

St. John Fisher University

## Fisher Digital Publications

---

Education Doctoral

Ralph C. Wilson, Jr. School of Education

---

5-2023

### Seeking Sustainable Leadership: An Interpretive Phenomenological Study of Why Rural High School Principals Choose to Stay

Raina Reynolds Hinman

St. John Fisher University, [rrh00063@sjfc.edu](mailto:rrh00063@sjfc.edu)

Follow this and additional works at: [https://fisherpub.sjf.edu/education\\_etd](https://fisherpub.sjf.edu/education_etd)



Part of the [Education Commons](#)

---

#### Recommended Citation

Hinman, Raina Reynolds, "Seeking Sustainable Leadership: An Interpretive Phenomenological Study of Why Rural High School Principals Choose to Stay" (2023). *Education Doctoral*. Paper 577.

Please note that the Recommended Citation provides general citation information and may not be appropriate for your discipline. To receive help in creating a citation based on your discipline, please visit <http://libguides.sjfc.edu/citations>.

This document is posted at [https://fisherpub.sjf.edu/education\\_etd/577](https://fisherpub.sjf.edu/education_etd/577) and is brought to you for free and open access by Fisher Digital Publications at . For more information, please contact [fisherpub@sjfc.edu](mailto:fisherpub@sjfc.edu).

---

# Seeking Sustainable Leadership: An Interpretive Phenomenological Study of Why Rural High School Principals Choose to Stay

## Abstract

This interpretive phenomenological study explored the lived experience of rural high school principals in New York State and developed an understanding of why they choose to remain in their role as school leaders. The study answered two research questions: "What role, if any, does self-efficacy play in the sustainability of rural high school principals to stay in their current positions?" and "In what way do rural high school principals in Upstate New York describe their reasons to remain in their positions?" The qualitative research design included semi-structured interviews using a purposeful sample of four rural high school principals in Upstate New York. Bandura's theory of self-efficacy was utilized as the theoretical framework for this study. Three themes emerged from the research: obstacles facing rural principals, why they stay, and how they stay. Subthemes emerged under each theme which included: work/life balance, work environment, relationships, impact/opportunities, boundaries, and collaboration. As a result of this research, specific recommendations focus on flexibility, creating a systems approach, practicing shared leadership, providing mentorship and positive feedback, addressing the social-emotional health of the principal, normalizing set boundaries, and understanding the rural culture. Upon reading this study, the firsthand accounts provide stakeholders with insight into the practices supporting leadership sustainability in the rural secondary leadership position through the participant's voice. This research lays the groundwork for future recruitment, retention, and succession planning to address the current and anticipated shortage of qualified educational administrative professionals.

## Document Type

Dissertation

## Degree Name

Doctor of Education (EdD)

## Department

Executive Leadership

## First Supervisor

Dr. Daniele Lyman-Torres

## Subject Categories

Education

Seeking Sustainable Leadership: An Interpretive Phenomenological Study of  
Why Rural High School Principals Choose to Stay

By

Raina Reynolds Hinman

Submitted in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree  
EdD in Executive Leadership

Supervised by

Dr. Daniele Lyman-Torres

Committee Member

Dr. Danielle O'Brien

Ralph C. Wilson, Jr. School of Education

St. John Fisher University

May 2023

Copyright by  
Raina Reynolds Hinman

May 2023

## **Dedication**

Being a full-time school administrator, doctoral student, wife, and mother simultaneously has been one of the most challenging situations in my entire life. This journey has been full of struggles and triumphs, which would not have been possible to endure without the following people.

First, Cohort 8, who accepted me as a transfer student right out of the gates, I couldn't have completed this without your constant encouragement and support. The COVID Cohort: We laughed and cried as we worked through every class and every assignment together. You will always be a part of my DEXL family.

Next, I am grateful to Dr. Lyman-Torres and Dr. O'Brien, who jumped in to help keep me on track after losing my chair and committee member. You both gave me real encouragement and motivated me to realize the importance of my work. Thank you.

Thank you to Dr. Quigley for being one of the kindest human beings I have ever met. I strive to have your patience, compassion, and positive outlook daily. Thank you for your continued check-ins and authentic emotion. I appreciate you so much.

To my family, thank you for your continued support. Completing this work meant missing important events and sometimes typing next to the campfire. I am grateful for your continued understanding of what I needed to do to accomplish this for me.

To my husband and my daughter: Dexter, you're the one who never lets me settle and never stops me from my next crazy idea. I owe every step of this journey to you. You make me proud of the work I have completed in the last 32 months. Without your constant reminders of

what I am capable of and to stop procrastinating, this work would have been so much harder.

Thank you for your love and support. Abby, I'm proud to break glass ceilings to show you how to accomplish whatever you set your mind to. No one can stop you if you set your mind to it.

Thank you for your constant motivation and for getting me through the late hours when I wasn't sure I could finish this degree. Doing homework together has made so many memories for us. I

hope that I can continue to be the role model you need and be the girl boss you think I am. I am honored to be the first Dr. Hinman, and I can't wait for you to be the second.

### **Biographical Sketch**

Mrs. Raina Hinman is currently the high school principal at the Red Creek Central School District in Upstate New York. Mrs. Hinman attended the State University of New York at Oswego from 1996 to 2000 and graduated with a Bachelor of Science in Elementary Education with a Grades 7-9 concentration in English in 2000. Mrs. Hinman attended Le Moyne College. She graduated Summa Cum Laude with a Master of Science in Secondary Education in 2005, a Master of Science in Education in Educational Leadership in 2007, and a Certificate of Advanced Study in Educational Leadership in 2008. She began her doctoral journey at Le Moyne College in the fall of 2020 during the COVID-19 pandemic and transferred to St. John Fisher University in the spring of 2021 to continue her doctoral studies in the Ed.D. Program in Executive Leadership. Mrs. Hinman pursued her research in the sustainability of rural high school principals under the direction of Dr. Daniele Lyman-Torres and Dr. Danielle O'Brien and received her Ed.D. degree in 2023.

## **Abstract**

This interpretive phenomenological study explored the lived experience of rural high school principals in New York State and developed an understanding of why they choose to remain in their role as school leaders. The study answered two research questions: “What role, if any, does self-efficacy play in the sustainability of rural high school principals to stay in their current positions?” and “In what way do rural high school principals in Upstate New York describe their reasons to remain in their positions?” The qualitative research design included semi-structured interviews using a purposeful sample of four rural high school principals in Upstate New York. Bandura’s theory of self-efficacy was utilized as the theoretical framework for this study. Three themes emerged from the research: obstacles facing rural principals, why they stay, and how they stay. Subthemes emerged under each theme which included: work/life balance, work environment, relationships, impact/opportunities, boundaries, and collaboration. As a result of this research, specific recommendations focus on flexibility, creating a systems approach, practicing shared leadership, providing mentorship and positive feedback, addressing the social-emotional health of the principal, normalizing set boundaries, and understanding the rural culture. Upon reading this study, the firsthand accounts provide stakeholders with insight into the practices supporting leadership sustainability in the rural secondary leadership position through the participant's voice. This research lays the groundwork for future recruitment, retention, and succession planning to address the current and anticipated shortage of qualified educational administrative professionals.



