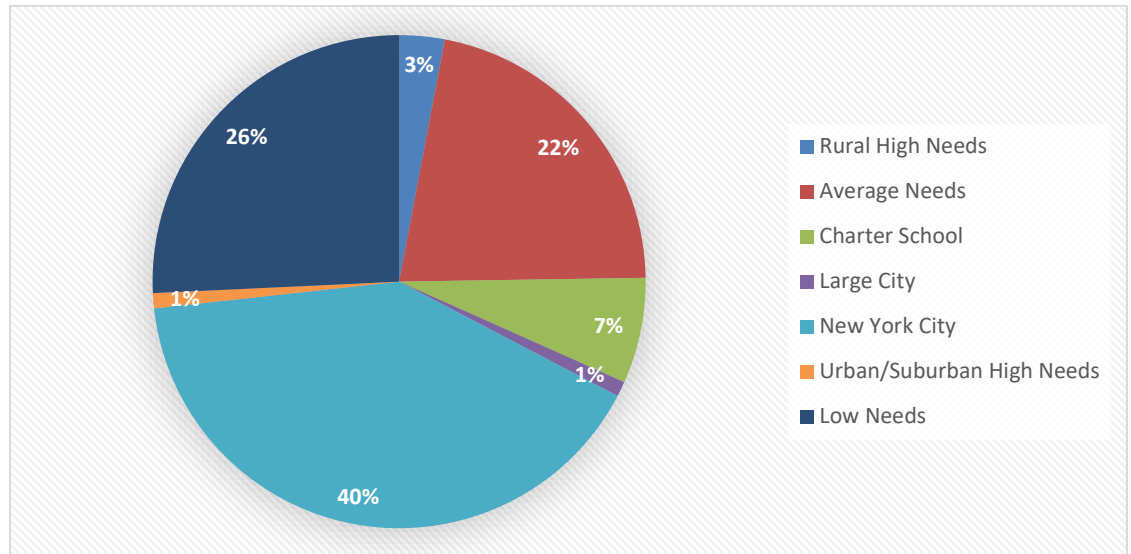
growth, high graduation rates, and year-to-year progress (NYSED, 2019). Over the two school years, less than 3% of the Recognition Schools were classified as Rural High Needs schools (NYSED, 2019). As outlined in Figure 1.2, there are seven Needs Resource Categories recognized by New York State: Rural High Needs, Average Needs, Charter School, Large City, New York City, Urban/Suburban High Needs, and Low Needs. During the 2018-2019 and 2019-2020 school years, Rural High Needs schools received the honor only 14 and 19 times, respectively (NYSED, 2019). The unique challenges that face principals in rural high needs schools make it difficult for leaders to guide high-performing schools, as recognized by NYSED (Stewart & Matthews, 2015).

While socioeconomic status has been a statistically significant predictor of academic achievement in schools, effective principal leadership practices have helped mitigate these challenges. Shatzer et al. (2014) studied the effect a principal's leadership behaviors can have on student performance. School principals who demonstrably valued instructional time and provided incentives for learning saw a statistically relevant increase in their students' achievement scores (Shatzer et al., 2014).

In addition to the unique problems that rural schools face, there are also considerable socioeconomic issues. According to the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) Economic Research Service, the average income of New York State residents was \$68,668 in 2018. However, the average rural New Yorker earned only \$42,497. The poverty rate in rural New York is 14.4%, while it is 13.6% in urban areas (United States Department of Agriculture [USDA], 2020). The increased poverty rate leads to additional issues for the disproportionate number of New York's rural school children living in poverty (NYSED, 2020b).

Figure 1.2

New York State Recognition Schools by Need Resource Categories, School Years 2018–2019 and 2019–2020



Influence of Poverty on Learning

Families living in poverty are an important demographic when discussing the difficulties facing the American education system, particularly students living in rural areas. The United States Census Bureau (2019) stated that in 2018, approximately 13.6% of New Yorkers lived in a family where the annual income was below \$24,860, the established poverty line for a family of four. In numerous parts of New York State, over one in five school-aged children live in poverty (United States Census Bureau, 2019).

Educating students in rural areas presents unique challenges for school principals. Rural districts face the difficulty of maintaining a quality workforce due to personnel issues relating to the recruitment and retention of teachers (Biddle & Azano, 2016; Wood et al., 2013). Coupled with staffing issues, rural schools rely on state and federal funding at a higher rate than suburban schools. State funding can often be unpredictable and lead

to economic uncertainty (Strange et al., 2012). These economic issues can affect children in a variety of ways. Children who grow up in high-poverty families have significant developmental disadvantages (Chetty et al., 2016). They often enter school cognitively behind their peers leading to a diminished rate of academic success. Academic struggles result in lower attendance in post-secondary programs and ultimately fewer lifelong earnings. (Chetty et al., 2016; Nikulina et al., 2011).

The effects of poverty are visible even before children enter schools. Students living in poverty show decreased reading abilities at the earliest stages of academic development, putting them at a disadvantage before they begin the formal educational process (Chetty et al., 2016; Logan et al., 2012). Children who grow up in poverty disproportionately struggle with cognitive development. The lack of access to instructional supports can be a significant factor in student development. Children from families in poverty are less likely to receive parental assistance at home when completing schoolwork. This lack of support hinders learning and lifelong academic performance (Habibullah & Ashraf, 2013). High-poverty neighborhoods often lack the institutional backing needed for children to succeed academically. Students who move from high-poverty neighborhoods to attend school in more affluent districts demonstrate a significant improvement in their academic performance (Chetty et al., 2016; Wax, 2017).

Living in poverty also affects children's health, which can lead to students missing time away from school (Nikulina et al., 2011). Lost instructional time can impede academic growth as well as social-emotional learning. This restricted development can have long-lasting effects on the future success of the individual, with lost opportunities having economic implications. Children who live in high poverty areas

see a lower rate of college attendance, lower future earnings, and less academic success (Walsh & Theodorakakis, 2017). Children living in poverty are at a higher risk for economic stressors, family chaos, and family violence. Each of these factors negatively affects a child's ability to be academically successful (Devenish, 2017; Ruiz et al., 2018).

Role of School Principals

The guidelines provided in ESSA (2015) outline the important role principals play to ensure continuous school improvement. The legislation details activities that demonstrate a positive impact on staff and student outcomes, requiring principals to focus on areas of weakness. ESSA (2015) asks principals to provide a detailed plan for continuous school improvement. Leaders must explicitly identify improvement initiatives that meet the needs of all students (Herman et al., 2017).

ESSA (2015) heightens the attention placed on school-wide leaders with an increased focus on the practices that ensure schools meet the established federal educational goals. Secondary school principals, in particular, are affected by ESSA as they are evaluated on a variety of state-mandated accountability measures (ESSA, 2015). Principals are mandated to demonstrate measurable school-wide achievements on an annual basis. Meeting these established benchmarks is a focus for secondary school principals. Principals who noticeably value instructional time, and provide incentives for learning, see a statistically relevant increase in their students' achievement scores (Leithwood et al., 2012; NYSED, 2019; Young et al., 2017).

In an environment of increased governmental accountability, school principals are required to lead, develop stable systems, and be effective change agents. For principals to be successful leaders, they need to be proficient in a variety of competencies (Klar &

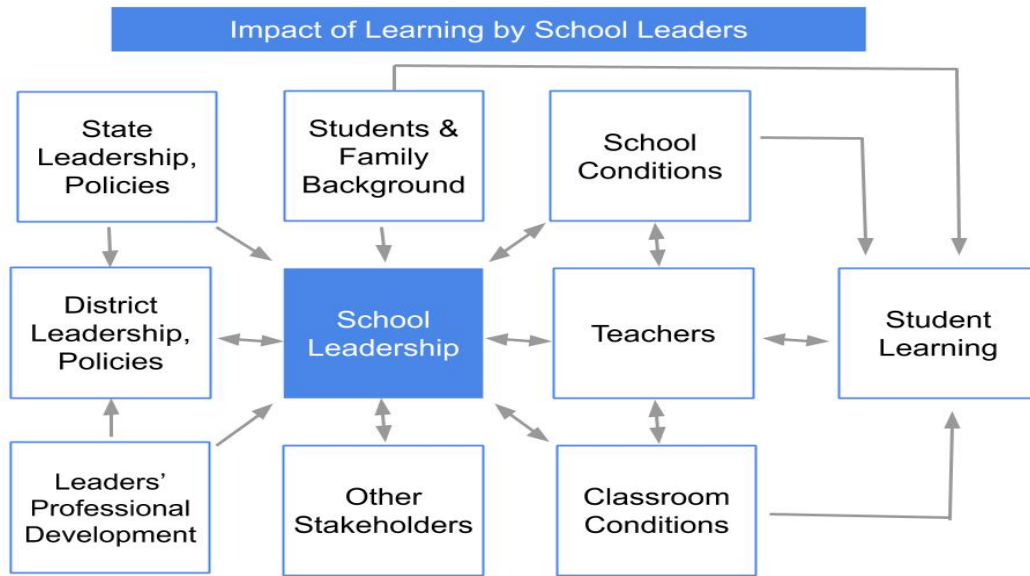
Brewer, 2013). These competencies include building a shared vision, fostering defined goals, and creating high expectations for stakeholders. Leaders make decisions while remaining focused on meeting the complex needs of each student (Woods & Martin, 2016). Additionally, leaders need to make those around them better by developing the skills of the employees within the organization (Kearney et al., 2012). Principals must not only have strong relationships inside the school but with their communities as well. Positive connections with families and communities are essential in creating productive educational communities (Bouchamma, 2012; Klar & Brewer, 2013).

It is vital for leaders to ensure student achievement while also being politically mindful (Kafka, 2009). Collaborative leaders create a sense of shared purpose, and they increase the likelihood of successful performance from their staff members. The ability to frame governmental mandates as opportunities to collaboratively address existing problems, rather than viewing them as top-down directives, increases the likelihood of academic success (Stosich, 2017).

School leaders have an impact on the school-wide climate and culture. They implement appropriate systems and influence conditions both inside and outside of the classroom. The principal is at the center of the organization and impacts various factors that influence student learning. Figure 1.3 outlines the importance of school leadership on overall student learning (Leithwood et al., 2012). The figure also demonstrates how school leadership is interconnected on a variety of issues. School leadership has an impact on learning in numerous ways.

Figure 1.3

The Impact on Student Learning by School Leaders



Note. Adapted from “Linking Leadership to Student Learning,” by K. A. Leithwood, K. S. Louis, S. E. Anderson, & M. S. Knapp, p. XXVII (2012). Copyright 2012 by Jossey-Bass.

Secondary school principals are often change agents who communicate a well thought-out vision (Carbaugh et al., 2018). With a focus on continuous academic progress, principals use data to ensure a viable curriculum and quality professional development for staff members. They build partnerships with the community, maximize available resources, and continuously ensure organizational progress (Lindahl, 2014). Leaders who are effective in these areas and can consistently build a positive school-wide culture are more likely to see significant improvements in students’ academic achievement (Carbaugh et al., 2018; Lindahl, 2014).

Leaders are most effective when they identify and define school-wide needs while developing strategies that address these issues. School principals who demonstrate the ability to create a system of shared values that are entrenched in the school's culture are more likely to see an increase in student success (Day et al., 2016; Heck & Hallinger, 2014). Leaders in high-poverty areas need to be aware of an established correlation between poverty and educational achievement. Schools that consistently outperform their high-poverty peers primarily have the shared characteristic of successful, high-performing leaders (Mulford et al., 2008).

Rural School Principals

School principals are uniquely positioned to make a positive impact on a school and lead the students toward academic success (Kearney et al., 2012). By understanding that students from high-needs rural schools face significant inherent disadvantages, effective leaders are able to take appropriate actions that meet students' needs. Leaders who institute interventions inside the school, coupled with those outside the school, increase the likelihood of academic and future success (Klar & Brewer, 2013; Ladd, 2012). A principal's role within an organization is to lead students and staff both structurally and academically. School leaders who are not meeting established governmental and local standards are required to make changes that are effective and timely. Rural school leaders are faced with a set of unique obstacles that provide difficulties to ensuring meaningful change.

Students in rural areas present distinct challenges for educational leaders. Rural districts face the difficulty of retaining high-quality staff due to personnel issues relating to recruitment and retention (Biddle & Azano, 2016; Wood et al., 2013). Coupled with

staffing issues, rural schools rely on state and federal funding at a much higher rate than suburban schools. This state funding can often be unpredictable and lead to financial uncertainty (Strange et al., 2012). With the potential cuts in state and federal aid during the COVID-19 pandemic, rural schools are facing additional economic uncertainty (New York State Division of the Budget, 2020). These economic issues can affect children in many ways. Children who grow up in high-poverty families have significant developmental disadvantages (Chetty et al., 2016). They often enter school cognitively behind their peers leading to a diminished rate of academic success. Academic struggles result in lower graduation rates of post-secondary attendance and ultimately lower lifelong earnings (Chetty et al., 2016; Nikulina et al., 2011).

A focus on quality instructional practices, coupled with purposeful collaboration, can significantly decrease the negative effects of poverty on students' academic achievement (Leithwood et al., 2012). The ability to be flexible and fill multiple roles is essential to ensuring student success. When school principals establish a shared vision for employees and students, they can work together to improve overall academic achievement (Valentine & Prater, 2011). Creating a shared vision with students can lead to an improved culture and a genuine sense of belonging within a school, which ultimately leads to an increased potential for academic success (Irvin et al., 2011).

Principals in high-performing schools offer more opportunities for staff members to take leadership roles in improving student learning. In low-performing schools, principals do not offer teachers similar leadership opportunities (Musselman et al., 2014). The inability of some rural principals to ensure an organizational culture that encourages collaboration and initiative leads to a lack of growth and hinders academic performance

within schools. With purposeful, focused leadership practices, rural schools can maximize student performance (Musselman et al., 2014).

Problem Statement

With the increased accountability for schools as required by ESSA, principals are federally mandated to address the needs of all of their students (ESSA, 2015). In New York State's high-needs, rural school districts, students are performing substantially worse than students from low-needs communities. Over the past decade, these high-needs, rural schools have lagged in high school graduation rates, warranting secondary school principals to consider potential changes (Cornell University, 2020).

A national study investigated the relationship between certain demographic factors and overall student performance. Children presenting with poverty, race, and location disadvantages performed poorly compared to their peers who did not face the same challenges (Logan et al., 2012). Growing up in poverty is a predictor of a student's future success from the very beginning of a student's academic journey, as poverty negatively affects students' reading development at the earliest stages (Chetty et al., 2016). The economic demographics of the communities where children live have become increasingly predictive of a child's access to a viable education (Ruiz et al., 2018).

Rural schools face these high-poverty issues while also facing unique geographic challenges. Professional development, staff retention, economic sustainability, and purposeful collaboration are lacking in many rural educational communities. The opportunity to cultivate outstanding teachers and leaders is inherently more challenging in rural settings (Biddle & Azano, 2016; Stewart & Matthews, 2015; Strange et al., 2012). These factors, coupled with the struggles of involving parents in rural

communities, make it difficult for rural principals to ensure staff members are continuously improving their approaches. With community members living in a larger geographic area, it is often difficult for them to get to school functions (Semke & Sheridan, 2012). This lack of parental involvement results in additional challenges for principals as they try to meet the needs of their students.

Studies have analyzed the relationship between leadership practices and student performance in varying degrees (Sun & Leithwood, 2015). In general, the majority of research has been in urban, low-income schools. While a few studies have been conducted in rural, low-income schools, most of this research focuses on the elementary level. There is limited research on rural secondary school principals' perceptions of their own leadership practices. While studies have investigated principals' leadership practices in underperforming schools, studies have not explicitly researched the practices exhibited by secondary school principals in high-needs rural schools.

Theoretical Rationale

The theoretical rationale that guided this study and its findings is transformational leadership. Transformational leadership is characterized by leaders who can motivate others to focus on the overall good of an organization, even above their personal self-interest (Powell et al., 2008). Transformational leadership often produces positive changes in stakeholder behavior and overall school culture (Burton & Peachey, 2009). Using transformational leadership, leaders meet the desired goals by developing a common vision, setting a positive example, challenging the status quo, and meeting the needs of each stakeholder group (Abu-Tineh et al., 2008). Effective transformational leadership helps leaders meet the goals of their organizations while also meeting the

social-emotional needs of the members within those organizations (Kouzes & Posner, 2017). In the complex and interdependent world of education, transformational leadership is applicable in a variety of situations. When the educational issues presented are more complex, organizations benefit from transformational leadership (Wang et al., 2014). Transformational leadership has positive outcomes not just for leaders and followers but for the organization as a whole. In a K-12 organization, this positive outcome would directly affect students as active members of that organization.

This study used the five practices outlined by Kouzes and Posner (2017) as a context to discuss transformational change: modeling the way, inspiring a shared vision, challenging the process, enabling others to act, and encouraging the heart. The researcher chose to use transformational leadership theory as it has been effective in studying leadership practices in schools for over 30 years (Podsakoff et al., 1990). Additionally, transformational leadership theory stipulates that a few effective leadership practices can offer a significant improvement in the ability of an organization to meet its established goals (Sun & Leithwood, 2012).

Model the Way

Exceptional leaders do not solely state their values; they show them. When discussing the leadership practice of modeling the way, leaders earn credibility from their colleagues by demonstrating action. There is a noticeable consistency between the spoken word and the action. Leaders lead by example, and the followers within the organization can visually see that the leader is competent. The leader's conduct is continuously dedicated to the success of the organization (Kouzes & Posner, 2019)

Inspire a Shared Vision

Leaders must be able to recognize and clarify their personal mission before inspiring a shared vision throughout an organization. The shared vision is something that individuals need to identify with and support. The leader is responsible for creating the conditions that foster a common goal. Effective organizations have stakeholders who demonstrate a shared pride in the successes of the organization. They can articulate and illustrate the purpose of the organization and are supportive of the team as a whole. The organization is more than a collection of people working in the same place; it is a collection of people working together (Kouzes & Posner, 2017).

Challenge the Process

Quality leaders can innovate to make positive changes to improve an organization. These leaders find creative ways to question current practices and find opportunities to challenge the norm. They take risks as leaders and support their colleagues when they do the same. Purposefully challenging the process shows stakeholders that being above average is not enough. The leader is always looking for ways to improve and become more efficient. Quality leaders are committed to facing challenges and guiding an organization to newfound success. (Kouzes & Posner, 2017).

Enable Others to Act

The ability of a leader to enable others to act is vital inside of a complex organization. Individuals who have the opportunity to grow and develop capabilities are more likely to show improvement and benefit the organization. Stakeholders will demonstrate continuous learning and the desire to innovate. Quality leaders use their power in the service of others to increase individual capacity. This resulting increase in

confidence allows the individuals to perform to the best of their abilities (Kouzes & Posner, 2019).

Encourage the Heart

The ability to motivate people is one of the most important traits of a leader. Kouzes and Posner (2003) discussed the importance of recognition and support as primary motivators, even superseding that of increased salary. Open, public appreciation of efforts and accomplishments help support individuals emotionally to keep them motivated and invested. A leader who can consistently support an individual's need for gratitude in a clearly demonstrated way can help that individual's performance.

Transformational leadership allows leaders to guide positive organizational change. When leaders demonstrate an increase in observed leadership practices, their constituents view them more favorably. The culture of the workplace and the attitude of the workers show a positive improvement (Posner, 2013).

The five practices provide a contextual framework for examining how principals strategize within their schools to achieve positive results. School principals who demonstrate the five transformational leadership practices may be able to maximize organizational results and lead effectively during a period of educational change. Discussing a principal's practices through a transformational leadership framework allows individuals to identify impactful leadership practices. These five specific practices functioned as the framework of this study to identify the methods used by secondary school principals in high-achieving, high-needs rural schools.

Statement of Purpose

The purpose of this study was to identify the effective leadership practices of secondary school principals in high-achieving, high-needs rural schools. This study researched the approaches demonstrated by secondary school principals in successful rural schools, because rural schools largely remain under researched (Schafft, 2016). Identifying successful leadership strategies allows principals and others to recognize best practices as well as potential areas of improvement (Klar & Brewer, 2013). These best practices can be used to improve the capacity of future educational leaders.

It is crucial for schools to have knowledgeable, innovative leaders. In rural high-needs schools, principals take on various roles. These educational leaders must lead their organizations forward while being mindful of state and federal mandates. They are some of the most visible members of the community and some of the most influential inside the educational system (Sanchez et al., 2017; Wieczorek & Manard, 2018). By utilizing the findings from this study, high-needs rural school principals may be able to replicate effective leadership practices to meet the needs of their stakeholders.