## Table of Contents

Dedication .....	iii
Biographical Sketch .....	v
Abstract .....	vi
Table of Contents .....	vii
List of Tables .....	x
List of Figures .....	xi
Chapter 1: Introduction .....	1
Impact of the Principal .....	1
National Attrition and Mobility .....	2
State-Level Attrition and Mobility .....	3
Local Level Attrition and Mobility .....	3
Impact on the Student .....	5
Impact of the Location .....	6
Impact on the Individual .....	7
Impact of Superintendent Turnover .....	8
Impact on Retention of High School Principals .....	9
Problem Statement .....	10
Theoretical Rationale .....	11
Statement of Purpose .....	13
Research Questions .....	13

Potential Significance of the Study.....	13
Chapter Summary .....	14
Chapter 2: Review of the Literature.....	16
Introduction.....	16
Review of the Literature .....	17
Chapter Summary .....	30
Chapter 3: Research Design Methodology .....	33
Introduction.....	33
Research Design.....	35
Research Context .....	37
Research Participants .....	38
Instrument Used in Data Collection.....	40
Procedures for Data Collection.....	41
Procedures for Data Analysis.....	42
Summary .....	43
Chapter 4: Results .....	45
Introduction.....	45
Research Questions.....	48
Findings.....	48
Theme 1: Obstacles facing rural principals .....	48
Theme 2: Why they stay .....	67
Theme 3: How they stay .....	78
Chapter 5: Discussion .....	86

Introduction.....	86
Implication of Findings.....	88
Limitations .....	92
Recommendations.....	93
Conclusion .....	100
References.....	104
Appendix A.....	110
Appendix B.....	115
Appendix C.....	112
Appendix D.....	113
Appendix E .....	115

## List of Tables

<b>Item</b>	<b>Title</b>	<b>Page</b>
Table 1.1	Data Comparison of Principal Turnover in the Red Creek CSD	4
Table 4.1	Participant Demographics	40
Table 4.2	Research Question Themes and Subthemes	46

## **List of Figures**

<b>Item</b>	<b>Title</b>	<b>Page</b>
Figure 1.1	Percentage of Public School Principals, by Mobility or Attrition Status: 2008-09, 2012-13, and 2016-17	2
Figure 4.1	Incentives and Deterrents	47
Figure 5.1	Bandura's Theory of Self-Efficacy	88



## **Chapter 1: Introduction**

Leadership sustainability in education, or continuity over time, is critical to the growth of students and teachers within the school (Cook, 2014). Research shows there are threats to leadership sustainability (Bottery, 2016). Threats to leadership sustainability can vary from the quantity of the role, a perceived lack of trust, a lack of appreciation for the individual in the role, value conflicts of stakeholders, and governing regulations on the position (Bottery, 2016). These threats directly impact the stakeholders in the education field, with students being the primary stakeholders of concern (Bottery, 2016).

### **Impact of the Principal**

The role of the principalship impacts students' achievement, teachers' growth, and the school's morale (Levin & Bradley, 2019). Levin and Bradley (2019) emphasize the importance of consistent, quality leadership in the principal role. Principal stability has a positive impact on the school building overall. Consistent leadership results in an increase in student achievement as well as a decrease in student discipline issues (Grissom et al., 2021). Increased cost and academic loss have been associated with high principal turnover, making consistency in the role important (Tran et al., 2017). Districts can spend up to \$75,000 to onboard a new principal. This includes preparation, hiring, and placing a principal into the position (New Teacher Center, 2018). Additionally, principals are responsible for approximately 25% of a student's academic achievement (New Teacher Center, 2018).

The academic deficit during the transition of a new principal is attributed to inconsistent vision and planning (Levin et al., 2020), which results in low student achievement scores

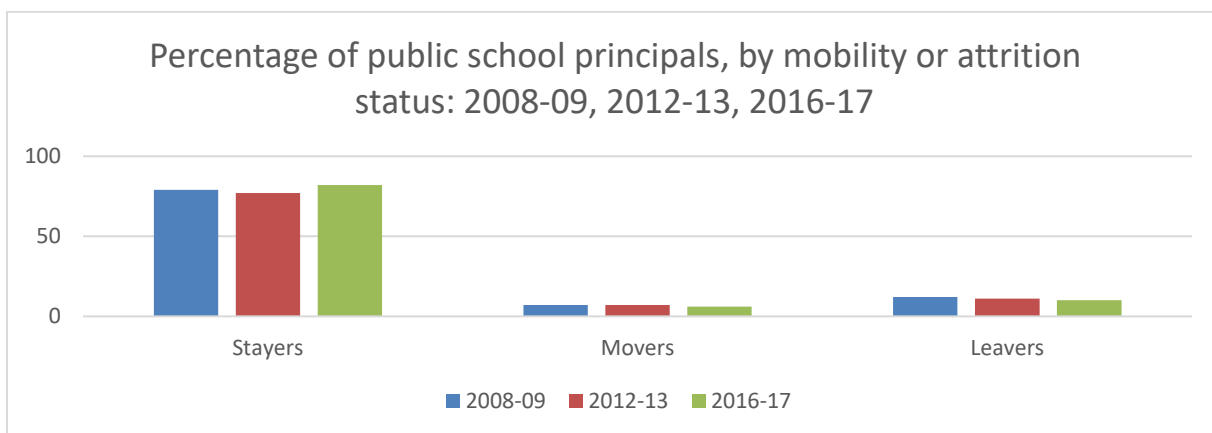
(Bartanen et al., 2019). The lack of consistency also applies to the faculty and staff, resulting in high attrition of teachers (Grissom & Bartanen, 2019) and low morale (Levin et al., 2019).

### National Attrition and Mobility

The overall national turnover of school administrators was 18% in 2015-2016 (Levin & Bradley, 2016). National Center for Education Statistics (2022) compared the percentage of public high school principals by mobility or attrition status in the 2008-2009, 2012-2013, and 2016-2017 school years. The term “stayers” referred to public school principals who stayed in their positions the following school year. Principals labeled “movers” were those who continued to be principals in a different school than originally reported. “Leavers” were principals who did not continue in their role as a principal the following school year. Figure 1.1 shows the national comparison data.

**Figure 1.1**

*Percentage of Public School Principals, By Mobility or Attrition Status: 2008-09, 2012-13, and 2016-17*



*Note.* From National Center for Educational Statistics. (2022). Principal turnover: stayers, movers, and leavers. *Condition of Education*. U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Educational Sciences. Retrieved [November 14, 2022] from <https://nces.ed.gov/programs/coe/indisctor/slb>.



Overall, the number of principals choosing to stay in the field has increased slightly from 2008 to 2017. The 2016-17 participants' locale was categorized by city (urban), suburban, and rural. Stayers in the suburban area were higher than in the city and rural areas. Suburban stayers were 83%, whereas the city and rural stayers were 81% in 2016-17 (NCES, 2022). The percentage of city movers (8%) was higher than the suburban (6%) and rural (5%) movers. When analyzing the data on leavers, the number of rural principals leaving the profession (12%) was higher than the city (10%) and suburban (9%) principals (NCES, 2022).

### **State-Level Attrition and Mobility**

The New York State School Board Association has indicated that principal retention is an issue that needs to be addressed. Although there are no viable data regarding the attrition and mobility of principals in New York State, the trends are universal. In any given year, it is estimated that 18% of principals leave their position, with a higher probability of this occurring in low-income areas (Simidian, 2020).

### **Local Level Attrition and Mobility**

Principal turnover has increased for some Upstate New York school districts. For example, since 2000, the Red Creek Central School District in Wayne County, New York, has had eight different high school principals. The longest tenure was 8 years, served from 2009-2017. High school leadership changes occurred in 2004, 2009, 2017, 2018, 2019, 2020, and 2021. Table 1.1 compares district enrollment, graduation rates, and teacher turnover for the years a new principal assumed the role at Red Creek (NYSED, n.d.).