Research Questions

The following research questions guided this study:

1. From the perspective of secondary school principals in high-achieving, high-needs rural schools, what leadership practices are effective in supporting change?
2. From the perspective of secondary school principals in high-achieving, high-needs rural schools, what do secondary school principals identify as potential areas of improvement?

3. From the perspective of secondary school principals in high-achieving, high-needs rural schools, how do secondary school principals address the most significant challenges to ensuring student success?

An in-depth analysis, through the lens of transformational leadership, sheds light on what practices secondary school principals identified that improved outcomes in high-needs rural schools.

Potential Significance of the Study

In compliance with ESSA mandates, administrators must support all students, including minority subgroups, to produce quality graduates (ESSA, 2015). By identifying effective and replicable best practices, principals will be able to modify their current practices to meet the specific needs of rural students (Klar & Brewer, 2013; Mulford et al., 2008). The ability of secondary school principals to effectively meet student needs offers a lasting impact and benefits society for generations. By establishing and replicating best practices, school principals can make a difference in improving students' academic achievement (Gallard et al., 2010; Koricich & Boylan, 2019).

It is vital for the 465,000 students attending New York State's rural schools to have effective, informed educational leaders (NCES, 2019b; United States Census Bureau, 2019). These leaders are responsible for providing the students and staff with an educational community focused on improving academic achievement. Only with a thorough understanding of best practices can these leaders best meet the unique needs of New York's rural students, particularly those living in poverty. Educators must be able to identify and replicate leadership practices and strategies that give students the best opportunity to succeed (Klar & Brewer, 2013).

Definitions of Terms

For this study, the key terms relating to schools are defined as:

High-needs school – New York State term for public schools where more than 50% of the students are eligible for free or reduced-price lunches (NCES, 2019a; NYSED 2020b), which is calculated by using U.S. Census data. An index is created comparing free and reduced-price lunches and combined wealth ratios in comparison with schools statewide. High-needs schools fall within the highest 30% among the state’s public schools (NYSED, 2020b).

High-achieving schools – public schools in good standing that meet established New York State benchmarks in the areas of academic performance; graduation rate; English language proficiency; absenteeism; and college, career, and civic readiness (NYSED, 2020a).

High-poverty schools – federal government term for public schools where more than 50% of the students are eligible for free or reduced-price lunches (NCES, 2019a).

Low-needs schools – calculated using U.S. Census data. An index is created comparing free and reduced-price lunch rates and combined wealth ratios in comparison with schools statewide. Low-needs schools fall within the lowest 20% among the state’s public schools (NYSED, 2020b).

Recognition schools – high-achieving or rapidly improving schools as determined by the New York State Commissioner of Schools. Schools are evaluated on academic performance, absenteeism, graduation rate, and college and career readiness (NYSED, 2020d).

Rural schools – deemed as rural based on NYSED classifications. A rural district must have fewer than 50 students per square mile or fewer than 100 students per square mile, with a total student enrollment of no more than 2,500 students (NYSED, 2020c).

Secondary schools – junior/senior high schools as well as senior high or K–12 schools. Secondary schools in New York State serve students in grades above ninth grade exclusive of schools that educate all students K-12 (NYSED, 2020a).

Chapter Summary

The 2.5 million students who attend public schools located in New York State benefit when they have competent, innovative leaders (Carbaugh et al., 2018). A significant portion of those students are located in small-town, rural settings (NCES, 2019a; United States Census Bureau, 2020).

Governmental mandates, such as NCLB and ESSA, have outlined the expectations of school officials (ESSA, 2015). To ensure school-wide academic achievement, the government has set accountability measures that correlate with educational funding. The government’s purpose is to ensure graduates are college and career ready, and that student subgroups have equity to necessary resources (ESSA, 2015; Jennings & Laeun, 2016).

Rural schools have inherent disadvantages that make educating their student populations difficult. Teacher recruitment and retention in rural settings is more difficult than in suburban schools. This issue can lead to staffing shortages and difficulties finding highly qualified instructors (Biddle & Azano, 2016; Brownell et al., 2018). Rural schools face difficulties in ensuring parental involvement. The sparse population density makes it difficult for caregivers to attend educational events, leading to adverse effects on

students' academic performance (Semke & Sheridan, 2012). These issues are important factors in providing opportunities for rural school students.

Rural school leaders also face significant socioeconomic challenges. Rural schools educate students living in poverty at a higher rate than suburban schools (United States Census Bureau, 2020). School leaders face many challenges in educating students from poverty. Lack of academic support in the home is prevalent and can result in underdeveloped educational growth (Habibullah & Ashraf, 2013; Wax, 2017).

Schools that consistently outperform their peers have innovative, high-performing leaders. Educational leaders not only influence staff members but they have an impact on students and the community as a whole (Kearney et al., 2012; Mulford et al., 2008). Through interventions and quality transformational leadership, principals may be able to meet these students' unique needs. This study used the five transformational leadership practices as identified by Kouzes and Posner (2017) to analyze and compare the perspectives of secondary school principals in high-achieving, high-needs rural schools.

Chapter 2 consists of a review of the relevant literature that focuses on the difficulties facing principals, the impact of effective leaders on schools, and what high-achieving, high-needs rural secondary school principals do differently. Chapter 3 details the methodology and design of this study. Chapter 4 describes the analysis of the data gathered throughout the study, and Chapter 5 presents a summary of the findings and recommendations.

Chapter 2: Review of the Literature

Introduction and Purpose

This review of the literature examines the importance of leaders in relation to school-wide results. The chapter first outlines the specific challenges facing rural school leaders. The chapter then presents information on the leadership practices of principals in high-performing schools. Next, the chapter explores the challenges and supports associated with students living in poverty. Finally, the chapter closes with an examination of principals' focus on implementing transformational leadership practices to improve student achievement. Through positive, thoughtful actions, leaders can meet the needs of both students and staff members as they look to improve opportunities for student success (Leithwood et al., 2012). Given the unique issues faced by rural school leaders, additional research is needed to further examine the effects of leadership practices in high-needs rural schools (Shatzer et al., 2014).

The research questions that guided this study include:

1. From the perspective of secondary school principals in high-achieving, high-needs rural schools, what leadership practices are effective in supporting change?
2. From the perspective of secondary school principals in high-achieving, high-needs rural schools, what do secondary school principals identify as potential areas of improvement?

3. From the perspective of secondary school principals in high-achieving, high-needs rural schools, how do secondary school principals address the most significant challenges to ensuring student success?

The purpose of the study was to identify the effective leadership practices of secondary school principals in high-achieving, high-needs rural schools. This study's findings may benefit school leaders who are able to replicate these practices and potentially see similar results in their schools (Gallard et al., 2010; Koricich & Boylan, 2019).

Rural School Leadership

Rural school principals face unique challenges when attempting to meet students' needs in rural settings. Principals often have to develop systems to use their own strengths while also maximizing the abilities of the school's staff members (Schafft, 2016; Stewart & Matthews, 2015). Leaders are faced with challenges relating to staff retention, professional development opportunities, and economic viability (Chetty et al., 2016). Rural school principals encounter a myriad of challenges, including staffing issues that can be a hindrance to ensuring students' improved academic performance.

With smaller administrative teams in rural schools, principals have limited opportunities for collaboration and often must develop their skills in isolation. This professional isolation can inhibit professional growth and overall professional development. Sanchez et al. (2017) interviewed 24 middle school administrators and teacher leaders in six rural communities to investigate the leaders' attempts to create change with the goal of increased academic performance. The educators were responsible for leading rural schools that served a small but diverse student population. The schools

in the study had considerable socioeconomic disadvantages, with all schools qualifying for free and reduced-price lunches at a rate of 60% or higher. Rural school leaders admitted to feelings of isolation during their school careers. They described long days of hard work with little institutional support (Sanchez et al., 2017).

Klocko (2019) researched rural school principals' ability to mitigate the stressors of leading low-income schools. The researchers found that rural principals identified government mandates, inequitable funding, professional isolation, and increased accountability as difficulties in performing their professional responsibilities. In the study, which compared rural principals with their urban and suburban peers, Klocko (2019) found that limited opportunities to collaborate with peers and participate in professional development hindered rural principals' professional growth. The principals who demonstrated grit and resilience were more able to navigate the stressors by using a holistic approach to leadership (Klocko, 2019).

Rural principals' job responsibilities are varied and require a variety of skills. Wieczorek and Manard (2018) studied six inexperienced rural school principals and the challenges associated with the position. The principals discussed the difficulties of rural settings and their requirements to perform additional professional duties outside their roles as secondary school principals. Due to the size of small rural school districts, principals often serve as special education directors and human resources experts. Some are responsible for federal grant accountability, on top of the daily responsibilities of being a principal (Wieczorek & Manard, 2018). Rural school principals identified the difficulty of being pulled in multiple directions at once. One individual compared principals to "skillful jugglers, keeping many balls in the air while talking calmly to an

audience” (Sanchez et al., 2017, p. 9). The numerous roles assumed by rural school principals pull them in multiple directions, resulting in additional difficulties associated with the position.

The expectations of the rural school principal do not end when students leave for the day, as principals are often expected to perform various community-related duties (Wieczorek & Manard, 2018). In many rural areas, the secondary school principal is one of the most identifiable members of the community. While one principal mentioned it made her “feel like a rock star” (Wieczorek & Manard, 2018, p. 15) when she was consistently recognized outside of school, many discussed the difficulties of finding time for escape and self-reflection. The rural school principals in the study stated they felt they were often working in a “bubble,” which complicated personal and professional experiences (Wieczorek & Manard, 2018). This responsibility to the community is an additional pressure identified by rural principals.

Rural educational leaders interviewed by Sanchez et al. (2017) addressed the importance of developing professional learning communities (PLCs). PLCs became popular when addressing the educational reform movement of the 1990s. They were designed to provide a framework for collegial collaboration and shared best practices (Archer, 2012). In building a system of collaboration with outside partners, leaders anticipated increased academic achievement (Sanchez et al., 2017). However, they encountered various struggles in attempting to collaborate with the community to garner support. When implemented effectively, PLCs allow for improvement in instructional capacity. Communities with PLCs were able to provide relevant and purposeful staff development that advanced the organization as a whole (Sanchez et al., 2017). The ability

of the organization to promote professional development, give relevant feedback, and create shared goals, can lead to an atmosphere conducive to improving student performance. In Leithwood et al. (2010), the leaders who built a culture designed to maximize their staff's abilities saw the benefit of improved student performance.

School principals in all geographic areas face challenges in their roles as instructional leaders. However, rural school leaders face additional issues that are unique to the rural setting. The ability to navigate these challenges is a major factor in ensuring student success (Shatzer et al., 2014). The difficulties in collaborating with families, staff, and students are uniquely challenging in a rural setting. An inability to find partners in the educational process may ultimately disadvantage the students educationally (Chenoweth & Theokas, 2013; Klar & Brewer, 2013; Leithwood et al., 2010; Lindahl, 2014).

Kurland (2019) researched the ability of school principals to create a caring and supportive environment focused on student achievement. Semi-structured interviews were coupled with researcher observations to provide context on the school principals' leadership practices. Kurland (2019) found that a positive school environment built on genuine, caring educational leadership is able to resonate with students. This practice had a positive effect on the school environment as a whole, improving student outcomes.

Leadership Practices in High-Performing Schools

School principals are at the heart of the organization, with a wide-ranging influence on others. Principal leadership is essential to improving overall student learning (Leithwood et al., 2012). When principals display quality leadership skills, students'

academic scores outperform schools with lesser leaders (Valentine & Prater, 2017). Therefore, secondary schools benefit from having competent, effective principals.

Valentine and Prater (2011) discovered that leaders of outperforming schools demonstrated at least one of three specific abilities. Even though the individuals in Valentine and Prater's (2011) study were not exclusively rural leaders, it is important to note their findings on effective school-wide leadership. Principals who demonstrate a focus on academic achievement, the ability to improve school culture, and build positive relationships, see their students outperform expectations.

Moolenaar et al. (2010) and Shea (2020) found that transformational leadership increases a principal's popularity and helps to build genuine bonds with staff. These improved relationships helped the schools' instructors feel more comfortable taking risks, which, in turn, created an innovative climate designed to increase student learning.

Leithwood et al. (2010) studied the effect that educational leaders had on student learning. In a study of 199 schools, the researchers investigated the relationship between leadership practices and students' academic achievement. Leithwood et al. (2010) showed a correlation between school leaders, who focused on academic improvement, and building a strong disciplinary climate with academic performance. Ruiz et al. (2018) also determined that the school climate was a significant predictor of academic success. Ensuring a school-wide culture of accountability and collaboration helped to improve the education of the school's students in the Ruiz et al. (2018) study. The difficulties facing the student population have to be viewed as challenges and not barriers (Lindahl, 2014; Reyes & Garcia, 2014).

Masumoto and Brown-Welty (2009) investigated the leadership practices of principals in high-achieving, high-needs rural schools. The researchers identified commonalities among the principals' leadership practices. Effective principals used transformational leadership practices to focus on improving standards-focused instruction and teaching practices. In the highest-poverty schools, leaders saw success when they were able to ensure parent and community involvement focused on improving student achievement (Masumoto & Brown-Welty, 2009).

Klar and Brewer (2013) found that school leaders set out to celebrate academic successes throughout their educational community with a shared vision of improving student achievement. In a study of a high-poverty rural school, Klar & Brewer (2013) investigated principals' ability to provide relevant professional learning opportunities to improve the capacity of staff members. The leaders incorporated modeling and peer coaching, and they relied on internal experts to establish a community of learners. The school principals participants also made purposeful organizational changes that mirrored the mission and vision of their organizations. The principals studied were highly focused on improving instruction. They used purposeful professional development, made data-informed decisions, and maximized appropriate resources, including personnel. Through a holistic and comprehensive approach, these principals were able to institute purposeful reform to move their organizations forward (Klar & Brewer, 2013).

High-Poverty or High-Needs Schools

Poverty's effect on children can provide a significant barrier to academic performance. It is necessary for principals to be aware of these difficulties and address them in a meaningful way (Wieczorek & Manard, 2018). Rural school principals often

face challenges with fewer resources than principals in urban or suburban schools. The fiscal limitations of small rural school principals affect the leaders' ability to recruit qualified applicants, retain productive staff members, and offer differentiated opportunities (Wieczorek & Manard, 2018). A lack of resources tests a rural principal's creativity to offer a quality education. Various principals mentioned a model of doing "more with less" (Wieczorek & Manard, 2018, p. 15) to meet the various needs of the students.

When considering poverty's effect in schools, it is relevant to include research from all types of school settings. The majority of research has been completed in urban areas; therefore, recent urban research is included in this review. Ruiz et al. (2018) investigated the relationship between high-poverty neighborhoods and academic achievement for their students. The areas that had the highest rates of poverty had the lowest-performing elementary schools. The opposite was true, as well, as areas with lower poverty rates had better performing schools.

Successful Principals in High-Achieving, High-Needs Schools

Researchers have investigated the ability of effective school leaders to mitigate the difficulties associated with educating students from high-poverty homes. It is relevant to note that the majority of studies of high-poverty schools are conducted in urban areas, as there are more urban schools, and they also offer researchers more centrally located, high-poverty populations. However, principals in high-achieving, high-poverty schools—no matter the setting—share common attributes. They consistently demonstrate an emphasis on academic achievement, a shared school-wide culture, and the ability to build

on positive relationships and implement effective change (Chenoweth & Theokas, 2013; Klar & Brewer, 2013; Lindahl, 2014; Moolenaar et al., 2010).

Focus on Academic Achievement

Successful principals in high-performing schools often emphasize academic achievement. Reyes and Garcia (2014) discussed the principal's ability to provide targeted professional development to identify students who needed interventions. Instructional leaders would meet weekly to discuss student progress, scores, and to reevaluate programs. Successful teachers were often asked to collaborate with peers to highlight best practices. When further professional development was needed, the principal brought in experts to work alongside school leaders to improve overall capacity. Chenoweth and Theokas (2013) found that school leaders who routinely pushed students to meet rigorous academic standards saw more drastic improvements. A principal shared with Chenoweth and Theokas (2013) a story of kindergarten, Spanish-speaking immigrant students who had progressed into identifying letters and numbers in a reasonable timeframe. Rather than allow the staff members to be complacent with the progress, the principal spoke about the statistics on graduation rates if the children's reading improved but remained below grade level. Improvement was to be applauded, but the staff could not be complacent. The researchers identified the principal's ability to "being willing to discriminate between mediocrity and excellence" (Chenoweth & Theokas, 2013, p. 58). Only by consistently demanding exemplary work will the staff maximize the potential of each student. When staff members communicated a shared vision of high academic expectations, students performed at higher levels (Klar &

Brewer, 2013). The staff members focused on every student and maximized their abilities.

Wilcox (2013) analyzed high-poverty schools that scored at least one standard deviation above the mean. The research showed that high-achieving, high-poverty schools share four critical factors. The schools each had staff who genuinely understood the students and their backgrounds; technology was in place to support literacy initiatives; there were plans for consistent and targeted curriculum development; and there were purposeful uses of resources. Wilcox (2013) found that high-achieving schools consistently focused on improving the school's curriculum and instruction. Standards-based curriculum, infused with instructional supports, allowed for staff to build a culture of learning that benefitted all students. Additionally, high-achieving schools, in comparison to low-performing schools, demonstrated a more pronounced commitment to improving student literacy. Literacy was integrated into the classroom for all students, while instructors provided targeted instruction to enhance instruction for struggling students. Time, energy, and preparation were dedicated to ensuring that literacy was a priority. Instructional technology was incorporated to support the literacy initiatives and enhance instruction. In the high-performing schools, technology was used not only as a teaching tool but also as a data-collection tool to help guide curriculum and instruction (Wilcox, 2013).

Culture and Climate

School culture plays a significant factor in academic success. Lindahl (2014) examined 357 schools in Alabama to determine the impact that school climate and safety had on students' performances on state exams while considering data related to

socioeconomic status. As indicated in the prior research of Chenoweth and Theokas (2013), Klar and Brewer (2013), and Lindahl (2014), student poverty levels are a strong predictor of student performance. Interestingly, when looking at poverty levels, Lindahl (2014) found that poverty negatively correlated with teachers' perceptions of the overall school climate. Teachers' negative perceptions of the school climate and culture were predictors of student performance on state exams. Not only were student poverty levels directly affecting student achievement, but the poverty levels were also affecting teachers' perceptions of the school climate. Overall, teacher perceptions could only be mitigated through improved leadership practices (Lindahl, 2014).

To combat the effect of poverty on student performance, Lindahl (2014) stated that schools should purposefully recruit staff members who are culturally sensitive to students living in poverty. School principals should provide professional development on meeting high-poverty students' needs while weeding out staff members who are substandard. As Lindahl's (2014) research shows, student and staff's perception of the school climate is a direct factor toward enhanced student achievement. By focusing on improving structural and cultural support, schools may be able to better meet the needs of all students, particularly those living in poverty.

Reyes and Garcia (2014) conducted a study where the principal took over a school with an observed culture of negativity. In his interview, the principal stated shock when he saw, "behaviors and language that expressed anti bilingualism, anti-kids of poverty and disgusting displays of socioeconomic and language intolerance toward children and their parents," (Reyes & Garcia, 2014, p. 361). The principal set out to focus on the positive aspects of the organization while simultaneously working to transform the

school's various deficiencies. To gather data, the principal interviewed staff members to provide perspective. Individual staff members disrespected and alienated students, while others avoided the dysfunction and intentionally isolated themselves. The principal determined that without a change in the school culture, progress would be impossible. With a focus on the positive aspects of the school, the school began to improve. Building on the successes, staff members began to feel like part of a cohesive professional learning community collaborating toward a common purpose (Reyes & Garcia, 2014).

School principals who achieve extraordinary results also maximize their time as educational leaders. A principal's primary responsibility is to optimize all resources, which include the time and energy of the employees. A focus on putting instruction as the primary goal helps lead to improved academic achievement. The opportunity for time to collaborate and improve pedagogical skills benefits more than just one instructor. It creates a community of quality educators focused on improving the education of all (Chenoweth & Theokas, 2013).

Through purposeful action, secondary school principals can create an organizational commitment to a productive school environment. These efforts are effective in producing a culture that values academic achievement and student improvement. Principals who can effectively establish a positive culture are more likely to be rewarded with increases in academic performance (Carbaugh et al., 2018; Lindahl, 2014).