**Table 1.1**

*Data Comparison of Principal Turnover in the Red Creek CSD*

Year	District Enrollment (K-12)	Graduation Rate Compared to Prior Year	K-12 Teacher Turnover
2004	1087	88% to 79%	16
2009	958	76% to 66%	11
2017	887	88% to 88%	11
2018	854	88% to 89%	17
2019	850	89% to 89%	10
2020 – COVID	783	89% to 88%	14
2021	790	88% to 80%	N/A

*Note.* From: New York State Department of Education. (n.d.). *New York State Data report card.*

Retrieved 28 September 2022 from <https://data.nysed.gov/profile.php?instid=800000035761>

The district's enrollment has been declining for over a decade, which is the trend in New York State. The graduation rate varied when compared to the principals leaving the position. There was an increase in high school dropouts in 2004, 2009, and 2021 (NYSED, n.d.). Otherwise, the high school graduation rate stayed consistent. The number of teachers leaving the district varies, and there was not a consistent pattern of teacher turnover when compared to the years of the principal vacating the position. The reasons for teacher turnover are not known. The reasons for high school principal turnover included a death, two promotions, a midyear shift out of the profession, and two interim principals while the interview processes were taking place for a probationary, tenure-track principal. The turnover at the Red Creek High School is only one example of the impact that the turnover of the building principal can have on the stakeholders.

## **Impact on the Student**

Student achievement is negatively impacted by the turnover of administration (Leithwood & Jantzi, 2008). Compared to the 2018-2019 graduation rate of 86% nationally, New York State achieved a rate of 83% (New York State Department of Education, n.d.). The range of graduation rates in the United States is 75-92%. New York was the lowest in the Northeast (NCES, n.d.).

Education faces a shortage of high school administrators (Ruggirello, 2022). Valentine and Prater (2011) indicate the role of the principal has become increasingly complex as expectations of society, politics, and the organization of schools have changed. The role of the high school principal has changed, and fewer professionals desire to remain in the position (Ruggirello, 2022). The responsibility of the principalship expands beyond the basic academic and managerial duties.

Since the COVID-19 pandemic struck in March 2020, principals have assumed many roles, including driving the bus, serving lunch, and substituting in classrooms (Lieberman, 2021). The Great Resignation has increased the workload for administrators nationwide (Varghese, 2022). Additionally, principals report that their jobs have changed due to working longer hours and tense environments (National Association of Secondary School Principals [NASSP], 2021).

In the early 1800s, there was no clear distinction between principal and teacher (Kafka, 2009). Administratively, the role of the principal teacher was created as the population of students grew (Kafka, 2009). With that growth came more responsibility. In 1859, after pushback on superintendents, the principalship became a role of prestige (Kafka, 2009). The role of the principal was about who was in the position, and it encompassed the political implications of that person. The principal was typically a Caucasian male who was the lead decision-maker in

the school. Adding to the prestige were the principal's new responsibilities, including supervision, hiring, and firing. This put political leverage onto the person who occupied the position of principal. The history of the principalship indicates that principals will continue to be expected to accomplish great things with little support (Kafka, 2009).

Additionally, the newest addition to the role of the principal is to address society's social and educational inequities (Kafka, 2009). Principals have been essential in efforts to improve the quality of schooling and enact educational change (Kafka, 2009). The duties of the principalship include safety, observation and evaluation, implementation of initiatives and laws, curriculum, personnel, visibility, and accessibility (Berkowicz & Myers, 2015). Furthermore, there is a reactive problem-solving facet to the principalship for those unexpected events that need a resolution. This makes the role complicated and complex (Berkowicz & Myers, 2015).

Shortage in the education field due to the impact of the pandemic and the decrease in certified educational professionals has created a new facet of the ongoing problem of insufficient staffing (Lieberman, 2021). In addition to the impact of COVID-19, other obstacles create a challenging work environment for rural high school administrators. Principal turnover, lack of professional development, lack of resources, and lack of competitive financial compensation threaten the consistent, quality leadership necessary for our educational system to grow (Yan, 2020).

### **Impact of the Location**

There is a difference between large and small schools concerning turnover. Small schools may be a stepping stone in a high school principal's career (Beteille et al., 2011). Transferring principals tend to move to more affluent, higher-achieving districts than where they were (Beteille et al., 2011). Transferring within the same district may not include a pay increase for

these professionals, so findings indicate that these professionals leave districts to be better compensated (Beteille et al., 2011). Larger urban and suburban districts have more opportunities for movement within leadership roles (Beteille et al., 2011). Voluntary turnover information suggests that applicants seek easier-to-staff, higher-achieving schools (Beteille, Kalogrides & Loeb, 2011).

### **Impact on the Individual**

The principalship can personally impact the individual in the position (Beusaert et al., 2016). Due to the high stress and high demand of the role, there is a shortage of certified and qualified principals applying for the vacancies of the principalship. Additionally, there is an increasing departure of principals from the role and field (Tekleselassie & Villarreal, 2011). According to a survey by the RAND Corporation, four out of five high school principals faced job-related stress in the 2020-2021 school year (Woo & Steiner, 2022). Stressors for the secondary principals during the COVID-19 pandemic included supporting teachers' well-being, students' social-emotional learning, and providing remote instruction to students (Woo & Steiner, 2022). COVID-19 related stressors added to the numerous challenges and pressures of the job. Challenges before COVID-19 included the pressures of high-stakes testing, implementation of new regulations, changing student demographics, lack of autonomy, and limited resources (Woo & Steiner, 2022). High levels of poverty exacerbate the stress of the principalship. The RAND Corporation (2022) found that 36% of principals in high-poverty schools experienced constant job-related stress compared to 26% in low-poverty schools (Woo & Steiner, 2022). Other demographics noted in the research was an increase in stress in principals who were female or were of color.

For many principals, there are night obligations multiple times a week. Those obligations include music concerts, board of education meetings, induction ceremonies, school dances, and field trips. The expectation of visibility requires the principal to attend events, lengthening their workday. The Regional Education Laboratory for Northeast and Islands (REL) found that principals work approximately 60 hours per week (Sparks, 2016).

The qualifications required to be certified as an administrator in New York State are more rigorous than in most of the remaining United States (ECS, 2017). Additionally, stress and burnout are contributors to principal turnover and attrition. Research on the leader's self-efficacy indicates that the leader's mental health contributes to job sustainability and the effects on job performance (Postma & Babo, 2019). Many high school administrators are leaving the profession. In 2016-2017, 10% of public-school principals left the profession completely (Irwin et al., 2021). Principals with 10 or more years of experience had a higher percentage of leaving the principalship than those with fewer years of experience (U.S. Department of Education, 2019).

The average tenure of a high school principal is 4 years, and only 11% of principals stay in their schools for 10 years or more (Irwin et al., 2021). Additionally, data shows that public school principals who work in high-poverty schools remained in their position only 79% of the time. In contrast, principals in low-poverty schools stayed 86% of the time. (Irwin et al., 2021). Other factors influencing the decision to remain in the position are school enrollment characteristics, such as minority concentrations and school location (Irwin et al., 2021).

### **Impact of Superintendent Turnover**

There has been an increase in New York State superintendents retiring. Pre-COVID pandemic data indicates that 45 superintendents retired on average yearly. In 2022, 65

superintendents intend to retire in New York (Goot, 2022). The number of superintendents retiring impacts the hiring of new high school administration. School reforms take 5 or more years to take place (Natkin et al., 2003). The implication is that districts with high turnover in the superintendency role could prove detrimental to system-wide improvement efforts, including hiring key personnel (Natkin et al., 2003). Prioritization and expectations continue to change in districts that experience high turnover. As a result, there is a direct effect on the district's sustainability, including hiring district management, staff morale, funding, and community support, potentially causing a negative impact on student achievement (Grissom & Mitani, 2016).

### **Impact on Retention of High School Principals**

For decades prior to COVID-19, researchers have conducted studies regarding the turnover in educational administration, specifically the principalship. The focus has been on what challenges and obstacles school-building leaders face daily. Gajda & Militello (2008) state that the obstacles these leaders face directly contribute to the decision to leave the field of education. The NASSP and the Learning Policy Institute (LPI) conducted a survey that indicated that 42% of principals were considering leaving their current position (Levin et al., 2020). Additionally, the COVID-19 pandemic has significantly impacted the retention of professionals in the education field (Bailey & Schurz, 2020).