Placing Value in Relationships

Reyes and Garcia (2014) highlighted the ability of school principals to build relationships with the community. Principals who purposefully focused on improving

school-wide culture, academic achievement, and community involvement saw significant improvement in school-wide academic performance. Musselman et al. (2014) also focused on the benefits of community involvement in high-achieving rural schools. School leaders who collaborate with families and community organizations through an inclusive approach are able to enhance the opportunities available for students (Musselman et al., 2014).

Wilcox (2013) outlined the difference between how high-performing schools viewed student development and the view of average-performing schools. The high-performing schools established a shared responsibility in ensuring the education of the whole child. It was the entire school's responsibility to meet the needs of the student. Student physical and emotional safety was a shared responsibility. This vision meant developing quality partnerships with parents and community members. The ability to get multiple stakeholders working together and focusing on student achievement was a significant factor in ensuring a high level of academic performance. Watson-Vandiver and Wiggan (2020) conducted research on a small, low-income urban school that demonstrated improvements in academic achievement. The researchers identified a culture of shared responsibility in the school, with many participants identifying the environment as welcoming and supportive.

While students from poor socioeconomic backgrounds face numerous additional educational challenges, quality leaders can help mitigate these issues through purposeful actions. By improving the overall school-wide culture and creating a welcoming, supportive atmosphere, principals benefit both the teachers and the students. Additionally, developing a positive organizational culture allows for increased buy-in

toward a purposeful focus on improving academic outcomes for all students. These changes help to improve overall student achievement throughout the educational environment (Chenoweth & Theokas, 2013; Klar & Brewer, 2013; Lindahl, 2014).

Implementing Change

Effective principals are knowledgeable change agents. The principals interviewed by Chenoweth and Theokas (2013) stated that they did not want to simply be aware of what areas could be improved upon, but they wanted to learn from failures. They set reasonable, measurable goals and actively assessed progress. They insisted on gathering data to create a culture of informed decision-making. When these leaders identified successful practices, they maximized the effectiveness. When they experienced failure, they did not place blame, but they adjusted and moved forward. The principals remained solution focused to move their organization and their students toward excellence.

School principals must be aware of a variety of factors, including race, family backgrounds, language, and disabilities, when leading schools through a period of change. DeMatthews (2020) discussed the importance of purposeful inclusivity when principals encounter challenges. Researchers examined elementary school principals in high-poverty areas, with a focus on their leadership practices to effect change in their schools. By taking an inclusive, diverse approach, the principals were more effective in cultivating meaningful change (DeMatthews, 2020).

Transformational Leadership

Transformational leadership theory is used by various organizations in a multitude of fields to focus on organizational improvement (Kouzes & Posner, 2017). In the health care field, transformational leadership theory is used to investigate leadership training

practices. Saravo et al. (2017) used a transformational leadership framework to examine the effectiveness of leaders in residential patient care. Postgraduate residents took part in a 4-week-long leadership training geared to increase leadership skills. Graduates who completed the transformational leadership training demonstrated improved performance in appreciation skills and inspirational motivation compared to those who did not complete the training. The researchers stated that the ability to infuse these transformational leadership skills, along with other factors, can benefit the individuals in the future and provide a blueprint for resident leadership training (Saravo et al., 2017).

Transformational leadership is also being used to examine the leadership in volunteer organizations. Posner (2015) researched the leadership practices of volunteer coaches and their influences on members of their organizations. In this largely understudied demographic, volunteers demonstrated frequent positive leadership behaviors.

Internationally, businesses use transformational leadership to analyze the effectiveness of various programs and procedures. In Germany, Henker et al. (2015) explored the ability of transformational leadership practices to foster employee creativity. In China, Afsar et al. (2014) researched the impact of transformational leadership on ensuring employee innovation. The results showed that transformational leadership had an impact not only on the ability of employees to generate ideas, but also on their ability to implement those ideas independently. Additionally, Mittal and Dhar (2015) investigated the effect of transformational leadership on technology companies located in India and researched the leadership practices of 348 IT managers. They found that transformational leadership behaviors had a meaningful impact on the creativity of the

employees, offering the organization a significant competitive advantage.

Transformational leadership is utilized in businesses across the world to improve the organization and secure a competitive advantage (Afsar et al., 2014; Henker et al., 2015; Mittal & Dhar, 2015).

Transformational Leadership and Schools

School principals who demonstrate transformational leadership practices see an improved academic performance from their students. Valentine and Prater (2011) studied the correlation between a principal's instructional and transformational leadership and overall student performance. In schools where principals demonstrated transformational leadership, student achievement scores vastly exceeded schools where principals did not demonstrate the identified leadership practices (Valentine & Prater, 2017).

Meyer et al. (2020) discussed the importance of school principal leadership to ensure staff member collaboration focused on improving opportunities for student success. When principals encourage staff to build on their individual strengths, it maximizes students' opportunities to improve academically. By facilitating teacher-leader development rather than assuming the identity of the sole educational leader, the principal transforms the organization. This mindset allows teachers to support each other as experts dedicated to the academic improvement of all students (Meyer et al., 2020; Musselman et al., 2014). Stosich (2017) found that when principals use specific leadership frames, it helps teachers, which in turn improves student achievement.

Davis (2015) conducted interviews with 11 administrators using a transformational leadership lens to discuss perceptions of their daily leadership practices. The principals highlighted the importance of shared decision-making to improve student

learning outcomes. Participants stated the need for the school community to demonstrate a shared vision and a common purpose to ensure student success (Davis, 2015). A shared vision, coupled with the principal's ability to foster community support, can make a significant difference in improving student achievement (Masumoto & Brown-Welty, 2009).

Development of Teachers and Leaders

As an educational leader, it is vital for principals to maximize the effectiveness of the teaching staff. Musselman et al. (2014) studied high-performing rural school principals' ability to offer additional opportunities for staff members to take leadership roles designed to improve student learning. In low-performing rural schools, the principals did not facilitate similar teacher leadership opportunities. The inability of these rural principals to ensure an organizational culture that encouraged collaboration and initiative led to a lack of growth that hindered the overall academic performance of the students (Musselman et al., 2014). Transformational leadership allows leaders to guide positive organizational change. When principals demonstrate an increase in observed leadership practices, their constituents view them more favorably. The workplace culture and the attitude of the workers can show a noticeable improvement (Posner, 2013).

Principals who purposefully interact with teachers with a focus on promoting growth routinely see improvement in teacher actions. Blase (2016) researched principals' instructional strategies from the teachers' perspectives. When principals worked with instructors, teachers became more reflective of their educational practices and conveyed an increase in willingness to implement improved behaviors. When principals provided purposeful, detailed, respectful, and nonjudgmental feedback, teachers demonstrated

improved self-esteem and self-efficacy—these changes correlated with a stronger instructional focus with enhanced planning and preparation. Shea (2020) analyzed the construct of teacher leadership through a transformational lens. Teachers expressed a feeling of being liberated and supported. Shea (2020) outlined the benefits of building leadership capacity in teachers and their role in organizational change.

Quin et al. (2015) used a transformational leadership framework to research the leadership practices of principals to improve academic achievement. The research was conducted in both high- and low-performing schools at all levels: elementary, middle, and high school. The 92 teacher participants stated a higher prevalence of Kouzes and Posner's (2017) transformational leadership practices in effective leaders than in ineffective ones. Researchers found that principals who were adept at inspiring a shared vision and challenging the process had the highest positive impact on student performance. Researchers recommended implementing a transformational leadership model in school principal preparation programs (Quin et al., 2015).

Opportunities for leadership development in rural areas is uncommon, but it has been attempted in rural North Carolina. The Principal Preparation for Excellence and Equity in Rural Schools (PPEERS) is a partnership between 11 rural school districts and the University of North Carolina Greensboro (UNCG) to find and develop school principals (University of North Carolina Greensboro [UNCG], 2017). The program was founded to address the needs of rural districts to attract and cultivate high-quality administrators. The program identifies high-performing teachers and places them in a principal-development program. The program's goal is to grow leaders who can address the specific needs of high-needs rural schools. By strategically combining resources with

a focus on professional development, the PPEERS partnership hopes to cultivate a community of future leaders. The program focuses on developing specific skills that are essential for successful leadership in high-needs schools. The program is designed to build leaders' instructional leadership and to build the ability to promote change, manage talent, and create a positive culture that ensures equity (Spencer, n.d.).

Leading for Innovation and Change

Leaders who effectively demonstrate transformational leadership practices can maximize organizational results and lead effectively during a period of educational change. Moolenaar et al. (2010) studied transformational leadership as it pertained to creating an innovative climate. The researchers interviewed 51 principals and 702 teachers to gather teachers' perceptions of leadership and education. The data showed that transformational leaders had a significant impact on teachers' overall perceptions of their schools. Participants stated that the leaders who demonstrated transformational leadership were more popular with staff, which helped to build genuine bonds within the organization. The personal relationships that resulted from a leaders' commitments to transformational leadership helped to drive continuous organizational innovation (Moolenaar et al., 2010).

Transformational leadership is an effective framework used by researchers to discuss the abilities of educational leaders to improve their schools. Researchers have used the Kouzes and Posner's (2017) transformational leadership framework and Leadership Practices Inventory to investigate the effect leadership practices had on generating change in a school (Metz et al., 2019; Quin et al., 2015). The principals studied by Metz et al. (2019) primarily described themselves as transformational leaders.

They expressed that the ability to implement change was a vital piece in their role as a transformational leader. One principal, when describing his role as a transformational leader, stated “I’ve got the capacity to allow for that metamorphosis to occur” (Metz et al., 2019, p. 399). Effective transformational leaders demonstrate the ability to lead change and build relationships that result in organizational success (Metz et al., 2019).

Yang (2014) used the transformational leadership framework to analyze principal practices in primary schools. Yang’s research highlights the importance of transformational leaders in guiding the organization through school development throughout crucial times of change. A transformational leadership framework can be appropriately utilized as a quality framework to conduct educational research on the practices of school leaders (Yang, 2014).

Gaps in the Literature

Scholars have conducted limited research on the ability of secondary school principals to increase student performance in high-poverty or high needs rural schools. Studies have investigated principals who demonstrated quality practices that affected student performance, particularly in underperforming schools; however, the majority of that research was within urban high-poverty schools (Ruiz et al., 2018; Watson-Vandiver & Wiggan, 2020). To a lesser degree, researchers have considered high-poverty rural schools at the elementary level and the affect principals can have on turning around struggling schools. There is an opportunity for further research on the established practices of rural secondary school principals to impact student performance. When considering what practices effective secondary school principals demonstrate to improve student performance in rural schools, there is a significant gap in the literature (Sebastian

et al., 2019). A critical research topic is the exploration of relevant principal leadership practices and how those practices influence student and staff members as they endeavor to meet the unique needs of students in high-poverty rural schools. There is a lack of research in principal development programs in rural high-needs schools. High-needs rural principal leadership programs have yet to be rigorously studied to determine their effectiveness (UNCG, 2017). Considering almost half a million students attend rural schools in New York State, alone, coupled with the increased accountability provided by ESSA, it is essential to identify these effective practices in high-poverty rural settings to address the needs of all students (ESSA, 2015; Rude & Miller, 2018).

Chapter Summary

School principals play an important role in the overall success of a school. The research outlines the challenges facing rural school leaders. However, rural principals must navigate various challenges as they seek to lead schools that ensure the success of their students. Hiring and retaining quality staff members, providing quality professional development opportunities, and collaborating with peers are just a few of the difficulties rural school principals face as they lead their schools (Chetty et al., 2016; Sanchez et al., 2017). High-needs rural school principals face additional challenges pertaining to family support and academic intervention services. When students miss out on these services at a young age, it can severely impact their future academic achievement (Ruiz et al., 2018).

School principals who lead with an intentional focus on ensuring academic success see improved student achievement (Leithwood et al., 2010). When principals are change agents and show an ability to build positive relationships, students routinely outperform expectations. A school with a favorable climate and staff focused on

academic excellence will see improved student achievement (Klar & Brewer, 2013; Ruiz et al., 2018).

Leaders who practice transformational leadership often see improvements in organizational outcomes (Kouzes & Posner, 2017). In health care, a transformational approach is useful in developing effective training practices (Saravo et al., 2017). International business leaders who demonstrate transformational leadership see an increase in organizational creativity and innovation (Afsar et al., 2014; Henker et al., 2015; Mittal & Dhar, 2015).

Transformational leadership has also proven to be effective in American schools. Principals who demonstrate transformational leadership practices see an increase in students' academic performance (Quin et al., 2015). These principals are able to build relationships within the organization that can assist with facilitating change. The innovation that results from teachers feeling comfortable taking risks helps to increase academic achievement (Moolenaar et al., 2010; Musselman et al., 2014). These transformational leadership behaviors also foster a school-wide culture that maximizes teachers' strengths focused on a common goal (Davis, 2015).

As principal leadership practices are crucial for schools' successes, and principals are some of the most visible, important players of the academic community (Sanchez et al., 2017; Wiczorek & Manard, 2018), a qualitative research method was used in this study. Qualitative research is appropriate as it examines the perceptions of the individuals being studied (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). The qualitative methodology helped to develop an in-depth understanding of secondary school principals' leadership practices in

high-achieving, high-needs rural schools. The research methodology is outlined in Chapter 3.

Chapter 3: Research Design Methodology

Introduction

Secondary school principals have a significant impact on the staff and students in their schools. A capable principal can have a positive effect on academic outcomes for a school's entire student body (Kearney et al., 2012). As the centerpiece of a secondary school, the principal influences various components that impact student learning to create an environment that either assists or hinders the overall mission of the organization. By designing and executing a purposeful plan, the secondary school principal can affect conditions inside and outside the classroom, shape procedures and policies, and create a school-wide culture that positively impacts students' academic achievement (Leithwood et al., 2012).

When principals purposefully create a culture that embraces organizational change and collegial collaboration, they experience improvement in students' academic performance. High-performing schools offer teachers instructional leadership roles that are focused on ensuring improvement in student achievement (Musselman et al., 2014). This culture of shared values improves the ability of staff members, benefiting the students through the increased capacity of their teaching staff (Irvin et al., 2011; Valentine & Prater, 2011).

This chapter explains in detail the research methodology used in this study. The chapter describes the purpose, context, and the participants. It concludes with a

description of the instruments used to collect the data and the procedures for data analysis.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to identify the perceived leadership practices of secondary school principals in high-achieving, high-needs rural schools by considering the participants' responses, which were guided by a transformational leadership framework. The identified themes provide information for areas of targeted improvement. This information could provide a blueprint for rural secondary school principals to improve their leadership practices (Klar & Brewer, 2013). The opportunity for secondary school principals to grow professionally will enhance the outcomes of students and staff members. Improving the capacity of rural secondary school principals will benefit entire communities (Kearney et al., 2012; Mulford et al., 2008).

Research Questions

The following research questions guided this study:

1. From the perspective of secondary school principals in high-achieving, high-needs rural schools, what leadership practices are effective in supporting change?
2. From the perspective of secondary school principals in high-achieving, high-needs rural schools, what do secondary school principals identify as potential areas of improvement?

3. From the perspective of secondary school principals in high-achieving, high-needs rural schools, how do secondary school principals address the most significant challenges to ensuring student success?

Each research question guided the study, as the researcher gathered and analyzed data using Kouzes and Posner's (2017) transformational leadership practices as a framework.

Research Context

In New York State's 1,000 rural schools, principals are responsible for educating over 465,000 students (NCES, 2019b). These rural schools often have very different demographics. A few of New York's rural school districts report having as few as 19 students, district-wide (NCES, 2019b). With a small student population and minimal staffing, offering rural students quality programming and support presents a unique set of challenges when compared to a larger district. New York State still has districts that are located in one-room schoolhouses, and other districts that have senior classes as small as three students (McMahon, 2019). Geographically, some rural schools span over 350 square miles of land area to educate a student population of under 500 total students district-wide (NCES, 2019b; NYSED, 2019). The diversity of rural districts across New York State, highlights a significant issue for rural school principals as they educate their students under wide-ranging circumstances.

Rural school principals face a variety of significant challenges that have the potential to impact the educational community. Rural school leaders encounter geographic disadvantages that include decreased parental involvement, fiscal uncertainty, and issues with staff recruitment and retention (Biddle & Azano, 2016; Semke &

Sheridan, 2012; Stewart & Matthews, 2015). Additionally, rural principals often lead schools with a significant percentage of students from underprivileged socioeconomic homes (Strange et al., 2012). In New York State, 13.6% of families live below the poverty line for a family of four (United States Census Bureau, 2019). Children who live in poverty have a lesser likelihood of access to instructional supports that can assist with cognitive development (Habibullah & Ashraf, 2013).

Research Methodology

This study used a qualitative design that consisted of semi-structured interviews conducted with rural secondary school principals. Using a qualitative approach was appropriate for this study as the researcher attempted to gain a deeper understanding of a particular phenomenon (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Kvale & Brinkman, 2009).

The phenomenological study gathered the participants' perceptions of their professional leadership behaviors. Creswell and Creswell (2018) described qualitative research as a process of moving from basic assumptions to an interpretation of discovery focused on relevant human issues. Qualitative research was appropriate as it examines the experiences and perceptions of the individuals being studied (Creswell & Creswell, 2018), in this case, rural principals' experiences and perceptions of their own leadership practices. In this study, the researcher interviewed rural secondary school principals regarding their lived experiences, exploring for potential themes. Additionally, the researcher applied a relevant framework to guide the study.

The five transformational leadership practices, as outlined by Kouzes & Posner (2017), provided a structural framework for the research process. Analyzing a principal's leadership through the transformational leadership framework made the research relevant

and easy to follow. Kouzes & Posner (2017) identified the five practices as modeling the way, inspiring a shared vision, challenging the process, enabling others to act, and encouraging the heart. Each of these leadership practices could be codified by the researcher.

Kouzes and Posner (2017) provided a framework for categorizing and discussing responses to the research questions. Identifying practices by using a transformational framework, the researcher categorized the identified leadership practices into Kouzes and Posner's (2017) five areas. These transformational leadership practices guided the analysis of the results.

Research Participants

A phenomenological study allows for a small sample size of participants, with some studies focusing on a sole individual (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). For the participant sample size to be appropriate, it should include enough participants for the researcher to identify relevant patterns in the participants' responses (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Therefore, for inclusion in this study, all the school principal participants led schools that met the following criteria:

1. New York State public school;
2. recognized by New York State as a Recognition School in at least one of the 2018–2019 or 2019–2020 school years;
3. classified by New York State as a high-needs rural school; and
4. educates students in Grades 10–12, nonexclusively.

The principals who led schools that did not meet the criteria for each of these requirements were not considered for the study. NYSED named 582 high-performing

schools as 2018–2019 Recognition Schools. Recognition Schools are high-achieving or rapidly improving schools as determined by the Commissioner of Education. Schools are evaluated on academic performance, absenteeism, graduation rate, and college and career readiness (NYSED, 2020a). For this study, only the principals of high-needs rural schools were asked to participate. In the 2018–2019 and 2019–2020 school years, less than 3% of New York State’s Recognition Schools were classified as high-needs rural schools (NYSED, 2019). A disproportionately low percentage of New York State’s high-needs rural schools earned Recognition School status when compared to the overall makeup of the state’s schools.

Common secondary school grade configurations in New York State consist of Grades 7–12, 9–12, and 10–12 (NYSED, 2019). Using the criteria outlined above, only eight of the over 1,000 schools in New York State met all benchmarks. The principals of each of the eight schools were contacted, with six agreeing to participate in semi-structured interviews. Table 3.1 details the information pertaining to the participants of this study.

Table 3.1

Research Participants

Principal	Secondary School
Principal Byrd	Hamilton Secondary School
Principal Dollinger	Blackwell Lane Secondary School
Principal Jackson	Cesar Cardinal Secondary School
Principal Jeffrey	David Wethers Secondary School
Principal O’Brien	Nathaniel Secondary School
Principal Ryan	Janto Hill Secondary School

Note. Principal and secondary school names are pseudonyms.

The specific schools studied were not identified in the findings to ensure the confidentiality of the participants. The interview questions were developed using a transformational leadership lens. The participant responses were analyzed using a transformational approach with a focus on Kouzes & Posner's (2017) five transformational leadership practices. Using a transformational leadership design was appropriate for this study as it is characterized by individuals who show the ability to move others toward a common goal (Powell et al., 2008).