In contrast, some school building leaders, specifically rural high school principals, choose to stay in complex roles. The obstacles that challenge the rural high school principal are why some leave the position or profession; however, what has not been explored is what contributes to the reason why some choose to stay. There is little about what factors prompt rural high school principals to remain in their roles when these individuals realize how difficult the position

is. The lack of research suggests that more investigation is needed in the area of self-efficacy of rural high school principals and how that affects job retention.

### **Problem Statement**

Those moving into the education field face many challenges as they build their career. New York State has the most rigorous certification standards in the United States for those entering the education field (ECS, 2022). The level of education required to become a school administrator involves multiple post-secondary degrees and comes with a hefty price tag. Individuals who choose to advance their careers into school leadership face daily threats to their role (Wise, 2015).

The principalship has become a complicated, multifaceted role vital to the school's success (Postma & Babo, 2019). The importance of the principalship influences teacher retention, student achievement, and the overall growth of a school (Grissom et al., 2021). Additionally, there are negative consequences related to the turnover of a principal (Levin et al., 2020). Furthermore, the challenges and obstacles have an impact on the person in the position (Klocko & Wells, 2015). The mental health of the educational leader indicates that stress and burnout contribute to principal turnover and attrition (Beauseart et al., 2016). Similarly, the mental health of the school building leader affects job sustainability and performance (Federici & Skaalvik, 2012).

Information is lacking on those who choose to remain in the rural high school principalship despite the demands placed on the job. Looking at the lived experience of current administrators may indicate what qualities sustain rural high school principals. Therefore, this qualitative study explored the role self-efficacy plays in the decision to continue the position of the rural high school principal.



## **Theoretical Rationale**

Bandura's (1977) social learning theory explains the concept of self-efficacy. Self-efficacy is defined as the self-perception that one can control life events and produce desired results. Perceived self-efficacy is the idea that people's beliefs in their capabilities to exercise control over their own functioning and over events in their life (Bandura, 1994). Yavas (2022) utilized Bandura's (1977) research to help conclude that there is a direct relationship between an administrator's self-efficacy and their success as a leader. An administrator's self-efficacy is a predictor of teacher self-efficacy and student achievement (Yavas, 2020). Bandura's (1977) social learning theory focuses on how environmental and cognitive factors affect human learning and behavior. More specifically, the social theory of self-efficacy states that one can control one's behavior to attain specific goals. Self-efficacy reflects the ability to control motivation, behavior, and social environment to achieve particular tasks associated with performance outcomes (Yavas, 2020).

Self-efficacy theory is a subset of Bandura's (1977) social learning theory. Bandura (1997) defines self-efficacy as "the belief in one's capabilities to organize and execute the courses of action required to manage prospective situations" (p. 2). Furthermore, Bandura (1997) states self-efficacy is developed through four primary sources of influence: mastery experiences, vicarious experiences, social persuasion, and emotional and physiological states. Mastery experiences are where a person takes on a new challenge and finds success. Success builds one's self-efficacy, according to Bandura (1997). Vicarious experiences are when one watches another successfully complete a task. Observing this success for another builds the self-efficacy that the observer can also complete the task successfully. Social persuasion is the encouragement one receives that allows the belief that the individual can successfully perform a given duty. This

tenet of self-efficacy implies that outside influences lead to a positive outcome. Emotional and physiological states affect the outcome of a specific performance indicator. Bandura (1997) states that “people who have a high sense of self-efficacy are likely to view their state of affective arousal as an energizing facilitator, whereas those who are beset by self-doubts regard their arousal as a debilitator” (p. 3). In other words, interpreting the situation and learning how to manage the reaction can affect the outcome based on the individual’s level of self-efficacy.

Bandura began studying at Stanford University and believed that the individuals studying behaviorism explained that behavior was influenced by one’s environment, which Bandura believed was too vague. In turn, Bandura created the social learning theory, which was refined over the years to include self-efficacy. Self-efficacy is typically self-reported. Surveys were given to measure self-efficacy following a Likert scale, with five choices ranging from *strongly agree* to *strongly disagree* or *very true* to *not true*. The General Efficacy Scale created by Schwarzer & Jerusalem (1995) is based on Bandura’s work. It is a 10-question survey to help measure self-efficacy. Williams and Rhodes (2016) question whether the survey truly measures self-efficacy and introduce the idea that the survey may measure motivation rather than self-efficacy. Critics of the theory, such as Biglan (1987), question if other factors, including the external environment, influence behavior besides self-efficacy.

Bandura’s theory of self-efficacy is used for this study because self-efficacy is the belief that one can overcome barriers to obtain a goal. Self-efficacy drives the leader in their mission and goal setting. With that, leaders are in a position daily to overcome obstacles to provide a safe, educationally productive environment for their faculty, staff, and students. Therefore, this theory is used to explore why rural high school principals stay in their roles by sharing their lived experiences.

## **Statement of Purpose**

This study explored the self-efficacy of rural high school principals in Upstate New York and examined if their self-defined success contributed to and influenced the longevity in their leadership role. The interest was to determine how rural high school principals describe the experiences that define their success and evaluate if the experiences contributed to the sustainability of the high-demand, high-stress position of the principalship. With the ongoing challenges that rural high school principals face, this study explored why principals stay and determined if those reasons provided insight into the measures that can be taken to keep these leaders in their principalship roles. This study used a qualitative, asset-based approach that presented the lived experiences of rural high school principals who choose to stay. The asset-based approach was used to potentially inform future recruitment, retention, and hiring practices for school leaders. By taking this approach, this study intended to understand why those leaders stay and how that affected their organization.

## **Research Questions**

The research questions for this study were to develop an understanding of rural high school principals' perceptions of career sustainability:

1. What role, if any, does self-efficacy play in the sustainability of rural high school principals to stay in their current positions?
2. In what way do rural high school principals in Upstate New York describe their reasons to remain in their positions?

## **Potential Significance of the Study**

The past investigation focused on the stressors that cause high school principals to leave their positions. The study offered a different perspective on the administrative role by identifying

the traits shared by those rural high school principals who remain in their positions despite the role's challenges. The importance of this exploration was the potential to use the data collected to help recruit and retain rural high school principals during an employment crisis. Additionally, the data collected may influence future hiring practices by recognizing the potential significance self-efficacy plays on the success of the rural high school principal. Focusing on rural schools introduced a different perspective on the importance of the retention of high school principals. This study highlighted the importance of the lived experience and its impact on helping create an environment that sustains the rural high school principal. Ultimately, the retention of principals will impact students by directly influencing the retention of teachers. The retention of teachers provides quality, consistent education to the students. Additionally, student achievement increases with the retention of high school principals (Grissom et al., 2021). The New Teacher Center (2018) reports that the school principal is responsible for 25% of the students' academic achievement. The consistency and quality of programming increase, and proper changes are made when the principal stays in their leadership position.

### **Chapter Summary**

Employing high school principals for more than 4 years is challenging for school districts throughout the United States. This chapter provided the framework for examining the lived experience of rural high school principals and their reasons for remaining in the principalship. In turn, this created the purpose of this study. The social theory of self-efficacy was presented through the lens of leadership. The research design was introduced.

The following four chapters outline this paper. Chapter 2 presents the literature that is relevant to the phenomenon of leadership sustainability and the challenges threatening the principalship. Chapter 3 includes the research design methodology, demographics of the

participants, data collection procedures, and data analysis procedures. Chapter 4 presents the study findings. The fifth chapter discusses the implications of the findings, the recommendations for change in practice, the limitations of the study, and the recommendations for further research.

## **Chapter 2: Review of the Literature**

### **Introduction**

The turnover of rural high school principals impacts many facets of the school environment. Levin et al. (2022) have focused research on the attrition of high school principals. In-depth data collected indicates that there are many reasons these leaders decide to leave the field of education. Additionally, it was found that a lack of support, particularly when managing difficult stakeholders, is also a key factor when considering leaving the role of the principalship.