Participating in a study can be an inconvenience for the participants. To honor and recognize the time commitment necessary for the researcher to conduct the survey, each participant received a \$25 gift card. This token of appreciation was not so large as to skew any potential results and it was within the St. John Fisher College Institutional Review Board (IRB) guidelines (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

Participant Recruitment

The researcher identified secondary school principals who led high-needs rural schools identified as Recognition Schools by the NYSED in the 2018–2019 or 2019–2020 school years. The participants' responses were coded with personal identifying factors removed to ensure privacy and confidentiality for the participants.

The researcher conveyed the purpose of this study to the participants by a phone call and in a follow-up email as detailed in Appendix C. The purpose of this study was to identify the perceived leadership practices of secondary school principals in high-achieving, high-needs rural schools. This research is relevant to the field because rural schools are under researched (Schafft, 2016). The potential identification of effective leadership practices of successful rural principals can potentially benefit the educational

field. The researcher discovered shared practices that rural secondary school principals can replicate to improve the quality of their leadership—in turn—benefiting their students and staff (Abu-Tineh et al., 2009; Sun & Leithwood, 2015).

Researcher

A sole researcher conducted this study. The researcher was responsible for collecting, categorizing, and analyzing the relevant data. As is the case in phenomenological studies, the researcher brought a series of presumptions and potential preconceived notions. It was the responsibility of the researcher to be aware of any prior assumptions and to discard them throughout the research process. (Creswell & Poth, 2018)

The researcher in this study spent 20 years as an educator working in New York State's rural schools. For 16 years, the researcher worked in a rural high-needs public school of approximately 1,000 students in Grades K-12. At the time of this writing, the researcher was employed at a secondary educational setting that serves students from urban, suburban, and rural schools of varying sizes. The researcher's experience working with various school districts and their administrators provided a wide-ranging perspective on differing leadership styles. As an educator in a similar role to the participants in this study, the researcher was able to understand specific terminology and perspectives that an outsider may not grasp.

Data Collection

The researcher completed semi-structured interviews with the research participants, engaged the respondents in formal interviews, and used an established set of relevant questions for each participant. The researcher used the questions as a guide,

utilizing follow-up questions to go further in-depth when appropriate. The researcher purposefully used semi-structured interview questions to seek a thorough understanding of the leaders' perceptions of their leadership practices (Brinkmann, 2013; Kvale & Brinkman, 2009). Semi-structured interviews provided a guide with purposeful questions that touched on critical topics while maintaining the flexibility necessary for the researcher to delve deeper into purposefully selected responses. The opportunity to explore these additional trajectories assisted the researcher in gaining a deeper understanding of the participants' responses (Kvale & Brinkman, 2009).

The interviewer conducted and recorded video interviews using the Zoom platform. An additional audio recording was used as a back-up recording. In the semi-structured interviews, the researcher asked the secondary school principals specific questions regarding their perceived leadership practices. By conducting semi-structured interviews, the researcher was provided with the flexibility to ascertain detailed information from the participants (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Kvale & Brinkman, 2009). At the beginning of the interviews, the researcher informed the participants of the purpose and nature of this study. The researcher described the process and expected duration of the interviews, asking if there were any questions or points of clarification. The researcher obtained written consent to record the participants and attempted to intrude on the participant's environment as minimally as possible (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). The duration of the interviews ranged from 31 to 58 minutes. With prior written approval from the participants, the interviews were recorded to assist with observation and data collection. At the conclusion of the process, the researcher expressed thanks and notified the participants of the closing instructions.

The researcher conducted a field test using the interview questions in Appendix A. The field test ensured that the questions were relevant and capable of being understood by potential participants. The researcher transcribed all interviews conducted during this study. To ensure participants were not harmed in any way, the researcher kept the identity of the individuals confidential. This procedure allowed the participants to provide honest feedback to ensure accurate data (Flick, 2018; Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

The confidentiality of the data was maintained throughout the research process. No distinguishing information was used in the coding or publication process. Recordings and transcripts are secured on a password-protected device or in a locked filing cabinet. All materials will be kept secured for a period of 3 years after the publication of this work. At the end of the 3-year period, all materials will be destroyed, and the electronic files will be deleted.

Data Analysis

Data analysis occurred after the data collection, coding, and report writing. This procedure is appropriate in qualitative research as it pertains to developing themes and to narrowing the focus (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Flick, 2018). An audio file of the interviews was sent to rev.com, an online transcription service. The transcriptions were coded and arranged into relevant themes.

Using the transcripts, an initial round of analysis took place using a priori codes, which were predetermined using Kouzes and Posner's (2017) understanding of transformational leadership. Data collected during the interviews was coded based on the five leadership practices. Second, the researcher identified key words and phrases from

the participants' responses. Next, an additional series of open coding occurred using the key words and phrases that emerged throughout the process based on the participants' responses. The researcher then categorized and grouped the responses purposefully, formulating relevant themes (Saldaña, 2016). Axial coding was used to combine subcodes into larger codes as broader themes materialized. As overarching themes emerged from the process, the researcher used the transformational leadership framework to find meaning and potential similarities in the participants' responses (Saldaña, 2016). Throughout the theme development and the coding processes, a grid was used to organize and categorize relevant information as it pertained to the research questions, themes, and subthemes (Miles et al., 2020).

As a method of ensuring reliability in the coding process, the researcher invited a colleague to simultaneously complete the open coding of a portion of the research transcripts. A review of the results and a comparison to the codes, as developed and assembled in the coding grid, was appropriate to ensure inter-rater reliability. The result of the coding process was a comprehensive matrix of information that was categorized into relevant themes and subthemes (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

Procedures for Data Collection and Analysis

1. Preliminary Steps
 - a. Obtained IRB approval through St. John Fisher College IRB.
 - b. Emailed secondary school principals who met the study criteria.

- c. Made phone calls to interested secondary school principals.
 - i. Sent informed consent email to participants.
 - ii. Collected completed informed consent forms as outlined in Appendix D.

2. Data Collection

- a. Completed pilot interviews with a secondary school administrator who was not part of the study.
- b. Adjusted the interview questions and protocols based on the pilot interview feedback.
- c. Scheduled interviews with the participants upon receiving completed consent forms.
- d. Conducted and recorded the interviews with research participants.

3. Data Analysis

- a. Sent interview recording audio files to transcription service.
- b. Analyzed the completed transcripts using a priori codes.
- c. Identified key words and phrases from responses.
- d. Further analyzed the transcripts using open coding as key words and phrases were identified throughout the process.
- e. Axial coding narrowed codes into categories and themes.

The procedures for data collection and data analysis were followed with fidelity to ensure the process was appropriate and purposeful.

Summary

This chapter provided a summary of the research methods necessary for this study. By distinguishing effective leadership practices of rural secondary school principals, it may provide a guide for additional administrators to improve their leadership skills (Klar & Brewer, 2013). As this study was phenomenological and focused on the perceptions of secondary school principals, semi-structured interviews were purposeful and productive (Creswell & Creswell, 2018.) The interview questions, data collection, and coding utilized a transformational leadership design. This design was applicable as it is often utilized when leaders move followers forward, focusing on a shared goal (Powell et al., 2008).

This chapter described in detail the methodology, design, and framework that guided this study. The six research participants were chosen purposively, as they all led high-achieving secondary rural Recognition Schools, as outlined by New York State (NYSED, 2019). The researcher was also described in this paper to ensure transparency with the research process.

This study addressed the under-studied demographics of high-achieving, rural secondary school principals (Schafft, 2016.) By contributing to the field of study, this research outlines best practices for secondary school principals. These improved practices could a positive impact on rural students' academic performance (Gallard et al., 2010; Koricich & Boylan, 2019). Chapter 4 examines the study's findings and discusses the themes and subthemes that materialized during the research process.

Chapter 4: Results

Introduction

This study considered the perceived leadership practices of principals in high-achieving, high-needs rural secondary schools, and utilized a qualitative approach, as the researcher completed semi-structured interviews with secondary school principals. The framework for the research was based on Kouzes and Posner's (2017) five transformational leadership practices. The study investigated the following research questions:

1. From the perspective of secondary school principals in high-achieving, high-needs rural schools, what leadership practices are effective in supporting change?
2. From the perspective of secondary school principals in high-achieving, high-needs rural schools, what do secondary school principals identify as potential areas of improvement?
3. From the perspective of secondary school principals in high-achieving, high-needs rural schools, how do secondary school principals address the most significant challenges to ensuring student success?

After a thorough review of the participants' interview responses, themes were identified by the researcher.

Data Analysis and Procedures

Data for this study was obtained from semi-structured interviews with six secondary school principals. All of the principals interviewed were selected because they led rural high-needs secondary schools identified as Recognition Schools by NYSED in 2018–2019, 2019–2020, or both years (NYSED, 2019). Relevant themes emerged from a detailed review of the interview transcripts.

The responses were initially coded using a priori codes predetermined by Kouzes and Posner’s (2017) five transformational leadership practices. Next, key words and phrases were identified from the research. Then, a round of open coding occurred using the codes developed from analyzing the participants’ interview responses. Lastly, the researcher used axial coding, which helped analyze and organize the participants’ responses into categories, themes, and subthemes within a transformational leadership framework, which summarized the similarities in the participants’ responses (Saldaña, 2016).

Research Question 1:

From the perspective of secondary school principals in high-achieving, high-needs rural schools, what leadership practices are effective in supporting change?

The interview questions were purposefully developed to align with the research question. The protocol questions were aligned as outlined in Appendix B. The interview and protocol questions, in conjunction with relevant follow-up questions, resulted in categorizing the participants’ responses into three themes. The themes were “I keep everything focused on the kids,” which describes the principals’ abilities to establish a vision of keeping students first when making decisions. The second theme was “we first

started with our message,” which allowed the principals to communicate the shared goals that guided the organization forward. The third theme was “I’m a cheerleader,” which provided evidence of a focus on positivity and celebrating success. Table 4.1 shows the themes and subthemes that resulted from the data gathered during the interview and protocol questions.

Table 4.1

Research Question 1 – Themes and Subthemes

Theme	Subtheme
“I keep everything focused on the kids.”	Establishing a vision of keeping students first Knowing the students Putting students first Making success possible
“We first started with our message.”	Constant, consistent communication
“I’m a cheerleader.”	Find opportunities for positivity and appreciation

“I Keep Everything Focused on the Kids.” The first theme details how successfully the secondary principals in rural high-needs schools kept their decision-making process focused on the kids they were responsible for educating. A significant number of the principals’ responses centered around students and student learning. The principals described relationships that provided a personal understanding of the individual students and their needs. This commitment to building relationships allowed the principals to make student-driven decisions. Principal Jeffrey succinctly summed up his decision-making process. He noted, “I keep everything focused on kids” (T4, 96-97). By analyzing outcomes with students in mind, the principals reported decision-making being driven by a feeling of purpose.

Knowing the Students. The study participants stated the importance of knowing the students as individuals and the benefits from those personal connections. Principal Dollinger highlighted this when she stated, “As a principal here, I’m able to know all of the kids” (T2, 8). She went on to describe her perceived benefit. “I’m able to kind of follow them in their educational path for 4 years and really get to know them by the time they’re seniors” (T2, 9-11). Principal Jackson echoed a similar view when he stated, “all staff can get to know each kid” (T3, 12). He described his perceived benefits when he said, “visibility is, I think, a big thing” (T3, 358-359). When delving into greater detail, he reported, “not only does the staff and the administrators and the teachers get to know each student individually, but they know their families; they know their situations” (T3, 15-16). These personal relationships with students, as individuals, allowed the principals to analyze specific needs and implement targeted interventions rather than making global mandates. The principals were able to make calculated, purposeful decisions that provided positive outcomes for their students.

Putting Students First. On a daily basis, principals are responsible for a variety of managerial duties. Principal Byrd outlined how she prioritized students over other job-related tasks. When discussing time management choices, Principal Byrd stated, “I figure my time to do my work, my emails, my planning begins when the students leave” (T1, 237-238). That statement underscored her vision and commitment to making her students the utmost priority. She further detailed the results of her commitment to the students:

Sometimes getting an email back from me might be a little bit delayed. I believe that when the school day is going on, my time is their time, right there. And I’m constantly, I’m there in the lunches because that’s when they’re most social, I’m

in the hallways in between periods because that's when I can catch them. I can see who's nervous. I greet them at the front of the school [al]most every day. I'm there before they're getting off their bus or coming in; they're seeing me. (T1, 223–227)

While the various principals described the importance of dedicating time to get to know the students on a personal level, Principal Jeffrey described a system that he put into place to ensure that he made a consistent effort. He reported:

I set up reminders in my phone; I make my staff set reminders in their phone[s] to compliment kids. It's a simple thing, but set a reminder every other day that recurs in your [phone and] find a kid that's doing something positive and go talk to them. (T4, 81–183)

By dedicating time to ensure student interactions and relationship building, the principals were able to make positive impacts on their students. The principals interviewed had detailed how their actions mirrored the belief that an investment in time will pay significant dividends in student success.

As outlined above, the various principals described their choice to focus on students first and build connections with them as individuals. As the principals modeled this behavior, it often became part of the fabric of the school as a whole. This is a genuine example of leaders who model the way, as defined by Kouzes and Posner (2017).

Establishing a Vision of Keeping Students First. The research participants discussed the theme of keeping students first as they described putting students at the forefront of their decision-making. In reflecting on conversations with staff members, Principal O'Brien stated, "It should be Number 1, students first, no matter what" (T5, 57-

58). This intentional focus on keeping students at the center of decision-making was a theme among this study's participants.

When implementing change, it was vital that the principals communicated their thought processes with staff members. When she felt that staff members were focused on the needs of adults over the needs of students, she asked them, "Is this what's best for the students? Or is this what's best for you" (T5, 64)? She clarified her thought process to the researcher when she stated, "I'm always going to be about what's best for the student" (T5, 65). By framing the conversation on what meets the needs of the students, Principal O'Brien could influence the thinking of the entire organization. Principal Byrd echoed Principal O'Brien when she outlined exchanges that she had with her staff members. When describing these discussions, she stated, "we could disagree, and we can walk out the door and still care for each other because our defined purpose still remains the same: We're still working for that kid" (T1, 278-279). Communicating these values helped establish a shared commitment to putting the students first.

When faced with staff member dissent regarding administrative decisions, Principal Dollinger took a similar students-first approach. She outlined a situation where staff members removed students from class for what she considered a minor infraction. In this conversation, Principal Dollinger described her ability to reframe the decision to remove students from the classroom by prioritizing the educational needs of the students. She stated, "I had a lot of kids try to use book bags, and teachers were kicking kids out of class because they had book bags. I mean, it was just ridiculous" (T2, 140-142). As a result, she discussed her values with the staff and the priority of keeping students in class. Through the transformational leadership framework developed by Kouzes and Posner

(2017), these actions were an example of Principal Dollinger's ability to inspire a shared vision. By putting the students' needs of physical attendance in class over minor rule compliance, Principal Dollinger was able to demonstrate her commitment to keeping student needs at the forefront of her decision-making process.

Principal Jeffrey shared a similar perspective when he reflected on his leadership vision. He reported an intentional focus on keeping students first. He stated, "Student success. That's it. Every decision I make, every change that I implement, I measure my own success through my students' success" (T4, 250-251).

Overall, this subsection synthesized the principals' purposeful choice to keep students first. From their reflections, it is clear that keeping students' best interests at the forefront in decision-making was vital in their leadership philosophies. As important, is communicating that vision.

Making Success Possible. The principals noted that success looked different for some students when compared to others. This individuality of programming and tactics was essential in measuring organizational success. Principal Jackson emphasized the importance of communicating a student-centered approach when implementing a plan. He described, "We're worried more about student success and student learning" (T3, 557-225). Principal Dollinger discussed clear and consistent expectations. "I don't think there's anything unique in what we're doing here. I think it's just the consistency and the high expectations that we have for all kids" (T2 47-48). In recognizing that their students were unique and had various needs, Principal Dollinger outlined the importance of differentiating learning to assist students in finding academic success. She stated the importance of:

Making sure that the teachers have in their toolkit how to individualize that education to all different types of students. I think we're not a one-size-fits-all school or district, and [we] really trying to get the teachers on board with really looking at each child and how can we best service that child. (T2, 49–51)

Similarly, Principal O'Brien stated, "One thing that I want to make sure that everybody here understands is that not every child is going to fit into this same square box. That there are different pathways that these young men and women can be successful" (T5, 326-328).

Principal Jackson stated reservations to personalize all aspects but identified that there were specific ways to differentiate to meet student needs: "So it's not that we can individualize for everybody, but I think there is opportunity to individualize in some ways" (T3, 573-574). This commitment to individualize the learning process and make success possible for each individual student was also expressed by Principal Dollinger. Principal Dollinger described individualizing instruction for both high achievers and students who struggle academically. She stated:

But, for kids that maybe it comes easily to them, giving them the enrichment opportunities; maybe there's a project or something that they can do in class or something, and it isn't extra work, but it's enriching work that they can do. And then on the other end, putting those supports in place for kids that maybe are struggling with that, with the concepts. (T2, 60–63)

By knowing the students as individuals, the principals and staff members could make purposeful changes that increased the opportunity for student success. These principals were committed to challenging the process and searching out unique opportunities that

would meet the students' needs (Kouzes & Posner, 2017). As described by the research participants, a focus and commitment to individualized student success are vital when leading high-achieving rural schools.

The theme, I keep everything focused on the kids, describes the ability of the secondary school principals to put their students first when making decisions for their organization. Student needs are at the forefront of planning, relationship-building, and change. The next theme outlines the ability of the secondary school principals to communicate their commitment to ensuring others in the learning community had a similar philosophy when making purposeful change.

“We First Started With Our Message.” The principals routinely mentioned a deliberate focus on communicating their visions. By discussing shared goals, expectations, and desires, the principals were able to inspire a shared vision to enact change as they moved their organizations forward (Kouzes & Posner, 2017). Principal Byrd highlighted her choice to communicate her vision through every email correspondence that came from her office. “So, we first started with our message, and the message that’s on every email” (T1, 89-90). Principal Dollinger emphasized her focus on academics when she reported sending over 300 personal letters to students who had an 85 or better in the last marking period. By personalizing recognition for her students’ success, Principal Dollinger displayed the actions of a transformational leader who encourages the heart (Kouzes & Posner, 2017). Principal Jackson shared his belief that it was paramount that he communicated his vision to his students and staff members. He described how he kicked off the new school year with his staff members by conveying the shared vision right from the first conversation of the school year. He recalled telling

staff, “This is why we’re here. We’re here for students, we’re here for teaching, we’re here for learning” (T3, 550-551). Principal Jeffrey described how he also tried to remain focused on year-long efforts at an end-of-the-year celebration, continuing that shared message. He reported highlighting the positive acts that he saw from staff members throughout the year that benefitted students academically, socially, or behaviorally.

By starting with a purposeful and united message, the principals reported developing a common, organization-wide vision. These communications helped move the school community in a focused direction—often resulting in conditions that fostered improved student outcomes.

Constant, Consistent Communication. The principals stated that a clear and consistent message helped when they implemented a successful change process. Principal Jeffrey described a focus on “constant communication with the teachers and my students; they know that I’m looking for change” (T4, 277-278). This purposeful communication demonstrated the importance of the change, allowing for positive results. The various principals discussed communicating that vision with staff members as they started a school year. Principal Ryan reported, “making sure we have a clear focus for our staff” (T6, 74). Principal Byrd shared a similar theme when she reflected on her opening-day messaging with her staff; she stated how she communicated her year-long theme, “we are going to be a school without limits, and we’re going to work to the best of our ability” (T1, 39-40). She reported that consistently communicating this theme changed the staff’s thought process. She reported, “probably the biggest cultural change was when people started saying, ‘My students in my classes,’ and now it’s, ‘Our students in our classes’” (T1, 40-42).

Principal Jeffrey reflected on his communication with staff members to ensure buy-in. When implementing change, he described, “mak[ing] sure that the explanation and the reasoning behind it is kid-centered student achievement” (T4, 201-202). When the principals discussed organizational change through the framework of the impact on student achievement, they were able to secure staff buy-in that ensured a purposeful transformation. Principal Jeffrey’s ability to use his voice to affirm shared values and set an example for his staff was an excellent example of his ability to model the way (Kouzes & Posner, 2017).