There is a need to examine the lived experience of those rural educational leaders who decide to stay and explore the role of self-efficacy in their decision to stay. The NASSP and the LPI conducted a survey that indicated that 42% of principals were considering leaving their current positions (Levin et al., 2020). In contrast, there are school-building leaders, specifically rural high school principals, who choose to stay in difficult roles (Steward, 2014). The following literature review explored the impact of self-efficacy on the leader, reasons why principals leave, the importance of the principal on the school environment, and principal recruitment and retention.

### ***Self-Efficacy of the Leader***

The turnover of high school principals impacts many facets of the school environment. Levin et al. (2022) have focused research on the attrition of high school principals. In-depth data collected indicates that there are many reasons these leaders decide to leave the field of education. DeJong et al. (2017) determined that high job demands with unreasonable expectations influence principal dissatisfaction. Additionally, it was found that a lack of support,

particularly when managing difficult stakeholders, is also a key factor when considering leaving the role of the principalship.

The following literature review will explore the impact of self-efficacy on the leader, reasons why principals leave, the importance of the principal on the school environment, and principal recruitment and retention.

### ***Research Questions***

The research questions for this study were to develop an understanding of rural high school principals' perceptions of career sustainability by answering the primary research questions:

1. What role, if any, does self-efficacy play in the sustainability of rural high school principals to stay in their current positions?
2. In what way do rural high school principals in Upstate New York describe their reasons to remain in their positions?

### **Review of the Literature**

#### ***Influence of Self-Efficacy on the Individual Leader***

Bandura (1997) claims people have the ability to exercise influence over what they do—understanding that outside factors contribute to one's beliefs of personal self-efficacy. Bandura identifies four principal sources that contribute to self-efficacy. "Enactive Mastery Experiences serve as an indicator of capability and are the most influential, authentic evidence on whether one can muster whatever it takes to succeed" (p. 80). Success builds confidence, a robust belief in one's self-efficacy, persistence, the belief that one can overcome obstacles, and the ability to perform a given task effectively. Vicarious experiences influence the level of confidence one has in their ability to have success. These experiences can alter the perception of self-efficacy

through the attainment of others (Bandura, 1997). Verbal persuasion relies on external social influence to impact feelings of self-efficacy. This strengthens people's belief that they can achieve a desired task. The physiological and affective states rely on feelings connected with experiences. Indicators reveal an arousal or doubt state that can directly affect the person's self-efficacy. These four components of self-efficacy affect performance and desire to overcome challenging tasks (Bandura, 1997). According to this research, the only known self-efficacy component contributing to the negative turnover rate is executive mastery experience. However, some rural principals stay. The other three elements of Bandura's (1997) self-efficacy theory have the potential to identify why rural principals remain despite the challenges. Current qualitative research has presented minimal findings to support why rural leaders stay despite the hardships that performance mastery data present.

In 2012, Federici and Skaalvik studied relationships between a principal's self-efficacy, burnout, job satisfaction, and motivation to quit. After collecting survey data electronically from 1,818 principals, many areas were measured. Twenty-two items were surveyed, and topics included: instructional leadership, economic management, administrative management, teacher support, school environment, municipal authority, parental relations, and community relations. Findings show that there is a strong relationship between self-efficacy and burnout. Additionally, there was a strong relationship between self-efficacy and job satisfaction. Federici and Skaalvik (2012) also found a combination of factors that led to the motivation to quit. Lack of positive self-efficacy was a strong predictor of reduced job satisfaction and the desire to vacate the position of the principalship. Findings indicated that increasing a principal's self-efficacy could positively impact school leadership.



Skaalvik (2020) explored the relationship between principal self-efficacy for instructional leadership, emotional exhaustion, engagement, and motivation to quit the work as a principal. By creating a scale to rate each of these categories, Skaalvik found that self-efficacy for educational leadership is predictive of a principal's well-being in each area. Some participants left the role of the principalship, while other participants left the education field altogether. Skaalvik focused on the relationship between a principal's self-efficacy and the intent to continue the principalship. In Skaalvik's study, 55% of respondents served in a rural area. The focus was on rating self-efficacy in each area. It was determined that a principal's self-efficacy predicts a principal's well-being and motivation to continue or leave.

Bottery (2016) contends that principals need a better understanding of their self-efficacy and a level of self-regulation in their leadership roles. Bottery (2016) emphasizes that there are many unknown factors to the role of the school principal, indicating the need for leaders to understand their role differently and remain comfortable with uncertainty. Additionally, Leithwood & Jantzi (2008) aimed to improve understanding of the nature, causes, and consequences of school leader self-efficacy and its influence on student achievement. This quantitative study involved two surveys administered to 96 principals and 2,764 teachers. To address the objectives of the study, path analytic techniques were used. The sets of questions were based on the independent variables in the research. First, the researchers asked how district leadership and organizational conditions affected school leader efficacy. Results demonstrated that there is a strong influence, although in an indirect manner. The second question inquired about the effects of school leaders' efficacy of their leadership practices at the school and classroom levels. This was reported as a modest effect of efficacy on school leader behavior, mainly attributed to individual efficacy. The results indicate that leader efficacy effects are

moderated by a handful of organizational characteristics but by none of the personal independent variables included in the study. This information, coupled with 3 years of student achievement data, found that collective efficacy combines district and school conditions that indirectly affect student achievement. By prioritizing values rooted in academic instruction, overall school improvement, and relationship building with the classroom teachers, principals can build a strong, positive relationship that fosters growth in the school community, which builds positive self-efficacy contributing to successful school leadership.

### ***Reasons Why Principals Leave***

Research has been focused on the collective study of why principals leave their role as building leaders. Kearney (2012) found that many factors contributed to the reason why high school principals left the position they were in. Information cited revealed that principals felt inadequately prepared for the position and lacked professional development. Furthermore, the lack of autonomy to have decision-making authority within their building contributed to the overall morale of the building leader and the school community. Insufficient salaries with high-stakes accountability policies and a lack of qualified staff posed challenges for high school principals looking to run a building successfully. That success is defined as positive work morale, high academic rigor, and high student achievement. Instead, many reported high student mobility, high levels of poverty, and underperforming students with a lack of qualified staff. Dissatisfaction was reported when there were high job demands with unreasonable expectations, difficult stakeholders, a lack of work/life balance, and a lack of support and autonomy to appropriately lead the building (DeJong 2017).

Hansen (2018) investigated the factors influencing a principal's decision to leave a school. This research was conducted in a rural setting with six former rural principals. Using

semi-structured interviews in an environment comfortable for the interviewee, Hansen deduced seven themes attributed to a principal leaving their school. The seven themes were: (a) career opportunity, (b) family needs, (c) community expectations, (d) workload, (e) lack of professional support, (f) superintendent and school board: general decision-making and relationships, and (g) superintendent and school board: principal salary and contract negotiations.

Extended hours to meet a plethora of demands, and an overwhelming workload, all to protect the professional reputation of a high school principal, sometimes leads to their departure. The principal is the second most influential school-based Factor after classroom instruction providing 25% influence on a student's achievement, only being surpassed by the actual classroom teacher (Yan, 2020). Yan (2020) conducted a study that examines how principal working conditions are associated with principal turnover in K-12 public schools. Using data from the National Center for Education Statistics, specifically the 2011 to 2012 Schools and Staffing Survey and 2012-2013 Principal Follow-up Survey, findings indicated six categories of principal turnover: (a) stayer: still worked as a principal at current school; (b) mover: transferred to another school, but remained a principal; (c) demoted: changed to a non-principal position in the same or a different school; (d) promoted: worked in the district central office as a superintendent or other district-level staff; (e) leaver: took a job outside of education; and (f) retired. Principal characteristics, school context, and working conditions were identified as independent variables (Yan 2020). Findings concluded that increasing salary lowers the odds of principals moving to another school by 53% (Yan, 2020). This finding is consistent with previous studies on the impact of salary on principal retention (Papa, 2007).

Additionally, it was found that the average workload for principals is 59 hours per week. This was not seen as a statistically significant factor in principal turnover. This data

contrasts with Fuller et al. (2015), where the workload is identified as one of the most critical concerns for principal retention. Yan (2020) also finds a statistically significant relationship between the disciplinary environment of the school and the probability of principals moving to another school.

Mitani (2018) indicated that the high stress principals endure is often caused by outside forces the principal cannot control. Seward (2014) identifies many threats to school leadership. The workload for principals is overwhelming. External pressures from stakeholders and high-stakes accountability contribute to work-related stress for the principal. The principal is affected by long hours and a lack of balance between work and personal life (Steward, 2014). Insufficient salaries, inadequate academic preparation, and lack of targeted professional development also explain why principals leave.

Gajda & Millitello (2018) indicated that the principal shortage is not because of a lack of licensure. The potential candidates are not applying for the principalship. Reasons indicated include large populations of impoverished students, low per-pupil expenditure, working conditions, and pressures of the position. The dissatisfaction of the principal is due to the lack of support from upper leadership and unreasonable expectations. Papa (2007) identifies that what attracts principals to move from their current positions include more enticing salaries, favorable school characteristics, fewer at-risk students, and more-qualified teachers. Huff et al. (2011) cite the value of principal tenure, stability, and overall experience as factors in determining a principal's consideration for turnover.

Huff et al. (2011) examined the relationship and predictive value of principal tenure, principal stability, and principal experience in public education on middle school achievement. Results indicate that while principal tenure may not immediately impact student

achievement, there was an effect for some demographic groups. Students with disabilities and students with low socioeconomic status are two of those groups. Principal stability in this study was defined as principals serving more than 10 years in their roles. Departure from the principalship includes leaving the profession, shifting districts, and moving to a new position at the central office (Yan, 2020).

When investigating the principal shortage, a factor that emerged was the lack of licensed principals in the candidate pools (Gajda & Militello, 2008). Data show that those that are licensed educators choose not to assume the role of the principalship. Seventy-five percent of the respondents desired increased responsibility and challenges in the principalship. Fifty-nine percent indicated a desire to impact students, and almost half (48%) stated that the principalship was the next logical career move for them professionally.

The research showed that only 16% of participants indicated that their tenure in the principalship was more than 10 years. Like Wood et al. (2013), this survey revealed that challenges include increased job stress, low salary compared to the workload, and complexity of the demanding role. Findings showed that the principal shortage is linked to external factors that can affect recruitment and retention.

### ***Importance of the Principal on the School Environment***

The role of the principalship in school leadership has changed significantly (Coelli & Green, 2012; Grissom et al., 2021). Principals impact the students, faculty, staff, and district they work for.

Principals must lead their buildings in a way that positively influences student growth and achievement. Over the last two decades, research has established the impact of an effective principal on student performance (Grissom et al., 2021). Wood et al. (2013) found an indirect

relationship between leadership and student achievement. However, the school building principals' influence has been understated and is greater and more encompassing than previously believed. The principal has a more significant effect on student performance and has a broader reach, affecting other vital areas, including teacher satisfaction and retention, student attendance, and reduced discipline issues. Findings show that effective principals directly impact other components of the school environment, including student absenteeism and school discipline (Grissom et al., 2012).

In alignment with Wood et al. (2013) and Grissom et al. (2021), Kearney et al. (2012) analyzed five independent variables in this study: attendance rates, socioeconomic status, school size, teacher experience, and administrator longevity. Attendance data was also considered a factor in overall student performance. Student achievement was measured using statistics measuring passing and commended performance rates from 2007-2009. Results found that although school principals do not provide direct instruction, they do impact student success through the overall climate of the school campus (Kearney et al., 2012).

Kearney et al. (2012) also reviewed principal turnover data from all Texas campuses from 1996 through 2008. Results indicated that less than 30% of newly hired high school principals stay at the school for at least 5 years. Three-hundred thirteen secondary schools (Grades 9-12) were asked to participate in this study; of that population, 155 principals and 131 teachers participated in this electronic survey. Research shows that principalship roles substantially impact the students, faculty, staff, and district they work for (Coelli & Green, 2012). Through instructional, transformational, and managerial leadership, the high school principal's relationship impacted student achievement (Valentine & Prater, 2011). It was shown that a principal's education level is related to the perceived effectiveness of that leader. Data

also show that principals that were perceived as more competent had student achievement scores that were higher. This connects directly with Bandura's theory of self-efficacy (1997).

Over the last two decades, research has established the impact of an effective principal on student achievement (Grissom et al., 2021). However, the school building principals' influence has been understated and is greater and more encompassing than previously believed.

Additionally, it is not clear how these indicators for success are internalized as a personal accomplishment. Coelli and Green (2012) found that although there was no overall effect on graduation rates, individual test scores showed a positive impact from the principal's longevity. A factor identified in the study was that once a principal has had the ability to realize their full effect on their school, outcomes changed, particularly on ELA assessments. Student scores in English were analyzed in conjunction with the longevity of the building leader. It was found that individual dynamics impacted the student achievement of these students. Additional findings indicate that there was an improvement in academic achievement and the creation of a positive learning culture. It was also found that the motivation of the instructional leader created a positive influence on the school. The leader's capacity for instructional management and curriculum also contributed to positive student achievement.

Furthermore, a component that lent to positive student achievement was the instructional leader involving parents in a positive home-school relationship (Maponya, 2020; Sebastian & Allensworth, 2012). These indicators assert that a school principal's instructional leadership role significantly impacts the learners' academic achievement. Upon analyzing this data, it was found that school principals may not directly influence the overall quality of instruction; however, they do impact the school's climate and its effect on teachers, which indirectly affects student achievement.

Principals can affect many school environment factors, including those that support teachers. Lambersky (2016) found that morale and community building depend on components such as professional respect and acknowledgment of commitment to the organization. Teachers are looking for validation of their efforts and contributions to the school's vision. Teachers want to be respected as educationally competent and know their collective voice is heard. Being a part of the decision-making process, sharing the vision and mission of the district, and having a visible administrator contribute to a positive environment for teachers (Lambersky, 2016).

Lambersky (2016) conducted a study to understand principals' effects on teachers' emotions, self-efficacy, collective efficacy, teacher morale, stress, and commitment. The study investigated leaders' perceptions to understand the emotional effects leader actions have on teachers. The study indicated the positive attitude and enthusiasm towards a person's work increased when the principal provided positive morale. Indicators used as evidence included: being acknowledged by the principal, teachers being heard, visibility and presence of the principal, strong management regarding discipline in the code of conduct, empathy for teachers, and respecting teachers as professionals (Lambersky, 2016). The study indicates that consistency in the principalship directly influences the faculty and staff of that school. When an effective principal leaves the school where they have demonstrated a profound impact on the faculty and staff, it was shown that collective efficacy declined in the building. It had to essentially start over with forward progress, specifically with achievement, morale, vision, and vision goals. Situations such as these contribute to the negative impact of principal turnover. In conclusion, equity, relationships, and principal collaboration can help foster increased student achievement and staff growth.

### ***Principal Recruitment and Retention***



Principal succession is a three-part model: pre-succession, succession, and post-succession. In pre-succession, fit and qualifications are matched with the school's organizational structure. During the succession phase, the new principal is put in place. Finally, the new principal interacts with the new school in the post-succession stage. The decision is then made to stay in the position or look at different positions elsewhere. The post-succession can also involve a promotion or a shift within the current district or leaving due to retirement. Longevity was defined as more than 4 years after hire. Papa (2007) argues that the results indicate that schools with less-qualified teachers and higher at-risk students are at a disadvantage in appealing to and retaining highly qualified, effective principals.