The principals routinely discussed their desire to foster a shared vision that united the educational community. Principal Byrd stated the importance of communicating that vision with staff members and also with students. To reinforce a truly shared vision, she tapped into student leaders to share their voices. She reported:

We called everybody in and had a giant joint assembly where I could explain who I was and what our mission was and talk to them about it. We picked some of the student leaders, the senior class president, the student council president, to help present this message and display it for them. (T1, 143–145)

The principals shared the importance of communicating a shared vision when securing buy-in from stakeholder groups. When noting the recent development of a strategic plan, Principal O’Brien illustrated the importance of communicating that shared vision. She stated, “anything we want to do physically to our building, any new hires, from the little tiny change to a big change, it will have to fit our district initiative for sure, our mission, vision statement” (T5, 228-230).

The principals reported that a clear, consistent message helped individuals understand the goals and vision of their organizations. Overall, the principals noted the importance of understanding, stating, and communicating their message with various stakeholder groups. The final theme for Research Question 1 describes a principal's role as a leader, with a focus on building relationships.

“I’m a Cheerleader.” The final theme details the role of the principal as a supporter and encourager. The principals described the ability to look at situations through a positive lens and how to mitigate negativity under challenging conditions. This support helped develop relationships as the principals led others. Principal Ryan described how her demeanor helped build trust and foster positive relationships, “So, I feel like one of my biggest strengths, probably, is relationship building with the people that are here” (T6, 172-173). Principal Jeffrey went further when describing his communication style and commitment to positivity. He referred to himself as a cheerleader and explained how he used purposeful encouragement to champion change. He stated, “So, I am a transformational leader if you want to put a label on me. I’m a cheerleader, okay” (T4, 96). He described how his supportive, uplifting demeanor helped unify the staff to focus on doing what was best for the students. Principal Jackson agreed that positivity was necessary, as he described a commitment to observing celebrations. Principal Jackson said, “We’ve got things where we just celebrate together as a community, whether it’s homecoming, or whether it’s a pep rally during that week” (T3, 588-589). The principals reported that celebratory events helped build a sense of togetherness and community, which helped move the educational community on a positive path.

Principal Dollinger described a time that she reframed a problematic situation where she observed that students were disengaged. When faced with an expansive district, geographically, she spoke about her afternoon plans and how she was “going to go and do some home visits on some kids that I’m concerned about” (T2, 217-218). She described her belief that these visits were strategic and purposeful. Principal Dollinger explained purposefully putting a positive spin on the visits, “I’m going to come out. It’s not a gotcha. It’s more of a let’s make an action plan together and get you back on track” (T2, 236-237). By being an active part of the solution, rather than placing blame, Principal Dollinger built relationships and provided support.

Principal Ryan detailed her perspective as it pertained to relationships and communication. She stated,

In my mind, none of that means much about anything if you don’t have a relationship with the person that you’re working with. You can get so much farther along, you get so much more accomplished if there is that bond. (T6, 416–418)

This perspective was reported by the other research participants when they described their commitment to building relationships through a positive approach. In agreement with Principal Ryan, Principal Byrd noted her commitment to positivity. “So we’re constantly engaging and being positive” (T1, 229-230). She pointed out that this positivity was targeted in various ways to meet every student and staff member. She compared her focus on all individuals in her school to a quality florist. She noted, “they say, if you want to be a good florist, you never ignore a wilting rose” (T1, 231). By focusing on all stakeholders’ needs, Principal Byrd was able to make the necessary

adjustments to continue meeting the needs of the students and staff within her organization.

In this section, the principals described how being a supportive, positive leader helped them complete the tasks associated with their jobs. These actions are clear examples of a decision to encourage the heart and create a sense of community within the organization (Kouzes & Posner, 2017). These actions led to a strengthening of interpersonal relationships where the principals reported building strong reputations with their stakeholder groups. These interactions helped the principals gain trust, and ultimately support, as they led their organizations forward.

Find Opportunities for Positivity and Appreciation. The principals reported finding ways to demonstrate their appreciation for the individuals they encountered daily. Principal Byrd reported a time that a staff member remarked, “I wish you weren’t so darn positive” (T1, 361) when referring to a discussion about facing the necessary changes associated with remote learning. Principal Byrd stated that when purposefully leading with positivity, “you start out leading; you’re only leading with a few, but that grows to many” (T1, 364-365). Principal O’Brien expressed a genuine appreciation and admiration for her students and staff. She said, “I work with a great bunch of people. They’re really, really awesome teachers. The kids are really, really cool kids” (T5, 694). This positivity and regard for students was evident from the tone in each of the six participant interviews.

Principal O’Brien described how she seized the opportunity during faculty meetings to instill a sense of positivity and appreciation. She stated:

Well, at our faculty meetings, we do have some [celebrations] like, we'll bring in goodies. We also do staff member of the month, which is nominated by their own staff. So, I did the very first one. I did September, and then that person does this, [and] so on. We had a brand-new tech teacher come in, so he made us a trophy. Really, really nice trophy. And then when they have to pass on that trophy, they get a #1 [trophy]. (T5, 581–586)

This intentional focus on positivity and encouragement helps create a school-wide culture. This welcoming, supportive environment can be felt both by those within the organization as well as by visitors. Principal Ryan described feedback that she received from candidates who recently interviewed in her district. She reported a conversation with one of the interviewees. She noted the candidate stating, “We can’t really describe it. We get this feeling like it’s just this positive environment and from top to bottom” (T6, 48-49). It is that positivity that sets the tone for all the stakeholders and builds on itself. As reported by multiple principals, a purposeful focus on appreciation and gratitude is vital within these successful organizations. This organizational positivity illustrates a leader’s ability to create a shared vision where individuals encourage the heart (Kouzes & Posner, 2017). These actions create a shared commitment to ensuring a positive environment.

Several of the principals also noted their purposeful communication with students and the perceived benefits from these positive relationships. When Principal Jackson described the student interactions, he mentioned, “I can see students and congratulate them on things that they’re doing as I’m walking around, and that builds the connection between me and them” (T3, 403-405). Principal Ryan reported her morning routine of

greeting students and described how it assisted in her ability to build relationships. She stated, “there’s not these grand gestures so to speak. I’m afraid it’s just more continual, making sure that they know that I appreciate them” (T6, 403-404).

The principals also reported showing appreciation for their staff members. Principal Dollinger noted providing something more tangible. When asked about how she showed appreciation to her staff, she discussed choosing:

Simple things like writing a nice note to a teacher that you just got done observing; putting a little piece of candy with it. Something simple like that. I had my first year, I’ve done that as long as I’ve been an administrator, and it’s because an administrator did it to me, that I felt appreciated. (T2, 284–287)

While the execution may differ based on the principal’s comfort and style, the reported effect was the same. Gestures and acts of appreciation positively impacted the school culture, providing an atmosphere conducive to learning.

While discussing the difficulties surrounding learning during a global pandemic, Principal Byrd highlighted the importance of positivity. She described how an optimistic mindset helped staff, particularly through difficult times. She stated:

Basically, meeting adversity with a positive attitude, and maintaining positivity through all the struggles and stuff. We knew that we would have more valleys than peaks this year, so we wanted to frame that. And I think when we come in and they get to choose that better, that more positive attitude, that allows the discussion to lead on being a solution-based school versus a complaint-based school. (T1, 99–103)

She went on to further describe her leadership during tough times, “In my philosophy, personal philosophy, I think if we start with character and attitude, other things tend to flow and go with momentum” (T1, 88-89). Overwhelmingly, the respondents reported that building organizational positivity was an asset to building a solid culture this was willing to support change.

As presented in the themes for this section, the principals effectively led change when they followed specific practices. Each of these actions mirrored Kouzes and Posner’s (2017) transformational leadership practices. The participating principals inspired a shared vision of keeping students at the forefront of their decision-making. They fostered, and communicated, a clear and consistent message that detailed the mission of the organization. Lastly, they encouraged the heart by leading with genuine positivity and appreciation. The following section will address Research Question 2 and the themes that surfaced as a result of the data collection and analysis of the principals’ responses.

Research Question 2:

From the perspective of secondary school principals in high-achieving, high-needs rural schools, what do secondary school principals identify as potential areas of improvement?

The interview questions were designed with the research question in mind. As was the case for Research Question 1, the protocol questions were purposefully aligned as detailed in Appendix B. Relevant themes emerged from the participants’ responses. Those themes were “homework measures home” and “everything is on my shoulders.” The first theme, homework measures home, describes the difficulty that school leaders often have when partnering with families to educate children. The second theme,

everything is on my shoulders, discusses the numerous and varied job responsibilities that rural secondary school principals tackle to meet the needs of their students and staff members. Table 4.2 shows the themes and subthemes that resulted from the data gathered during the interview and protocol questions.

Table 4.2

Research Question 2 – Themes and Subthemes

Theme	Subtheme
“Homework measures home.”	Internet connectivity
	Geographical challenges
“Everything is on my shoulders.”	It’s just me.

“Homework Measures Home.” The feedback provided by the principals in this study outlined a significant lack of resources for students in high-needs rural school districts. Resources, such as internet connectivity, staffing, and financial support, were identified as barriers to student learning. The secondary school principals who participated in this study identified each area as needing improvement.

Principal Jeffrey discussed ways he challenged the process by implementing a significant change that addressed students who struggled to complete their school work at home. He stated:

It’s . . . the old adage “homework measures home.” So, if they’re not getting their homework done, it’s probably because they don’t do anything at home, and it’s not valued, and it’s not pushed. So, we got to give them time in the school to [complete the work]. (T4, 192–194)

In his interview, Principal Jeffrey identified various barriers to success for students that may struggle with completing assignments at home. The students may have jobs, family responsibilities, lack access to the Internet, or not understand the lessons. Principal Jeffrey identified that homework grades were not assessing student abilities but, rather, the availability of resources at home. As a solution to this issue, he scheduled time into the school day when students could complete work with all necessary supports available. These classes provided assistance and resources that may not have been available off campus. Rather than measuring the students' ability to be productive in the home setting, he addressed the root of the problem. If students struggled at home, he challenged the process and found a time for them to be successful inside the regular school day.

One common theme, when discussing challenges to educating the students in high-needs rural schools, was the negative effects of poverty. The principals reported a need for providing additional supports at school, as they were often not available at home. The ability to challenge the process to find creative solutions was paramount to meet students' needs. These issues were amplified during the COVID-19 pandemic, where schools were essentially closed to the public. When describing the importance of resources on student success, Principal Ryan detailed that "getting them the resources they need to succeed is a big, big thing here" (T6, 15-16). Principal Jeffrey outlined how poverty affected his students' mindsets and overall efficacy. He stated:

A lot of times, your most at-risk students . . . don't see a value in education. So, trying to motivate those individuals to be successful in school is extremely hard. They see no positive role models in their life that took school seriously. They don't see it as an escape from their current reality. (T4, 10-15)

The lack of support in the home can often lead to a lack of success in the classroom. By not valuing the educational process and the opportunity for future success, students could feel a disconnect regarding how success in school translates to success in the future.

While the principals discussed how poverty impacted student success, they also detailed that students often did not even have access to essential supports. The majority of the principals listed one particular support as a necessity, specifically during the COVID-19 pandemic—Internet connectivity..

Internet Connectivity. The principals reported a heightened importance for students to be able to access the Internet. As the research was conducted during the COVID-19 pandemic, the topic was discussed during many interviews. Consistently, the principals outlined the difficulty of their students and staff to access reliable Internet. Principal Jackson described a lack of access succinctly when he said, “So, the Internet simply doesn’t go down certain roads in our school district” (T3, 50). In the past, when confronted with a lack of connectivity, the principals challenged the process and opened schools outside of typical hours to meet students’ needs. During the pandemic and the transition to remote and online learning, the principals identified connectivity as a barrier to student learning, particularly for impoverished families. Principal Ryan agreed with the sentiments outlined by Principal Jackson and went more in-depth. She described the connectivity issue in the context of online learning during the pandemic when she said:

This answer probably has evolved throughout COVID and the entire pandemic, is the lack of resources and, actually, more specifically, the lack of connectivity. We have a lot of farm communities, poor families, but also, even families that have

some resources, where they live, they can't even physically get the Internet, for example. (T6, 7-10)

While Principal Ryan correlated the lack of connectivity with poverty and a family's lack of resources, Principal Jackson saw it as more of a geographic issue. He reported, "There's Internet connection issues, not necessarily because of income or socioeconomic status, though that is one factor. But the biggest factor is simply where we are, geographically, is further away from more populated areas" (T3, 44-46).

An inability to access the Internet from home proved to be a significant barrier to student learning, particularly as American schools transitioned to remote learning during the pandemic. This lack of geographic connectivity was also highlighted in detail as a significant barrier to student achievement. The next subtheme outlines how those geographic issues negatively impacted overall student performance.

Geographical Challenges. During the interviews, the principals discussed the geographic disadvantages that come with leading rural secondary schools. As outlined in Research Question 1, the principals reported the importance of encouraging the heart with students to build personal connections. They noted that this lack of personal interaction could often be a detriment to student success. They stated that when students' homes were located a significant distance from the school, as is the case in rural districts, students may face difficulties. Principal Dollinger stated that the geographic vastness often led to students missing opportunities such as involvement in extracurriculars. She said, "transportation, for example, is a barrier when it comes to kids participating in extracurricular activities or even just our daily runs, especially with COVID where we have to kind of socially distance the kids on the buses" (T2, 13-15). Not having students

on campus limits student opportunities to build connections with staff members. Principal O'Brien echoed a similar issue in her district. With family homes being located a significant distance from the school, students spend vast amounts of time in transit. She said: "sometimes you might look at a bus and there might be three kids on it. But you still have to go an hour and 15-minute round trip to get this one student home" (T5, 165-167). She even detailed perilous travels, "Being a parent, I would never put my kid on a bus. There's two, I mean, it's a two-lane road, and it's either you can get hit, or you want to be in a ditch" (T5, 158-159). Within this narrative, Principal O'Brien outlined the perceived danger of district transportation traveling on narrow country roads. These geographic and transportation challenges provided a significant barrier to student success. Not only did it make it difficult for students to get to school, but it made it harder for school personnel to visit families.

When discussing the ability to meet in person with students to refocus them, celebrate successes, and encourage the heart, Principal Dollinger discussed how geographical challenges could impede those conversations. She stated:

I'm going to go and do some home visits on some kids that I'm concerned about. I made sure I at least chunked the kids in one geographical area, so I could get the best bang for my buck. It's such a simple thing to think about, but I wanted to get to this one kid's house. And I'm like, "that is not going to happen today." I know I can go to this part of our district and, really, I can get to probably four or five houses, where if I wanted to get to this kid, I'd have to maybe only go to two. (T2, 217-222)

Given the geographic vastness of the district, it limited the number of students that Principal Dollinger could connect with during a specific time period, and given the size of the district, this lack of ability to make a personal connection was identified as a significant problem for various principals who participated in the study. Without the face-to-face interactions, it became difficult for the secondary school principals to build a personal connection.

The principals stated the difficulties that they encountered when leading rural school districts. The geographical disadvantage also led them to reporting challenges related to internet connectivity, staffing, and collaboration. With small staff sizes and neighboring schools located a significant distance away, the principals reported that collaboration was difficult or nonexistent. The next theme details the role of the secondary school principals in high-needs rural districts and the numerous responsibilities they must assume in their professional roles.

“Everything Is on My Shoulders.” This theme details the multiple obligations that come with a limited administrative and instructional staff often seen in high-needs rural districts. Rural schools inherently have fewer students than urban schools, which is due to the decreased population density of families in the district’s geographic boundaries. As a result of lower student enrollment numbers, the number of staff members in these districts is also considerably less. When discussing difficulties that the principals encountered in their existing roles, several of the principals identified staffing as a significant barrier to success.

During the interviews, the principals discussed their involvement in all aspects of the educational process. They described how they wore multiple hats as leaders, often

working outside of the typical job description. Principal O'Brien outlined the differences she experienced coming from a larger district to her existing role as a small, rural principal. She stated that "everything is on my shoulders" (T5, 14). She was responsible for a more extensive variety of responsibilities with fewer administrative colleagues as support. This lack of colleagues made it difficult to enable others to act, as there were no other administrative peers. Principal Ryan described these additional job responsibilities when discussing a staffing vacancy in her district. When the special education director moved on to another position, Principal Ryan stated, "And so, one of the things in this past year is [that the elementary principal] and I, we have put on the additional hat of overseeing the special ed department this year" (T6, 339-340). During the uncertainty of a global pandemic, this additional job duty significantly increased Principal Ryan's responsibilities on campus. Not only did this increase what she was expected to do, but she needed to collaborate with another member of her administrative team to divide the tasks and manage them appropriately. Various other principals that were interviewed discussed a lack of administrative staffing and the role it played in their effectiveness.

It's Just Me. During the interviews, at times, the principals compared their existing staff to those in other districts. Principal Dollinger and Principal O'Brien compared their prior experiences working in larger administrative teams with their existing roles. When discussing her time at a previous district as assistant principal, Principal O'Brien described the executive team:

There was two assistant principals plus the principal. So, I think the biggest challenge for me, personally, going from that scenario to where I am currently,

it's just me. I don't have any assistant principal, I don't have a dean of students, I don't have any of that. (T5, 6–9)

With the lack of individuals in other administrative roles, those job responsibilities fell on the principal. As Principal O'Brien detailed, there often were not assistant principals or other administrators to pick up related managerial duties. Then, when vacancies opened, as Principal Ryan described, these already stretched administrators were faced with additional responsibilities. The additional responsibilities often led to stress and pressure. Principal O'Brien described the anxiety felt by both herself and one of her administrative colleagues when she stated:

I've found myself attached a little bit to the middle school principal. He's in the same boat. We're in the same. The lower campus has the middle slash high school together. So, we do try to talk a bit, but I think we feel each other's pain and that we feel a lot of pressure. (T5, 429–431)

The pressure to perform and meet students' and staff members' needs was observed by the researcher during the interviews. In three of the six interviews, the principal was interrupted by a staff member or a student. While each interview continued, this demonstrated the multiple directions that these rural secondary school principals were pulled as they met the varying needs of their students and staff.

The feeling of isolation was not solely reserved for the administrators. When describing the sense of seclusion, the research participants mentioned the lack of opportunities for staff collaboration. Principal Byrd detailed feedback that she received from staff members that “teachers felt that they weren't meeting with certain departments enough doing collaboration” (T1, 122-123). Principal Jeffrey outlined how the lack of

time together could change the culture of a school when there was significant teacher turnover. This lack of collaboration could result in difficulties cultivating a shared vision throughout the organization. When describing a recent retirement of over 25% of the teachers in his building, Principal Jeffrey mentioned that losing those “rockstar teachers” could present a potential issue moving forward. He reported:

[The retirees] were the ones that bought into the changes the most. So, when they led, the others followed. Well, now I got seven newbies because my rockstars are gone, and that has been really hard this year to really continue that. (T4, 454–457)

To combat the cultural shift, Principal Jeffrey went on to describe how he challenged the process by implementing a modification to his staff meeting schedules and procedures (Kouzes & Posner, 2017). By increasing the opportunity for staff members to collaborate and learn together, he hoped to address this issue. The lack of collaboration, coupled with significant turnover, was a weakness. Principal Jeffrey summarized by saying, “So, my teacher culture, it is definitely in flux right now, and I got to get that fixed” (T4, 473-474). By identifying this weakness, Principal Jeffrey was able to create a plan to address it accordingly.

As discussed in this section, the secondary school principals working in high-needs rural schools faced many challenges to ensuring student success. The principals detailed significant barriers associated with students’ home lives, lack of resources, and fewer staff members. Geographic difficulties, a lack of internet connectivity, and a lack of collaborative opportunities between administrators and teaching staff presented significant barriers to success. These issues also proved detrimental in building capacity among the educational community to provide students with opportunities. By challenging

the process to find creative solutions, the principals reported that they overcame some of the hurdles that secondary school principals face in high-needs rural schools. This example of transformational leadership was evident in the principals’ responses as they discussed the importance of eliminating barriers to student success. The following section discusses Research Question 3 and the themes that emerged as a result of the data collection and analysis.

Research Question 3:

From the perspective of secondary school principals in high-achieving, high-needs rural schools, how do secondary school principals address the most significant challenges to ensuring student success?

The interview questions were designed to also address the third research question. Similar to Research Questions 1 and 2, the interview protocol questions aligned as detailed in Appendix B. The themes that emerged from the participants’ responses are outlined below. Those themes are, “we have the right supports in place for our students,” “we are the epicenter of our community,” and “a lot of times, it’s just getting out of the way.” Table 4.3 shows the themes and subthemes that resulted from the data gathered during the interview and protocol questions.