The Wallace Foundation compiled information in a meta-synthesis using data from the National Center for Education Statistics at the U.S. Department of Education from 1988, 1991, 1994, 2000, 2004, 2008, and 2012. The Schools and Staffing Survey (SASS) collects information about school principals and is a nationally representative sample. Information including demographics, experience in the principalship and prior positions, tenure in their schools, and education levels were collected.

Six significant trends were identified after analyzing the data collected. The first finding indicated that public school principals have become more diverse than past leaders and serve more low-income students, English language learners, and students with disabilities. This has an environment where these leaders work harder to create opportunities for marginalized students. Finding two suggests that although public school principals have become more racially and ethnically diverse, their student population does not reflect their leaders' backgrounds. The third finding is that the number of women in the principalship has increased. Finding number four indicates that public school principals have not had a change regarding whether they hold an

advanced degree. This has remained stable. The reason for this is that licensure in each state varies. The study also indicated the fifth finding is that public principals have become less experienced, especially in high-need areas. This results from attrition and impacts the quality of the instructional leaders applying for the position. The sixth and final finding indicated that public school principals have shorter tenure areas, especially in high-poverty schools. All of these factors play a part in the challenge of recruiting and retaining school-building principals. There appears to be a gap in representation of gender, race, and ethnicity in current candidates for principalships.

Pendola and Fuller (2018) concluded that the rural context differs from the general principal labor market. There are additional factors that contribute to the lack of recruitment and retention. It was also found that a rural principal is unlikely to see a single cohort of students complete all grades from elementary to high school due to a lack of school-level stability. Gender and race were not determining factors in employment stability in the rural school, whereas salary was. Rural principalship differs from urban and suburban areas. Although all three share commonalities in leadership difficulties, the rural principal faces unique challenges specific to the rural setting. Those challenges include geographic location, lack of resources, lack of internet access, lack of technology, lack of financial aid, and cultural differences such as the rural mindset (Klocko & Justis, 2019). Rural communities lack public transportation options, supermarkets, and facilities for medical services. The rural school district is often expected to provide these services because the community does not have access. The rural principal is charged with maneuvering these challenges in addition to the role multiplicity that exists in rural school districts. Principals take on multiple roles in addition to their role as instructional leaders.

The ability to understand the specific need of the rural district and problem-solve to move a district forward is important to the school's success.

The rural mindset is the rural community's specific values, beliefs, and attitudes (Bright, 2018). Many of the families in the rural community did not have a good experience with education or did not graduate themselves (Bright, 2018). The expectation for many children is that dropping out of school before graduating is acceptable, causing an academic barrier. The rural leader must work diligently to create a new mindset for their students, including an expectation for passing and a mindset for mastery. These students are also expected to work, help with siblings, and attempt to balance school with other family responsibilities. Due to the rural poverty and the large geographical area, farming is prevalent in these communities. Understanding the community's needs and navigating the rural culture mindset makes the role of the rural principal one that requires key expertise of solutions-oriented thinking.

Cieminski (2018) found that fostering sound practices within the role of the principalship provides the groundwork for proper succession and retention. Those practices include differentiating support, fostering relationships, creating partnerships, offering a competitive pay scale, properly onboarding new administration, appropriate professional development provided for the leadership team, and creating actionable plans with systematic follow-through. With that, Federici and Skaalvik (2012) state that principals should experience high levels of self-efficacy in persistence, performance, and motivation to deal with their tasks. Federici and Skaalvik (2012) further the depth of self-efficacy on the role of the principalship. The findings indicated self-efficacy is positively related to job satisfaction and the motivation to quit.

Grissom and Bartanen (2019) indicate the importance of principal effectiveness and retention. After investigating the association between principal effectiveness and principal

turnover, results showed that less-effective principals are demoted to other school positions or leave the field entirely. Additionally, the percentage of low socioeconomic students is a significant factor in longevity with newly hired principals. Furthermore, over 20% of newly hired high school principals in low-achieving or high-poverty schools leave their position in less than one year. Research showed that principal retention is somewhat higher in suburban areas with non-economically disadvantaged Caucasian students. As reported by Kearney, one-third of the respondents indicated a desire to retire, one-third of the respondents indicated a desire to remain in education, but not as the school principal and 30% expressed the desire to stay in their current position. (Norton, 2003). Kearney et al. (2012) contend that the rapid turnover of principals is caused by a lack of commitment to the organization, a lack of shared purpose, and an inability to attain meaningful change. Also, one indicator appears to be prominent in the data: the highest turnover rate is attributed to the school campuses with the most challenging situations.

Grissom et al. (2021) found that what drives the principal to be successful involves engaging and instructionally focused interactions with teachers, building a productive school climate, facilitating productive collaboration and professional learning communities, and managing personnel and resources strategically to have a more fluid manageable system within their school. This success provides the groundwork for a higher rate of retention. To keep high school principals, key factors for retention are beneficial contracts, professional support, higher salaries, and tenure (Yan, 2020).

## **Chapter Summary**

Data indicates that there are reasons for the principal turnover. The role is a high-stress, high-demand position which makes the position challenging. The research emphasizes school

principals' influence on their teachers, staff, and students. Academic achievement for students directly correlates with teacher and principal retention. Self-efficacy and support impact the longevity of the school principal. Research also indicates that best practices and retention strategies can be implemented to assist the principal with the pressure and stress of their leadership role. In reviewing the literature, research is needed on those school-building leaders who stay in demanding, difficult positions.

Amidst the research on principal retention and attrition, what is specifically unique about self-efficacy and the motivation to stay for these leaders is that it has not been viewed from a qualitative perspective. Unlike quantitative measures, the qualitative investigation reveals the story behind the data, which has not been told from the perspective of the tenured high school principal. Evidence is lacking on lived experiences of those who choose to remain in the high school principalship despite the demands placed on the job. What is not understood is what motivates educational leaders to stay in the principalship when these individuals regularly face complex, unpredictable challenges. Therefore, this study focused on the lived experiences of high school principals who remain in their high-demand, high-stress positions long term and what motivated them to continue in their position as educational leaders. Utilizing this research information could lead to further investigation into the best practices for retaining high school principals.

The empirical literature review yielded 14 peer-reviewed references that were utilized. The following databases were searched: ERIC, EBSCO-HOST, Sage Publication, and Google Scholar. Keywords searched were principal, employee retention, principal retention, principal attrition, principal motivation, self-efficacy, leadership, turnover, principal persistence, tenure of school principal, intent to stay, high school principals, threats to sustainability, impact of

principal, study, research, qualitative, quantitative, meta-synthesis, meta-analysis, factors to sustainability, and motivation to stay. The date range filtered articles from 2011-2021. Seven references were not used because they did not fully support the evidence needed. Of the seven, one was a working paper, and two were full dissertations.

Additional searches were performed using different keywords from the initial inquiry. The terms searched were secondary principal, employee retention, principal persistence, administrative turnover, collective efficacy, employee competency, leadership effects, job dissatisfaction for secondary principals, burnout, principal recruitment, leader efficacy, the perceived leadership style of high school principals, departure intentions of school principals, and administrator longevity. The date range was filtered from 2011 to 2021. To expand the literature review's depth, searches were performed without the date range. The data collected consisted of a few qualitative studies in an abundance of quantitative studies. The disparity appeared to be datasets tied to survey information used as the collection method.

## **Chapter 3: Research Design Methodology**

### **Introduction**

Bottery (2016) and Levin and Bradley (2019) have focused on school-building leaders' daily challenges and obstacles. In-depth data indicates that the barriers these leaders face contribute to the decision to leave the field of education (Levin et al., 2020). Obstacles include a lack of resources, teacher turnover, lack of professional development, and financial compensation, among the ongoing challenges (Levin et al., 2020). The NASSP and the LPI conducted a survey that indicated that 42% of principals were considering leaving their current positions (Levin et al., 2020). In contrast, there are school building leaders, specifically high school principals, who choose to stay in demanding roles. The obstacles that challenge the high school principal are why some leave the position or profession; however, it is also the reason that some choose to stay. This qualitative research case study aimed to explore principal retention from the perspective of high school principals. The interest was to determine how rural high school principals in Upstate New York describe the experiences that influence their longevity in their current role and what factors entice them to remain in their positions.