Table 4.3

Research Question 3 – Themes and Subthemes

Theme	Subtheme
“We have the right supports in place for our students.”	Purposeful staffing
“We are the epicenter of our community.”	
“A lot of times it’s just getting out of the way.”	

“We Have the Right Supports In Place for Our Students.” In a school, various decisions do not have a clear right or wrong answer. Principals are expected to make these decisions and move the organization forward with thoughtful, purposeful choices.

When asked about decision-making and building-level change, Principal Ryan described her commitment “to evaluate, adjust, make sure we have the right supports in place for our students” (T6, 72-73) so that the students could be successful academically. The principals discussed an intentional focus on providing supports while eliminating the barriers to students’ success. This ability to challenge the process and search out opportunities for success was a common theme among the study’s participants. As outlined in Research Question 2, students in rural high-needs schools often have difficult home lives. Principal Byrd addressed how she challenged the process to put supports in place that helped mitigate some of those deficiencies (Kouzes & Posner, 2017). She reported:

Some of those students that don’t have homework-conducive environments, don’t have those internet resources at home, that students can work with, even [on] remote learning days. The students that struggle the most are given the opportunity where we’ll pick them up, just like a normal school day, we’ll bring them in, and they will work with all the aides and the teacher aides and stuff to get those assignments in. (T1, 64–68)

By providing additional supports for her students, Principal Byrd turned a weakness into a strength for her students. She modeled the way for her staff by bringing kids into the building where she could provide a controlled environment that better met the needs of her students (Kouzes & Posner, 2017).

Secondary school principals are responsible for scheduling their students in classes that meet state and federal mandates. Faced with COVID-19 guidelines from the Department of Health, Principal Jeffrey discussed developing a schedule that met students' needs. His belief that having students physically in the school would provide the best opportunity for success led him to committing to in-person education. He stated, "every hurdle that came down from the Department of Health we met under the assumption, and we operate per the assumption the best thing for our kids is to come to school" (T4, 69-71). While many neighboring districts were bringing students into the buildings at a limited capacity, Principal Jeffrey found ways to challenge the process in order to meet governmental guidelines to provide face-to-face instruction for his students (Kouzes & Posner, 2017).

Principal Byrd also mentioned purposeful student scheduling with a focus on student achievement. When Principal Byrd outlined the rural challenge of lacking "resources, as in you have less staff, smaller staff" (T1, 6) she chose to maximize her resources to provide opportunities for the students. She modified bus runs, scheduling, and classroom space to offer in-person instruction. In agreement with Principal Jeffrey's thoughts, Principal Byrd took significant steps to maximize in-person instruction. Principal Byrd described her ability to challenge the process through a transformational leadership lens, particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic. She noted:

We had to get real strategic. We had to split our bus runs, but by doing that, we could bring all our students in. So, that was one way that we were able to be mobile. We had to clear out classrooms and become more adaptable. We have some classrooms that are in the cafeteria because you can't bring everybody in the

cafeteria now. We have some classrooms on the stage. We have classrooms in the large group instruction room that were bigger, but to maintain the schedules, the same graduation pathways, and to be able to bring every student in, we had to get real, real creative. That was helpful. (T1, 16–22)

This commitment to providing creative solutions to ensure support for students was prevalent in various interviews. The principals shared the ways they addressed the challenges that endangered the opportunities for the students' success.

Purposeful Staffing. The principals discussed the choices they made as it pertained to staffing and how it helped them provide opportunities for the students. In rural schools, student transiency can affect staffing needs on a yearly basis. Principal Byrd outlined how she challenged the process and used creativity in meeting her students' needs (Kouzes & Posner, 2017). With a focus on addressing these staffing constraints, Principal Byrd chose to institute scheduling modifications that met the unique enrollment and academic needs of the students in her building. She reported, "I know last year, specifically, there was a bubble coming through and there was a big math need. So, then we were able to flip a whole schedule" (T1, 24-25). This student-centered approach to modifying staffing and scheduling to provide for increased student achievement was impactful in Principal Byrd's school. Principal Jeffrey described staffing modifications in his building as well. When discussing his thought process in making these changes, he spoke in-depth about the impact the change would have on student success. When analyzing state test score data, Principal Jeffrey identified an area of weakness. He described the decision to eliminate teachers from being assigned study halls and, instead, they were given a targeted Academic Intervention Services (AIS) class. Principal Jeffrey

stated his belief that using teachers as study hall monitors was “the biggest waste of a resource ever” (T4, 111). Instead, he described how he purposefully utilized teachers for intervention services to assist students struggling academically. After reallocating his staffing resources, moving teachers from study halls to AIS classes, Principal Jeffrey reported a 75% decrease in student failures. As Principal Jeffrey reflected on the staffing changes, he described how impactful the modification was on ensuring student success. This is a prime example of Principal Jeffrey enabling his teachers to act in their primary role, as educators, to meet the needs of the students (Kouzes & Posner, 2017).

Principal O’Brien outlined how good teachers can make other staff members better. She outlined an informal collaboration process that she witnessed in her school among a particular department. Principal O’Brien attributed student success to the constant efforts of her teachers. She reported that clustering teachers in a hallway allowed them to work together and share ideas. She stated, “there’s definitely a collaboration piece between within the departments and across departments as well” (T5, 411-412). Principal O’Brien noted that tapping into the teachers’ strengths was instrumental in providing a quality education for the students. Principal Jeffrey went into detail regarding how one of his high-achieving teachers impacted not only her own students but also students taking other classes. In describing this teacher, he reported, “What she did with kids, how she ran [AIS], I basically based the model off for others” (T4, 228-229). By purposefully maximizing the strengths of their staff members, the principals provided increased opportunities for student success. This collaboration helped create a shared vision among the educators to discover best practices that ultimately benefitted the students (Kouzes & Posner, 2017). Just as these principals described exhausting space,

transportation, and financial resources, they outlined the importance of maximizing the impact of quality educators.

By utilizing Kouzes and Posner's (2017) transformational leadership practices, these secondary school principals maximized their resources to provide increased opportunities for student success. The next theme that the principals described, when discussing how they addressed significant challenges to student success, was the ability to partner with the community.

“We Are the Epicenter of Our Community.” The interviewees discussed the school as the hub of the community. They routinely mentioned the involvement of their communities in the educational process. They reported the benefits of creating a partnership with families and community organizations to help students to be successful. This partnership was explained by Principal Ryan when she described the feeling when, “everyone takes pride in school, everyone just wants it to be the best from community to the people who work here, and we fight tooth and nail to make sure that happens” (T6, 256-257). Principal Byrd reinforced the ability to foster a shared vision and investment in the children when she discussed ways she partnered with parents, particularly those who needed the support (Kouzes & Posner, 2017). She reported:

We reach to the parents and the students and we say, “We would like to work with you on this.” And we have working parents and/or parents that . . . there's generational poverty in our school district and, therefore, some of the parents, they really, really care, but they don't know how to academically support them. (T1, 74–77)

Principal Byrd described the partnership as beneficial for the students. When describing the relationship, she detailed an example of how her actions modeled the way (Kouzes & Posner, 2017). She stated, “we’re going to roll up [our sleeves] and stand shoulder to shoulder” (T1, 215-216). The principals noted that this commitment to collaboration with the community ultimately benefitted the students in their academic endeavors.

In many rural districts, the school district is one of the largest employers in the area and where constituents routinely meet. Providing financial and social benefits to the citizens, the principals reported that the schools also offered an opportunity. Principal Jeffrey described how working with the community impacted the school when he stated:

We are the epicenter of our community. Anything that happens, everything that happens in this community, pretty much is going to happen at our school; whether it’s the fireman pancake supper, a play. Everything that occurs is basically through the school. (T4, 25–28)

The principals reported that this involvement also led to an investment in the success of the student body. The communities often rose to the occasion when the districts or students needed their assistance. Principal Ryan and Principal Dollinger discussed events where the community provided additional services. Principal Ryan reported that churches stepped up to provide support during the transition to remote learning. She said church organizations “provided food for our teachers, for example, on some of the virtual days. That’s going above and beyond what they already do with their backpack program or feeding communities and providing resources” (T6, 35-37). Principal Dollinger noted a similar event where the community united to support the high school seniors during the pandemic. She described, “when we shut down last year, we did

a senior parade that I know a lot of other districts did the same thing as well. And it was nice, but we got the community involved” (T2, 294-295). These partnerships helped build a sense of community in these school districts.

Principal Byrd outlined how she monopolized on these relationships with families to provide them with exposure to resources. She detailed an event “where we bring in parents to learn about different community resources that are out there” (T1, 342-343). This development of a mutually beneficial relationship between families and the school keeps people focused on helping each other, which in turn benefited the students. Principal Jackson identified how this connection could persist throughout multiple generations. He stated:

I think, in this area, one of the benefits is that I think a lot of parents graduated from this school and feel that it’s beneficial, and it’s important that their kids graduate from high school. And, so, they’re a strong part of helping students get through. (T3, 65–68)

Parents, community members, and school officials working together, in harmony, can provide a positive experience that assists in meeting the needs of students. This relationship helped the secondary school principals as they offered the best possible environment for their students. This instance of creating a shared vision that united the stakeholder groups was effective in meeting the students’ needs. The next theme that the principals shared when discussing how they addressed significant challenges was a willingness to step aside and allow others to act.

“A Lot of Times, It’s Just Getting Out of the Way.” As a secondary school principals, there is no way to be everyone at once. There are numerous managerial duties,

connecting with the community, keeping up with changes in government mandates, staff observations, and interacting with students. An effective school needs to meet student needs without the principal overseeing every action. All six principals interviewed discussed how their staff members had the confidence to act without direct oversight. The principals discussed that their leadership style enabled others to act with the best interests of the students in mind. Principals detailed how they enabled others to act, which demonstrated one of the ways they practiced transformational leadership (Kouzes & Posner, 2017). Principal Ryan put it succinctly when she stated, “for me, personally, a lot of it truly is trusting in the people that are teachers, our staff” (T6, 102). This trust empowered staff members and enhanced opportunities for students.

When discussing the abilities of his staff members, Principal Jackson described his leadership philosophy. “A lot of times, it’s just getting out of the way, that’s really important” (T3, 640). By giving his staff the freedom to make choices, take risks, and implement action, Principal Jackson found that the students were the true beneficiaries. He stated:

It’s just letting [teachers] do the good things that they do. And, that way, is what I mean by just get[ting] out of the way and let them do the good things that they’re doing, try to support them in helping students be successful in school and in their education. (T3, 644–646)

Being a supportive part of a team solution allows staff members to take an active role. Principal Jackson made a point in highlighting this to the researcher, “I hope you’ve gotten from this that we have great teachers. That’s where the work happens, that’s not

me” (T3, 635-636). By trusting in his teachers and their abilities, Principal Jackson found significant academic success for his students.

Principal O’Brien shared a similar perspective when she described her teachers. She said, “we have really, really dedicated, very strong-willed teachers that want the kids to do well” (T5, 384-385). By tapping into that sense of pride, she has found the staff members were invested in student success. Their actions were designed to benefit the students. Principal Byrd echoed that instilling a sense of pride empowered her teachers. By appealing to shared aspirations, these principals enlisted their staff members to focus on a common vision (Kouzes & Posner, 2017). She mentioned that she gave the staff a voice in the program and building-wide decisions to increase buy-in. She reported, “giving the teachers and the staff the ability to be empowered and bring their ideas to the table is probably what makes us strongest” (T1, 372-373). The ability to give up a certain amount of control had been successful for these secondary school principals.

As stated previously, when discussing the barriers to success for secondary school principals in high-needs rural schools, these principals often assumed a variety of roles. With these numerous job responsibilities, it is vital for the delegation of particular duties. When outlining that delegation, Principal Dollinger stated, “I have to trust that the teachers are going to do what they need to do, or else I would go crazy as an administrator” (T2, 182-184). When clarifying her thoughts, she stated:

There’s trust, and then there’s just turning a blind eye and not knowing what’s going on in your building. I know what’s going on in my building, but I also know that teachers feel comfortable coming to me and being like, “I got an idea I think might work, but what do you think about it?” (T2, 271–271)

Principal Dollinger clearly outlined how trust and keeping with the pulse of the school enabled others to act, as she empowered her staff to make decisions that efficiently moved the organization forward to benefit the students.

Enabling teachers to take an active role is a tactic that the principals described in a variety of ways. Principal Ryan said, “I make a point not to hover . . . because they’re professionals” (T6, 110-111). Principal Dollinger similarly stated, “my teachers know I’m not going to micromanage them” (T2, 166). At the same time, Principal Jeffrey reported, “they’re allowed to basically do anything they want as long as it’s student-centered” (T4, 389). Kouzes and Posner (2017) identified the willingness to share power and discretion as an opportunity for leaders to enable others to act. This example of transformational leadership helped the schools move forward in the best interests of the students.

Principal Byrd summarized the impact of empowering students when she described one of the most successful changes in her building. When she noticed a deficiency in math scores, it was a staff member who came up with a solution. She stated, “It doesn’t have to be my idea, or your idea, if it works, then it must be a good idea. And I think that’s probably the biggest thing” (T1, 283-284). By focusing on outcomes and the impact on student achievement, rather than organizational hierarchies, the principals reported that the organizations improved, and students were the beneficiaries.

Summary of Results

This chapter analyzed the results of the semi-structured interviews of six secondary school principals who led high-achieving, high-needs rural secondary schools in the state of New York. When discussing effective leadership practices, three

predominant themes emerged. First, the participants discussed the importance of establishing a shared vision of keeping students at the forefront of decision-making. By building genuine relationships with the students, the research participants detailed how they could make informed decisions focused on making success possible for each student in their school. Second, the principals interviewed discussed the importance of constant, consistent communication. The ability to establish open lines of communication and convey a shared set of values proved essential as the participants discussed the impact of communication on student success. Finally, the participants described the importance of finding opportunities to encourage the heart by celebrating and recognizing excellence. This emphasis on appreciation and gratitude was central in the discussion, as the principals described establishing an organizational culture of positivity.

The participants identified areas for improvement in high-needs rural secondary schools. When considering significant barriers to success, two themes emerged. First, the principals detailed the difficulties associated with students and family living situations. Initially, they discussed geographic challenges associated with living in a rural area. The participants reported that their districts were located over a large geographic area, which necessitated long commutes to and from school. The extended travel time made it challenging for students and families to return to school after hours, which led to fewer opportunities to build relationships with the staff members. Additionally, the participants detailed the lack of internet connectivity available for homes in their districts. This lack of available internet connectivity was even more of a detriment to student success during the COVID-19 pandemic as many schools transitioned to remote learning. Students who did not have access to reliable Internet because of socioeconomic or geographic factors

were disadvantaged educationally. Along with geographic factors, the participants reported feeling burdened with the various duties and demands of being a rural secondary school principal. The participants reported a lack of opportunities to collaborate with colleagues as peers because of smaller leadership teams. They stated that they often felt the job demands pulled them in multiple directions and they were frequently asked to wear many hats outside of the typical secondary school principal job duties.

In coordination with identifying obstacles to student success, the participants detailed the ways they addressed those barriers. The participants initially discussed the importance of maximizing resources. They discussed ways that they challenged the process by implementing solutions to complex problems. By prioritizing student learning, the participants found creative means to meet their organizational needs. They outlined their decisions to modify staffing, scheduling, and opportunities for collaboration. In conjunction with the idea of maximizing resources, the participants detailed how they partnered with the community to create a shared vision focused on student success. The principals described how the school was often the epicenter of these small communities, where people came together for numerous events. To capitalize on that opportunity, the participants reported various ways that they partnered with community organizations to benefit their students. Finally, the participants stated that they enabled their staff members to act in the best interest of the students. By allowing staff members to take a more active approach, the principals reported a sense of empowerment and buy-in from their employees. The participants stated that this empowerment led to increased opportunities for student success.

Chapter 5 concludes this study by interpreting the findings presented in Chapter 4. Connections to the literature are discussed, with limitations of the research outlined in detail. Additionally, possible areas of future research are detailed. Finally, current and future school personnel recommendations for potential use are discussed, particularly as they pertain to high-needs rural schools.

Chapter 5: Discussion

Introduction

New York State's high-needs rural schools consistently underperform when compared to low-needs schools across the state. With over 465,000 students annually attending rural schools, it is vital that school leaders understand the challenges and have a blueprint for addressing barriers to success. As principals play a significant role in student performance, their purposeful actions can be instrumental in increasing the opportunity of success for students (Shatzer et al., 2014). Principals that can successfully adjust their behaviors and leadership practices can see improved student outcomes, specifically for students living in poverty (Gallard et al., 2010; Klar & Brewer, 2013; Koricich & Boylan, 2019, Wieczorek & Manard, 2018). Despite that fact, there has been a lack of research on the leadership practices of successful secondary school principals in high-needs rural schools (Sebastian et al., 2019). The purpose of this study was to identify the perceived leadership practices of secondary school principals in high-achieving, high-needs rural schools. Undertaking a qualitative approach using semi-structured interviews, the researcher discussed leadership practices with six secondary school principals. The interview questions pertained to the following research questions:

1. From the perspective of secondary school principals in high-achieving, high-needs rural schools, what leadership practices are effective in supporting change?

2. From the perspective of secondary school principals in high-achieving, high-needs rural schools, what do secondary school principals identify as potential areas of improvement?
3. From the perspective of secondary school principals in high-achieving, high-needs rural schools, how do secondary school principals address the most significant challenges to ensuring student success?

Discussions about perceived best practices provided insight into the thought processes and decision-making of the research participants. Data were analyzed using Kouzes and Posner's (2017) definition of transformational leadership. Utilizing a transformational leadership framework is especially appropriate in the educational setting. Principals who demonstrate transformational leadership practices see student success in their schools at a higher rate than those who do not (Valentine & Prater, 2017). Kouzes and Posner (2017) described transformational leadership with five practices in mind. Those practices are model the way, inspire a shared vision, challenge the process, enable others to act, and encourage the heart.

The participants in this study demonstrated all five transformational leadership practices through their actions. The principals were more explicit in detailing how they inspired a shared vision, challenged the process, and enabled others to act (Kouzes & Posner, 2017). The principals described ways that they communicated their personal beliefs as they inspired a shared vision (Kouzes & Posner, 2017). They fostered an organizational commitment to improvement and pride in student success. Additionally, when discussing organizational change, the principals described how they challenged the process to find solutions to various difficulties. Instead of seeing problems as detriments,

the principals were solution-oriented. They described a creative process that moved their schools forward, committed to continuous improvement. Lastly, the principals detailed how they enabled others to act. They noted a trust in staff members that led to a feeling of empowerment. Principal Jackson put it best when he stated, “A lot of times, it’s just getting out of the way, that’s really important” (T3, 640). By utilizing the strengths of the individuals within the organization, there are increased possibilities and a greater likelihood for success (Kouzes & Posner, 2017).

In addition to the leadership practices described above, the principals noted actions that modeled the way or encouraged the heart. The research participants often tied those actions into the other three leadership practices. For example, when Principal Jeffrey noted the organizational commitment to a shared vision of putting students first, he discussed conversations with staff where he framed his decision-making process as built on a “kid-centered” approach (T4, 202). Through modeling these values, Principal Jeffrey helped create a culture focused on what was best for students. Additionally, participants described the importance of finding opportunities to encourage the heart by celebrating and recognizing excellence. This emphasis on appreciation and gratitude was central in the discussion, as the principals described establishing an organizational culture of positivity. Principal Byrd noted her commitment to positivity when she noted, “meeting adversity with a positive attitude and maintaining positivity through all the struggles” (T1, 99-101). These actions helped create a culture that was solution-oriented and committed to continuous improvement.

The ability of principals to effectively demonstrate transformational leadership practices is essential, as leaders who are skilled at implementing these practices can have a positive influence on the students and staff in their schools (Quin et al., 2015).

Implication of Findings

This study produced three key findings in response to the research questions. First, inspiring a shared vision focused on student needs is vital to success. Second, the ability of principals to challenge the process and develop creative solutions is paramount when addressing difficulties. Finally, meeting student needs takes an educational community that must be cultivated, developed, and empowered. By enabling others to act, with the best interests of the students in mind, the potential for student success is far greater in such school settings. The findings and implications are aligned with the current literature focused on principal leadership practices, particularly in high-needs rural schools. The findings and literature are connected through Kouzes and Posner's (2017) transformational leadership framework.

Finding 1:

Rural secondary school principals who inspire a shared vision focused on student needs are able to cultivate student success.

Rural secondary school principals are responsible for the academic success of the students in their schools. NYSED and the United States federal government hold principals accountable through various mandates and accountability measures. In rural schools, the principals reported having smaller leadership teams and accepting responsibility for a wide range of items. The research participants routinely described how they were pulled in several directions and were responsible for students' academic,

social, and emotional needs. These high-achieving rural secondary school principals were in charge of the day-to-day activities, curriculum development, student management, and fidelity to mandates. To make the best decision possible, the principals noted a purposeful focus on prioritizing student needs. Principals were able to build a shared vision of collective responsibility for all members within the organization. This shared belief is paramount in leading a high-achieving school.

Given that a school's staff is made up of individuals with different backgrounds and perspectives, the principals noted the importance of developing a shared vision. Communicating the vision at staff meetings, celebrations, and shared decision-making made the organizational values evident. By reinforcing these beliefs in emails, teacher observations, and collective discussions, the participants fortified these beliefs throughout the organizations. This ability, or as a result of these actions, allowed for shared excitement in future possibilities and the opportunity for success (Kouzes & Posner, 2017). As a result, the staff members' actions became purposeful and intentional. The collective expectation became a student-center learning community. The research participants stated that this approach was vital in a rural setting, as most rural schools benefit from smaller student populations. These smaller populations allowed stakeholders to know each other on a personal level. This allowed the leaders to understand others' beliefs, values, vision, and aspirations. It ensured that everyone communicated in a common language, with a productive dialogue, focused on future possibilities. Staff members could address needs with individual students and provide the necessary resources to increase the likelihood of future success. They developed individualized

student plans. The staff member's actions traced back to the shared vision and expectation of focusing on student success.

When the rural secondary school principals communicated a shared vision, they fostered a common culture within their organizations. This culture had a positive impact on students and staff. When the principals communicated organizational priorities and the expectation that student success was more than a goal, but rather a collective responsibility, the school-wide culture changed, as staff members became partners with the students in their educational journeys. Barriers to success became obstacles instead of stop signs. The schools became communities that existed for the benefit of each student. Relationships were built that transcended difficult times, and the culture became a catalyst for success. Student success became the expectation, with decisions and actions reflecting that shared organizational goal.

The rural secondary school principals communicated the importance of celebrating accomplishments to help establish a positive organizational culture. The principals not only articulated a shared vision but also marked the successes realized from the implementation of those visions. This ability to commemorate events aligned with organizational goals helped reinforce expectations. The principals highlighted the importance of establishing a culture of positivity—especially during difficult times. When staff members encountered issues when educating children, especially those in poverty, the participants highlighted the benefits of a culture of positivity permeating the organization. This culture prevented staff from becoming discouraged or burned out. The ability of these rural secondary school principals to articulate shared vision ultimately supported a team focused on meeting each student's needs.

Transformational leadership has proven to be effective in a variety of settings and professions. In health care, volunteer organizations, international business, and informational technology, transformational leadership practices have positively affected organizational outcomes (Afsar et al., 2014; Henker et al., 2015; Mittal & Dhar, 2015; Posner, 2015; Saravo et al., 2017). In schools, transformational leadership has proven to be vital in ensuring a shared vision and a collective focus on student success (Davis, 2015). In schools where staff members view principals as exceptionally skilled at inspiring a shared vision, student achievement is higher than those schools with less capable leaders (Quin et al., 2015).

Principals in high-achieving, high-needs rural schools are committed to a focus on academic achievement, a culture dedicated to a shared vision, and the ability to build on positive relationships (Chenoweth & Theokas, 2013; Klar & Brewer, 2013; Lindahl, 2014; Moolenaar et al., 2010). A focus on positivity and the possibility for student success are critical in high-needs schools. When staff members demonstrate a defeatist attitude built on negative perceptions of student abilities, students perform poorly on state assessments. Lindahl (2014) found that the best way to adjust teacher perceptions was by improving the administrator's leadership practices (Lindahl, 2014). When principals are faced with a negative school culture, it is vital they take action. By purposefully emphasizing student and staff accomplishments, a school culture can improve. The ability of the school principal to unite stakeholders behind a shared vision results in increased outcomes and the strengthening of the educational community (Reyes & Garcia, 2014). Principals who are adept at establishing an authentic shared vision of

student success are more likely to see improved academic achievement by their students (Carbaugh et al., 2018; Lindahl, 2014).

The findings align with the research and observations of the research participants. Rural secondary school principals who are able to establish a shared vision for their students' success are more likely to see improved student performance (Quin et al., 2015). Those who couple a shared vision with a positive school culture are more likely to guide high-achieving school communities.

Finding 2:

The ability of rural principals to challenge the process and develop creative solutions is paramount when addressing difficulties in rural school settings.

When discussing the daily responsibility of guiding schools forward, the rural secondary school principals described varying issues and challenges. The principals reported the importance of identifying potential barriers to success. After doing so, successful rural secondary school principals find creative solutions where their peers do not. This was evidenced by Principal Byrd's ability to maximize her school's available space (T1, 16-22) and when Principal Jeffrey detailed changes to staffing assignments (T4, 111). This ability to challenge the process and mitigate shortcomings sets these leaders and their schools apart.

The primary challenges noted by the rural secondary school principals in this study were poverty, lack of resources, difficulties partnering with families, geographical issues, and a lack of collaboration. By acknowledging the challenges and approaching them with a problem-solving mindset, the principals found resolutions that ultimately allowed for student success. When the leaders identified these issues, they discussed

opportunities to challenge the process by identifying areas of improvement and organizational growth. As Principal Ryan stated, it was essential “to evaluate, adjust, make sure we have the right supports in place for our students” (T6, 72-73). The principals were not content with the notion that many schools face similar issues. These leaders focused on embracing the challenges as an occasion to innovate and problem-solve to ensure newfound opportunities for success.

The principals identified poverty as negatively affecting student achievement. They reported that students who lived in poverty faced various disadvantages. The principals often noted that families were unavailable to provide academic assistance or were not knowledgeable in the subject matter. The principals reported a desire to provide supports at school, because they were often not available at home. To address this issue, the principals challenged the process by modifying the daily schedule of their schools. They assisted students with their educational needs by incorporating additional time during the school day. During the COVID-19 pandemic, the principals detailed the hardship rural school students encountered, specifically those living in poverty. With the transition to remote learning, internet connectivity became a necessity. The principals noted the difficulties resulting from a lack of internet connectivity in rural areas. The principals chose to challenge the process and reimagine ways to educate their students, and they reported a variety of modifications that addressed student needs. School personnel delivered internet hotspots and materials to homes, schools opened using a hybrid schedule to provide services, and principals made home visits to provide personalized assistance. By creatively challenging the process, these rural secondary

school principals found solutions to once-in-a-generation issues while meeting the individualized needs of their students.

Additionally, the rural secondary school principals discussed the difficulties of leading organizations with few administrative staff members. As a result of low student enrollments, there were considerably fewer administrators in their organizations than in larger schools in the state. The lack of administrative colleagues limited opportunities for collaboration and growth. To address this issue, the principals connected with colleagues in similar roles outside their individual buildings. Building a network with principals from other buildings or other organizations proved effective as administrators reported a perception of growth through these collegial conversations.

With an understanding of the potential for professional isolation, the principals challenged the process to ensure that their staff members did not have the same feelings. The principals reported modifying schedules, assignments, and contractual duties to provide more time for staff-wide collaboration. They strategically relocated staff members to different rooms to encourage formal and informal conversations with peers. Additionally, professional development days and staff meetings were adjusted to allow colleagues to work together and share best practices. By identifying the issues and challenging the process, the principals found creative solutions that met the staff members' needs.

When principals challenge the process and display effective leadership, students often outperform schools with inferior leaders (Kouzes & Posner, 2017; Shatzer et al., 2014; Valentine & Prater, 2017). Rural school leaders are more likely to see student success when they are able to identify rural student problems and investigate ways to

mitigate the issues (Lindahl, 2014; Reyes & Garcia, 2014). The rural secondary school principals routinely identified a lack of resources as one key barrier to success. The principals that challenged the process and made modifications in the distribution of resources maximized students' opportunities and saw increased academic outcomes (Sanchez et al., 2017; Wieczorek & Manard, 2018). The research participants discussed scheduling modifications and purposeful staffing to better utilize their resources also discussed ways that they enabled their staff to act to meet the student populations' unique needs. These principals capitalized on staff members' strengths to provide a high-quality education for their students (Schafft, 2016; Stewart & Matthews, 2015).

Another factor discussed by the participants was the limited number of colleagues in rural districts. The rural secondary school principals discussed a feeling of isolation and lack of collegial support. As a result, the principals challenged the process and looked outside of their building to find peers. By collaborating with peers from other schools, principals were provided with professional growth opportunities that were not available within their organizations (Chenoweth & Theokas, 2013; Klocko, 2019; Sanchez et al., 2017). When addressing the lack of collaborative opportunities for staff, the principals challenged the process to increase peer-to-peer collaboration opportunities. The dedicated focus on growth and sharing best practices helped develop a professional learning community committed to improving instruction (Chenoweth & Theokas, 2013; Klar & Brewer, 2013; Leithwood et al., 2010).

This finding is supported by the statements made during the interviews by the rural secondary school principals and the relevant research available on the topic. As summarized by Principal Ryan on her ability "to evaluate, adjust, make sure we have the

right supports in place for our students” (T6, 72-73), transformational leaders can mitigate barriers to success. When the principals identified obstacles, and challenged the process, they were more likely to see improved student achievement.

Finding 3:

Meeting students’ needs takes an educational community that must be nurtured, developed, and empowered.

With the variety of responsibilities rural secondary school principals face, they must cultivate an educational community focused on meeting student needs (Sanchez et al., 2017). To be effective, this community must be able to complete tasks without continuous, direct principal oversight. The principals in this study routinely described teachers’ ability to perform tasks without being micromanaged. When principals have confidence in their staff members’ skills and decision-making abilities, they are comfortable delegating responsibilities. The principals in this study noted a trust that staff members would make decisions that were best for students and aligned with the organizational vision. As Principal Jeffrey stated when speaking about his teaching staff, “they’re allowed to basically do anything they want as long as it’s student-centered” (T4, 389). This trust empowered staff members in their professional duties. When the rural school principals enabled others to act with the best interests of the students in mind, the potential for student success improved.

Developing an efficient, supportive team allows principals to tap into staff members’ expertise (Musselman et al., 2014). The principals routinely stated that the teachers in their schools genuinely cared for and knew their students on a personal level. When the staff members identified an opportunity to address students’ needs, they took

action. The principals stated that this was possible because they had built an organizational culture of individual empowerment. The teachers were able to act and notify the administration later. This immediacy assists in addressing and correcting issues before they become systemic. The pride and buy-in that the teachers experienced from these actions helped foster a culture focused on collective responsibility.

The principals routinely discussed a productive relationship with the community as an asset to meeting student needs. These relationships made everyone stronger as the parties committed to a shared vision focused on student success. Through a cohesive and robust partnership, the parties collaborated to provide opportunities for student success. In these rural communities, the school was the epicenter of activities. The principals noted school officials and community members developed a shared sense of pride. The ability of the school administration to partner with community members and enable them to take purposeful action helped create a sense of ownership in student outcomes. The principals made a point of describing the relationships as partnerships, with the parties standing shoulder-to-shoulder. When the school was in need, the community stepped up. When the community was in need, the school district rose to the occasion. By working together, both parties benefitted and enjoyed improved outcomes (Masumoto & Brown-Welty, 2009). The principals described how partnership was especially valuable when leading schools in high-poverty communities. The schools, churches, and other neighborhood organizations supported students in need, provided resources, and celebrated successes.

The principals in this study detailed the positive effects when families, schools, and community organizations work cohesively toward shared goals. They stated that

students were the greatest beneficiaries when all stakeholder groups had an active and purposeful role. A genuine and intentional partnership with the community helped create a culture focused on student success.

The ability of principals to demonstrate transformational leadership practices that benefit all members of a school community is vital to an organization's success (Kouzes & Posner, 2017; Moolenaar et al., 2010; Shea, 2020). The staff members reported feeling supported and empowered by the administration, which enabled them to act. The staff members took risks and were creative in their actions, ultimately benefiting students. By including parents and community members in the educational process, student performance continued to improve (Masumoto & Brown-Welty, 2009).

Teacher performance significantly improves when principals implement the elements of transformational leadership (Metz et al., 2019; Stosich, 2017). In high-achieving, high-needs rural schools, principals created a positive environment with increased buy-in and a shared vision among stakeholder groups. This ability to foster a shared vision dedicated to student achievement is especially vital in rural high-needs schools (Chenoweth & Theokas, 2013). School leaders who establish a feeling of shared responsibility foster a collaborative and inviting culture. Principals who build strong relationships with stakeholders help establish the collaborative culture necessary for maximizing success (Bouchamma, 2012; Klar & Brewer, 2013). These actions enable staff members to act and capitalize on individuals' talents, resulting in expanded educational opportunities for students (Lindahl, 2014; Musselman et al., 2014; Masumoto & Brown-Welty, 2009). Leaders that effectively demonstrate transformational leadership practices increase the likelihood of success within their organization (Quin et al., 2015).

Limitations

The scope of this study was limited to six rural secondary school principals who led rural high-needs schools in New York State. The researcher used a qualitative approach as semi-structured interviews occurred with each of the participants. The findings of the study cannot be universally applied to make assumptions about all principal leadership practices in K–12 schools (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

Additionally, for the secondary school principals to be selected for this study, they were required to lead high-achieving, high-needs rural schools. Urban and suburban school principals were not a part of this study, nor were primary, elementary, or middle school leaders. Finally, the research participants led high-achieving, high-needs rural schools as defined by the NYSED (2019). The principals who led schools in other needs resource categories were not a part of this study.

Recommendations for Future Research

The findings of this study detail the importance of leadership practices of secondary school principals in rural, high-needs, high-performing schools. This study used qualitative data gained by analyzing the principals' responses to various questions, revealing perceptions of their own leadership. Future research can continue to build on this study in a variety of ways.

First, it is recommended that similar research questions are asked of teachers in rural, high-needs, high-performing schools. Speaking to teachers, either individually or in focus groups, and gathering teachers' perspectives of principals' leadership behaviors would provide further context to this study's findings. The results would provide

additional data that would be helpful for principals regarding their behaviors as viewed through the lens of their staff members.

Second, it is recommended that a similar study is conducted with rural principals at the middle, elementary, and primary school grade levels. By using similar questions, data analysis, and a transformational leadership lens, the findings can provide greater depth on the influence of rural principals as a whole. These findings, coupled with the findings of this study, would give a greater context to the impact of rural principal leadership practices on a broader scale and across levels.

The third recommendation for future research would be to complete a longer-term comparative analysis of the rural secondary schools that earned Recognition School status during the time period of this study. Future research could analyze any changes in student performance and compare that information with changes in principals and leadership behaviors. This information could potentially provide context on the sustainability of principals' transformational leadership practices on overall student achievement.

Recommendations for Practice

As this study shows, successful principals often use transformational leadership practices to guide their schools on a path of academic success. The research revealed commonalities among the rural secondary school principals as they led high-achieving, high-needs rural schools. The following recommendations detail the use of Kouzes and Posner's (2017) transformational leadership framework as a guide to opportunities for improvement for current and future school leaders. The following recommendations will help school leaders use these leadership practices, ultimately benefiting their educational

communities. Additional recommendations will outline the importance of leadership development programs to infuse transformational leadership practices into their training as they develop and nurture future school leaders.

Recommendations for Rural Secondary School Principals

Principals who are skilled in transformational leadership practices can guide schools to meet the unique challenges of educating today's students (Kearney et al., 2012; Quin et al., 2015; Yang, 2014). Effective principals demonstrate the ability to grow their organizations and help to develop students and staff members to make them more effective in meeting student needs. Research in the field agrees with the study's findings that teacher performance benefits from principals who purposefully use transformational leadership practices such as inspiring a shared vision, challenging the process, and enabling others to act. (Metz et al., 2019; Stosich, 2017). Therefore, it is essential for principals to make a concerted effort to cultivate these leadership skills (Kouzes & Posner, 2017; Masumoto & Brown-Welty, 2009). As a building-level leader told researchers when discussing the impact of his transformational leadership practices, "I've got the capacity to allow for that metamorphosis to occur" (Metz et al., 2019, p. 399). A disproportionate percentage of high-needs rural schools struggle to meet student needs; therefore, it is necessary for principals to lead a metamorphosis and make the changes required for academic success. This change begins with the principal becoming a purposeful practitioner of Kouzes and Posner's (2017) transformational leadership practices.

First, rural secondary school principals should establish a shared vision dedicated to student success. By communicating a shared vision in high-needs rural schools,

principals foster the conditions necessary for positive student outcomes (Chenoweth & Theokas, 2013). Actions and decisions should be communicated to stakeholders with this set of priorities in mind. It is the principal's responsibility to cultivate an atmosphere that promotes this common purpose (Carbaugh et al., 2018; Lindahl, 2014). After clearly defining their own beliefs, principals should collaborate with members of their organizations to develop a shared vision. Then, through teamwork and partnership, the school community should create a collective vision focused on student achievement (Kouzes & Posner, 2017). Uniting students and staff members through a common purpose is vital in focusing all parties toward a common goal of student achievement. Prior research echoes this study's findings that successful leaders demonstrate an aptitude for creating organizations committed to a shared vision (Day et al., 2016; Heck & Hallinger, 2014). A commitment to building a culture united toward a common mission helps schools maximize individual effort and improves the opportunity for student success (Carbaugh et al., 2018, Davis, 2015; Reyes & Garcia, 2014). By building a collaborative culture committed to a shared vision, rural high-needs secondary school principals can increase the likelihood of student success (Valentine & Prater, 2011).

Second, principals need to identify creative solutions that address the unique problems in rural high-needs secondary schools. Kouzes and Posner (2017) defined the ability of leaders to challenge norms and look outside the box for solutions as challenging the process. Rural high-needs students face challenges caused by poverty, lack of resources, and geographic factors that prove to be significant barriers to success (Logan et al., 2012; Stewart & Matthews, 2015). Rather than ignoring these issues, principals who lead high-achieving rural schools find productive solutions that allow their students

to overcome the inherent disadvantages (Klar & Brewer, 2013; Ladd, 2012; Shatzer et al., 2014). The principals in the study routinely detailed how they found solutions to problems that vexed their counterparts. During the COVID-19 pandemic, they noted the various ways they kept in contact with students, modified practices, and addressed difficulties. The principals described changing teacher schedules, transportation options, school hours, and other modifications that met student needs. These actions agree with the research that states that principals' ability to challenge the process and adjust improves the likelihood of student success (Sanchez et al., 2017; Wieczorek & Manard, 2018).

Lastly, rural secondary school principals need to unleash the supports available from staff members and the community. The principals that enabled others to act with student success in mind were able to mitigate the deficiencies often seen in high-needs rural schools. The sheer amount of varied professional responsibilities makes it extremely difficult for secondary school principals in high-needs rural schools to be successful without significant support (Sanchez et al., 2017; Wieczorek & Manard, 2018). In agreement with the research, the principals in this study detailed their abilities to build supportive and fruitful partnerships with their school and external community stakeholder groups. The principals who effectively built relationships with community agencies were rewarded with improved student outcomes (Masumoto & Brown-Welty, 2009; Reyes & Garcia, 2014). By building relationships, and enabling others to act, the principals built supportive networks committed to shared success. Accommodations provided by outside agencies are particularly vital when providing additional assistance in rural schools (Musselman et al., 2014). Strengthening community partnerships by utilizing a

transformational, collaborative approach allows secondary school principals in high-needs schools to ensure additional opportunities for their students (Musselman et al., 2014; Watson-Vandiver & Wiggan, 2020). Similarly, principals must enable staff members to act without direct oversight. This empowerment requires trust, training, and shared responsibility. Principals that instituted PLCs in their schools routinely saw positive results (Sanchez et al., 2017). The ability of principals to enable staff members to act and collaborate on best practices designed to enrich instruction was vital in ensuring improved student outcomes (Archer, 2012; Klar & Brewer, 2013; Leithwood et al., 2010). Principals must trust their staff members to take action and support them as they take risks. By doing so, the principals will build capacity in their staff members, ultimately benefiting students.

Recommendations for Rural Leadership Preparation Programs

In accordance with ESSA, school districts are responsible for providing a quality education to all students. These opportunities include minority subgroups, such as students living in poverty (ESSA, 2015). If school districts underperform on established benchmarks, they are in danger of losing government funding. This is especially important in rural schools as they are disproportionately reliant upon state and federal funds (ESSA, 2015; Strange et al., 2012). As a result, rural areas must develop and invest in leadership preparation programs designed to cultivate individuals with the specific skills necessary to lead rural schools. These programs must produce school administrators who are willing and able to address the unique needs of rural students, particularly those living in poverty. It is essential that faculty members in these programs understand best practices. Current and future rural school leader principals can develop the competence

necessary to address the specific needs of rural students (Klar & Brewer, 2013; Leithwood et al., 2012; Mulford et al., 2008). Rural school leaders can begin collaborating and developing professional communities focused on leadership that positively impacts student success (Koricich & Boylan, 2019). In agreement with the findings from this study, research states that principals are more successful when they utilize transformational leadership practices (Quin et al., 2015; Sun & Leithwood, 2012). Schools need to have competent, transformational leaders, as the effects of their actions can last for generations (Gallard et al., 2010; Koricich & Boylan, 2019; Leithwood et al., 2012).

Rural school districts have taken action to address the identification and cultivation of future leaders. When rural North Carolina schools discovered a lack of quality administrative candidates, they built a preparatory program designed to address the unique needs of developing and training future leaders. The goal of the programs are to increase the capacity of leaders as they lead their schools through change, with the focus of meeting student needs (UNCG, 2017; Spencer, n.d.). This leadership development program can be used as a model in areas that do not currently have programs or that have programs that do not address the specific needs of rural school districts. It is crucial to effectively train administrators because when educators replicate quality leadership practices and strategies, they give students the greatest opportunity to succeed (Klar & Brewer, 2013; Musselman et al., 2014).

Conclusion

Federal mandates state that school districts are responsible for educating all 50 million students who attend school each year in the United States (ESSA, 2015; NCES,

2019b). Rural high-needs students routinely underperform when compared to students in other demographic groups in various categories, including graduation rates (Cornell University, 2020). School district leaders are accountable for economically disadvantaged students with a disproportionate number of rural students living in poverty (NYSED, 2020c). This is especially important for rural administrators, as principals face substantial difficulties when leading schools, particularly high-needs schools. Rural principals struggle to attract and maintain qualified staff to guide students in the quest for academic success (Biddle & Azano, 2016; Brownell et al., 2018; Chetty et al., 2016; Wood et al., 2013). Poverty also affects the ability of rural students to learn. Children living in poverty receive less support from family members and the surrounding community (Devenish, 2017; Habibullah & Ashraf, 2013; Ruiz et al., 2018). This deficiency can put students behind their peers at very young ages. Rural school principals need to understand and address disadvantages as they lead students in high-needs rural schools (Chetty et al., 2016; Nikulina et al., 2011; Walsh & Theodorakakis, 2017). Given these discrepancies in student performance, significant research has been conducted to identify the issues facing rural school leaders. Additional research is needed that will provide a voice to rural school communities as they grapple with improving the educational system to meet the needs of the students for generations to come.

Researchers have often considered the effects of leadership practices on student performance. As principals significantly impact student performance, effective leadership practices have been studied at length (Leithwood et al., 2012; Sun & Leithwood, 2015). Transformational leadership has proven to be effective in improving struggling organizations in a variety of fields, including education (Afsar et al., 2014; Henker et al.,

2015; Kouzes & Posner, 2017; Mittal & Dhar, 2015; Saravo et al., 2017). These transformational leadership practices have particularly positive impacts on student achievement and learning (Davis, 2015; Kearney et al., 2012; Musselman et al., 2014; Mulford et al., 2008; Valentine & Prater, 2017). Researchers have shown that principals who create a positive culture, focus on relationships, and maximize teachers' strengths realize an increase in student academic success. (Moolenaar et al., 2010; Musselman et al., 2014; Davis, 2015; Quin et al., 2015).

Previous research has focused on the impact of principals on student performance, specifically within high-needs urban schools (Ruiz et al., 2018; Watson-Vandiver & Wiggan, 2020). There have been numerous studies that analyzed the impact of principals in urban settings, as well as in elementary high-needs rural schools. However, the literature lacks significant research regarding the impact of principals in high-needs rural secondary schools (Sebastian et al., 2019). High-achieving rural secondary school principals are an understudied demographic in academic research (Schafft, 2016). When considering the unique environment of rural high-needs districts, it is critical to identify highly effective principals' practices in these settings to ensure academic success and improved student achievement. Principals in high-needs schools who demonstrate certain leadership practices are rewarded with high-quality student performance. In high-performing schools, principals prioritize academic achievement, collaborate with the staff to determine best practices, and set high expectations (Chenoweth & Theokas, 2013; Klar & Brewer, 2013; Reyes & Garcia, 2014; Wilcox, 2013). Additionally, the culture and climate in the schools in this study was described as positive and supportive. Principals that foster a welcoming and caring school community find that their students

outperformed schools that did not have similar cultures (Carbaugh et al., 2018; Lindahl, 2014; Reyes & Garcia, 2014). The ability to build relationships with staff and community members also produces positive results. Building collaborative, cohesive partnerships maximizes efforts and resources, which ultimately benefits students (Musselman et al., 2014; Watson-Vandiver & Wiggan, 2020). Lastly, principals see drastic improvements when they identify problems and lead purposeful change (Chenoweth & Theokas, 2013; DeMatthews, 2020).

To investigate the practices of highly effective principals in high-needs rural schools, this study utilized a qualitative methodology to provide semi-structured interviews to six research participants who led secondary, rural, high-achieving Recognition Schools, as outlined by New York State (NYSED, 2019). During semi-structured interviews, high-achieving, rural secondary school principals were asked a variety of questions. The topics of questions included challenges and benefits of leading rural schools, the change process, leadership vision, and best practices. The questions were developed with three research questions in mind. Each question was designed to uncover the secondary school principals' perceived leadership practices in one of the three areas. The research participants discussed their actions that supported change, their processing identifying areas of improvement, and their actions to address challenges. At the conclusion of the interviews, the transcripts were coded, and data analysis ensued, as is appropriate with qualitative studies (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Flick, 2018). The coding process was substantial and included various methods. Initially, a priori codes were used to identify transformational leadership practices as defined by Kouzes and Posner (2017). Then, a series of open coding ensued using topics and phrases

communicated by the rural secondary school principals. Next, the researcher analyzed and categorized responses, identifying emergent themes (Saldaña, 2016). Lastly, axial coding was utilized in conjunction with the transformational leadership framework to organize data into broader themes (Miles et al., 2020; Saldaña, 2016).

The principals who participated in this study met specific characteristics that limited the sample size. The six participants all led high-needs rural secondary schools that were awarded Recognition School status, as identified by New York State. The participants in this study identified barriers to academic success in their high-needs rural secondary schools. Geographic challenges, including a lack of reliable internet connectivity and long commutes over a large geographic area, led to a lack of access to the resources necessary for students and families to appropriately engage in their academic programming. Additionally, the participants reported feeling burdened by the additional duties required as they took on multiple roles on their leadership teams in these lower population, rural districts. These barriers were addressed by partnering with the community to create a shared vision and maximize resources. To ensure their organizational needs were met, the participants fostered a sense of empowerment in their staff to develop a culture that prioritized student learning. It was imperative that staff be allowed to take an active approach in the organizations.

Three key findings were identified through a thorough analysis of the themes and subthemes identified during the coding process. First, for students to succeed, it is imperative that the principal inspire a shared vision focused on student needs. Rural secondary school principals who can unify their organizations by focusing on a collective mission see increased positive results for students. Second, a transformative principal

must be able to challenge the process and develop creative solutions. With the unique challenges faced by secondary school principals in high-needs rural schools, it is essential that they find imaginative paths forward that maximize resources and mitigate issues. Third, students thrive when their educational community is cultivated, unified, and empowered. Principals that enable staff and community members to play a supportive role in meeting student needs are more likely to see positive outcomes. Secondary school principals in high-needs rural schools are more successful when they demonstrate transformational leadership practices, specifically by inspiring a shared vision, challenging the process, and enabling others to act.

Additional research that builds on this study's findings could benefit rural secondary school leaders. Analyzing the perspectives of principal leadership practices from a teacher's view would allow for a deeper understanding of the impact of the transformative behaviors. Also, this research solely focused on secondary school principals. A study of elementary and primary school principals' leadership practices, conducted with similar procedures, research questions, and framework, would provide additional information. Any potential commonalities could prove useful when creating leadership development programs or identifying best practices. Lastly, a long-term study could highlight the impacts of transformative leadership on an organization and student achievement over a greater scope of time. This research could provide details on the enduring impact of transformative leadership practices on high-needs rural schools.

As executive leaders, secondary school principals have the responsibility to move their organizations forward. They are tasked not only with leading a school community but influencing generations of children. When schools have quality leaders, they increase

the likelihood of academic success, improving the opportunities for students as they move throughout their academic and professional lives (Bouchamma, 2012; Chetty et al., 2016; Klar & Brewer, 2013). Principals have a tremendous amount of influence on the potential success of the schools they lead. Their impact is felt throughout the educational community, with principals connected to various stakeholder groups (Leithwood et al., 2012). High-needs rural schools routinely underperform when compared to other schools (Cornell University, 2020; NYSED, 2019). Therefore, it is especially vital for high-needs rural schools to attract, train, and develop leaders who can address the disadvantages and find solutions that meet student needs. Rural principals are some of the most influential individuals in rural communities (Sanchez et al., 2017; Wieczorek & Manard, 2018). With this potential for impact comes responsibility and opportunity. Principals who effectively demonstrate transformational leadership practices significantly impact their organizations, providing improved educational opportunities for students (Davis, 2015; Valentine & Prater, 2017). Cultivating opportunities for secondary school principals to grow and improve their leadership skills is critical as high-needs rural schools attempt to provide high-quality education for their students. By improving secondary school principal leadership practices, we improve our students' schools and their opportunities for future success.

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Appendix A

Interview Protocol

Thank you for meeting with me today; I appreciate you taking the time out of your schedule. I will give a brief overview of the interview process, and you will have an opportunity to ask questions before we begin. I am currently a doctoral candidate in the St. John Fisher College Executive Leadership Ed.D. program. I am researching the perceptions of rural secondary school principals in high-poverty schools.

You were selected for this study because your school meets several specific criteria set forth for this study. You are the principal of a New York State public school recognized as a Recognition School in either school years 2017–2018 or 2018–2019, or both. Additionally, all participants are principals in high-needs, rural secondary schools.

The interview should last approximately 45 to 60 minutes. The contents of your interview will remain confidential. Your name and the name of your school or district will not be shared, and there will not be any identifiable characteristics shared publicly. I will be interviewing secondary school principals from other New York State schools, as well, which will help to keep all information confidential.

Upon receiving your permission, I will begin recording our Zoom meeting. The recording is for my records and will not be made public. The files will be categorized, and a coding system will be used to keep the identity of all participants confidential.

Again, I appreciate you taking the time out of your schedule to meet with me today. Do you have any questions before we begin?

Interview Questions

1. As secondary school principal what challenges and benefits do you see in leading a rural school?
 - a. Have these challenges or benefits changed over time?
 - b. As principal of a rural school, what makes your school unique?
2. Tell me about the change process in your school?
 - a. What does the change process look like in daily practice?
 - b. Can you elaborate on the change processes relating to academics and to school culture? Do they overlap at all or are they distinct initiatives?
 - c. What systems, if any, are in place to measure the success of these changes?
3. When attempting to implement change, who else is involved?
 - a. How do you encourage the acceptance of any proposed changes?
 - b. Who takes on the responsibility to ensure change is implemented with fidelity? How is that determined?
4. What is your leadership vision?
 - a. How do you ensure that the vision for your school is shared among members of the organization?
 - b. As a rural school principal with positive student results, how were you able to overcome the odds against success?
5. What sets your leadership apart?
 - a. Are there specific strategies you put into place that can minimize the challenges for rural high schools?

6. How do you collaborate with others in your role as an educational leader?
 - a. How do you build effective relationships with others?
 - b. What are the results of those collaboration?
7. How do you ensure that others are confident and comfortable taking actions to benefit the organization?
 - a. What positives and negatives do you generally see from these actions?
8. How do you celebrate successes within your organization?
 - a. Are there celebrations for students? Staff? Community?
 - b. How do you show your appreciation for a job well done?
9. Is there anything of importance that you feel we may have missed or should discuss as we conclude this interview?

Appendix B

Alignment Chart

Research Questions	Protocol Questions	Theoretical Framework Five Practices
<p>1. From the perspective of secondary school principals in high-achieving, high-needs rural schools, what leadership practices are effective in supporting change?</p>	<p>1. Tell me about change process in your school? Prompt: a. What does the change process look like in daily practice? b. Can you elaborate on the change processes relating to academics and to school culture? Do they overlap at all or are they distinct initiatives? c. What systems, if any, are in place to measure the success of these changes?</p> <p>2. When attempting to implement change, who else is involved? Prompt: a. How do you encourage the acceptance of any proposed changes? b. Who takes on the responsibility to ensure change is implemented with fidelity? How is that determined?</p> <p>3. What is your leadership vision? Prompt a. How do you ensure that the vision for your school is shared among members of your organization? b. As a rural school principal with positive student results, how were you able to overcome the odds against success?</p> <p>4. What sets your leadership apart? Prompt a. Are there specific strategies you put into place that can minimize the challenges for other rural schools?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Model the Way • Inspiring a Shared Vision • Challenge the Process • Enabling Others to Act • Encourage the Heart

<p>2. From the perspective of secondary school principals in high-achieving, high-needs rural schools, what do secondary school principals identify as potential areas of improvement?</p>	<p>1. As secondary school principal, what challenges and benefits do you see in leading a rural school? Prompt: a. Have these challenges or benefits changed over time? b. As principal of a rural school, what makes your school unique?</p> <p>2. How do you collaborate with others in your role as an educational leader?</p> <p>3. How do you ensure that others are confident and comfortable taking actions to benefit your organization? Prompt: a. What positives and negatives do you generally see from these actions?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Model the Way • Inspiring a Shared Vision • Challenge the Process • Enabling Others to Act • Encourage the Heart
<p>3. From the perspective of secondary school principals in high-achieving, high-needs rural schools, how do secondary school principals address the most significant challenges to ensuring student success?</p>	<p>1. How do you build effective relationships with others? Prompt: a. What are the result of those collaborations?</p> <p>2. How do you celebrate successes within the organization? Prompt: a. Are there celebrations for students? Staff? Community? b. How do you show your appreciation for a job well done?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Model the Way • Inspiring a Shared Vision • Challenge the Process • Enabling Others to Act • Encourage the Heart
<p>Miscellaneous</p>	<p>Additional interview question:</p> <p>Is there anything of importance that you feel we may have missed or should discuss as we conclude this interview?</p>	

Appendix C

Principal Email and Study Information

Dear Principal (NAME),

My name is Matthew Barr; I am the Principal at the Finger Lakes Technical and Career Center, part of Wayne Finger Lakes BOCES. Additionally, I am a doctoral candidate in the St. John Fisher College Executive Leadership Program. As part of the program, I am conducting a research study that focuses on rural secondary school principals. As a fellow rural school principal, I understand the lack of research in rural secondary schools. I would like to invite you to participate in the study by allowing me to interview you.

The topic of my study is the perceptions of principals regarding leadership practices in high-achieving, high-needs rural secondary schools. To gain insight into the leadership practices, I will conduct interviews with various New York State secondary school principals. All principals in the study lead secondary schools that have been recognized as 2018–2019 or 2019-2020 Recognition Schools by the New York State Education Department. In addition, all schools in the study are classified as high-needs rural schools.

The interviews will take place via Zoom and will last approximately 45–60 minutes. The interviews will be recorded and later transcribed. There is no preparation needed for the interview. Your participation or lack of participation in this research will

not impact any current or future professional relationships. All information will be kept confidential.

If you decide to participate and become uncomfortable at any time, you may choose not to answer. The research study is entirely voluntary, and you may withdraw at any time. As a small token of appreciation for your time, you will receive a \$25 gift card.

Thank you for your consideration. Please feel free to contact me at _____@sjfc.edu or on my cell phone at (____) ____ - ____ with any concerns or questions.

Sincerely,

Matthew D. Barr

Doctoral Candidate in Executive Leadership, St. John Fisher College

Appendix D

Consent Form



St. John Fisher College Institutional Review Board

Statement of Informed Consent for Adult Participants

An Examination of Perceived Secondary School Principal Leadership Practices in High Poverty Rural Schools in New York State

SUMMARY OF KEY INFORMATION:

- You are being asked to be in a research study of rural secondary school principals in high-poverty schools. As with all research studies, participation is voluntary.
- The purpose of this study is to identify effective leadership practices of secondary school principals in high-achieving, high-poverty, rural high schools.
- Approximately 5-8 people will take part in this study. The results will be used for a dissertation as part of the requirements for the St. John Fisher Ed. D program in Executive Leadership.
- If you agree to take part in this study, you will be involved in this study for one interview via Zoom for approximately forty-five to sixty minutes.
- The participants will be asked a series of questions as they relate to the participant's perceptions regarding leadership practices in rural secondary schools.
- We believe this study has minimal risks and inconveniences to the participants.
- The benefits of the study include the potential to outline effective leadership practices of successful rural, high-needs secondary school principals, so that they may potentially be replicated by other secondary school principals.

DETAILED STUDY INFORMATION (some information may be repeated from the summary above):

You are being asked to be in a research study of perceived leadership practices of secondary school principals. This study is being conducted via Zoom. This study is being conducted by:

Matthew Barr, and supervised by Dr. Marie Cianca in the Executive Leadership Program at St. John Fisher College.

You were selected as a possible participant because you are a principal in a high`-needs, rural secondary school recognized by New York State as a Recognition School in 2018-2019 or 20192020.

Please read this consent form and ask any questions you have before agreeing to be in the study.

St. John Fisher College IRB
Approval Date: February 11, 2021
Approved: February 11, 2021 / Expired: February 11, 2022

PROCEDURES:

If you agree to be in this study, you will be asked to do the following:

Interviews will take place via Zoom and will last approximately 45-60 minutes. The interviews will be recorded and later transcribed. There is no preparation needed for the interview.

COMPENSATION/INCENTIVES:

You will receive compensation/incentive for participation. Each participant will receive a \$25 gift card.

CONFIDENTIALITY:

The records of this study will be kept private and your confidentiality will be protected. In any sort of report the researcher(s) might publish, no identifying information will be included.

Identifiable research records will be stored securely and only the researcher(s) will have access to the records. All data will be kept in a locked filing cabinet in the researcher's office or on a password-protected laptop] by the investigator(s). All study records with identifiable information, including approved IRB documents, tapes, transcripts, and consent forms, will be destroyed by shredding and/or deleting after 3 years.

VOLUNTARY NATURE OF THE STUDY:

Participation in this study is voluntary and requires your informed consent. Your decision whether or not to participate will not affect your current or future relations with me or St.

John Fisher College. If you decide to participate, you are free to skip any question that is asked. You may also withdraw from this study at any time without penalty.

CONTACTS, REFERRALS AND QUESTIONS:

The researchers(s) conducting this study: Matthew Barr. If you have questions, **you are encouraged** to contact the researcher(s) at _____@sjfc.edu or (____) ____ - _____. You may also contact Dr. Marie Cianca at _____@sjfc.edu.

The Institutional Review Board of St. John Fisher College has reviewed this project. For any concerns regarding this study/or if you feel that your rights as a participant (or the rights of another participant) have been violated or caused you undue distress (physical or emotional distress), please contact the SJFC IRB administrator by phone during normal business hours at (585) 385-8012 or irb@sjfc.edu.

St. John Fisher College IRB Approval Date: February 11, 2021
Approved: February 11, 2021 / Expired: February 11, 2022

STATEMENT OF CONSENT:

I am 18 years of age or older. I have read and understood the above information. I consent to voluntarily participate in the study.

Signature: _____ Date: _____

Signature of Investigator: _____ Date: _____

I agree to be videorecorded/ transcribed ___ Yes ___ No

If I do not wish to be videotaped, I will inform the researcher, who will instead explain alternative to videorecording, if any. If no alternative, state this clearly.

Signature: _____ Date: _____

Signature of Investigator: _____ Date: _____

Please keep a copy of this informed consent for your records