Levin (2020) emphasizes the importance of consistent, quality principalship. Positive benefits of principal stability include consistency and retention of faculty and staff, community building, a decrease in student discipline issues, and an increase in student achievement (Burkhauser, 2017; Coelli & Green, 2012; Kearney et al., 2012; Leithwood & Jantzi, 2008; Maponya, 2020; Sebastian & Allensworth, 2012; Sun, 2004; Valentine & Prater, 2011). Adverse consequences are associated with high principal turnover. Those consequences include increased

costs to districts, high attrition of teachers, inconsistent vision and planning, low morale, and low student achievement scores (Grissom & Bartanen, 2019; Grissom et al., 2021; Hansen, 2018; Tran et al., 2017).

Due to the high stress and high demand of the role, there is a shortage of certified and qualified principals applying for the vacancies of the principalship, as well as an increased departure of principals from the role and field (Papa, 2007; Tekleselassie & Villarreal, 2011; Tran, 2017; Yan, 2010). Stress and burnout are contributors to principal turnover and attrition, and research on the self-efficacy of the leader indicates that the mental health of the leader attributes to job sustainability and the effects on job performance (Beusaert et al., 2016; Gajda & Militello, 2008; Klocko & Wells, 2015; Lane et al., 2021; Postma & Babo, 2019; Skaalvik, 2020; Steward, 2014).

Several high school administrators are leaving the profession. In 2016-2017, 10% of public school principals left the profession completely (Irwin et al., 2021). The average tenure of a high school principal is 4 years, and only 11% of principals stay in their schools for 10 years or more (Irwin et al., 2021). Principals with 10 or more years of experience had a higher percentage of leaving principalship than those with fewer years of experience (U.S. Department of Education, 2019). Additionally, data shows that public school principals who work in high-poverty schools remained in their position only 79% of the time. In contrast, principals in low-poverty schools stayed 86% of the time. (Irwin et al., 2021). Other areas influencing the decision to remain in the position are school enrollment characteristics, such as minority concentrations and school location (Irwin et al., 2021).

Research on principal retention and attrition has been conducted; however, what is lacking in the literature is why high school principals remain in high-demand, high-pressure



positions long-term. Additionally, the COVID-19 pandemic has significantly impacted the retention of professionals in the education field (Bailey & Schurz, 2020). There is little research about what prompts high school principals to remain in their roles when these individuals realize how difficult the position is. Evidence is lacking on lived experiences of those who choose to stay in the high school principalship despite the demands placed on the job. Therefore, research is needed on the lived experiences of high school principals who remain in their high-demand, high-stress positions long term and what entices them to continue in their position as educational leaders. To develop an understanding of high school principals' perceptions of career sustainability, the primary questions that were the focus of the research were:

1. What role, if any, does self-efficacy play in the sustainability of high school principals to stay in their current positions?
2. In what way do high school principals in Upstate New York describe their reasons to remain in their positions?

### **Research Design**

The research questions presented asked for a description from the participants. The framing of the question and the data being asked indicated that the research design was qualitative. Quantitative data is a method that collects data using surveys, numerical data, and statistics (Gliner et al., 2017). Qualitative research is a more subjective method, where data can be interpreted differently by different people (Kalu, 2019). Qualitative research is typically gathered from interviews, observations, or narrative documents (Gliner et al., 2017). Because the research questions sought responses that describe the lived experience of the participants, a qualitative research model was most fitting for this study.

For this research, the interpretive phenomenological analysis (IPA) explained the meaning behind the phenomena. This qualitative research method helped understand the "why" while conducting an in-depth analysis (Wertz et al., 2011). Semi-structured interviews were used to research the lived experience of rural high school principals who choose to remain in their high-stress, high-demand positions. Using this method provided a detailed examination and insight into the personal lived experience of rural high school principals regarding leadership sustainability.

IPA is participant oriented. The research question embeds values, worldview, and a direction of inquiry (Alase, 2017). To gain the participants' perspective, there were two introductory open-ended questions and the opportunity for two to five sub-questions as a follow-up. In alignment with IPA, there were four participants with a homogenous background in the area of inquiry. This purposeful sample did not utilize snowball sampling for other participants that met the criteria. Rural high school principals leading a 9<sup>th</sup> -12<sup>th</sup> grade building for 4 or more years in Upstate New York were asked to sign informed consent to participate.

Using interpretive phenomenological analysis is a qualitative method of research. The instruments utilized to collect the data were: (a) a demographic survey, (b) interview protocol, (c) analytic memos, (d) observation notes, and (e) the researcher. The request for participants was emailed through the BOCES listserv and posted on LinkedIn, Facebook, and Twitter. The introductory letter and demographic survey were distributed through email. The informed consent was signed in person by each participant. As a result of the request for participants, four individuals responded. All four met the criteria of the study. Each individual completed a demographic survey and participated in the face-to-face interview process. All interviews took place in a location of the participant's choice. Allowing the participant to choose the setting may

have impacted the responses to the interview questions, as three of the four participants chose their own offices. The participant that did not select the participant's own office used a conference room in a different school district located in their town of residence. Two of the four participants completed the interview during school hours, which impacted time and potentially the responses, although the interviews were conducted behind closed doors in a confidential setting while the school day was still in session.

The importance of identifying potential bias while conducting the interview process was recognized. The researcher is a current rural high school principal in Upstate New York. Because of this, open-ended questions were created and allowed the participant to respond without the researcher's bias influencing the response. Follow-up questions remained neutral and inquisitive without reflecting the potential bias.

### **Research Context**

IPA using purposive sampling aimed to explore the participants' lived experiences. The participants were a sample selected with 4 or more years of experience in the high school principal role. Additionally, the participants were currently in the position of the rural high school principal. The focus location was in Upstate New York because of proximity and ease of access. Additionally, Upstate New York was the target area due to the lack of research on this topic in this geographical location. Focusing on this geographic area provided information specific to this region. In 2015-2016, New York State had 4,617 public schools (NCES, n.d.). Of those districts, 744 schools in New York were categorized as rural, totaling 11.4% of the schools in New York State. There were 1,484 suburban schools (36.8%) and 2,037 urban schools, making up 45.4% of the total schools in New York State (NCES, n.d.). Education in rural schools differs from that of urban and suburban, although each has its' own challenges. The lived

experience of the participants was important to the data collected regarding perspectives from different rural Upstate New York counties. Focusing on rural schools provided perspectives on how principal turnover affects these educational institutions.

Using Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis is a qualitative method of research. The instruments utilized to collect the data were: (a) a demographic survey, (b) interview protocol, (c) analytic memos, (d) observation notes, and (e) the researcher. The request for participants was emailed through the BOCES listserv and posted on LinkedIn, Facebook, and Twitter. The introductory letter and demographic survey were distributed through email. The informed consent was signed in person by each participant. As a result of the request for participants, four individuals responded. All four met the criteria of the study. Each individual completed a demographic survey and participated in the face-to-face interview process. All interviews took place in a location of the participant's choice. Allowing the participant to choose the setting may have impacted the responses to the interview questions, as three of the four participants chose their own offices. The participant that did not select the participant's own office used a conference room in a different school district located in their town of residence. Two of the four participants completed the interview during school hours, which impacted time and potentially the responses, although the interviews were conducted behind closed doors in a confidential setting while the school day was still in session.

### **Research Participants**

When using qualitative research methods, the idea was to utilize purposive sampling when investigating the lived experiences of a specific population. Interviewing is one of the four suggested methods for collecting data. Creswell (2012) suggests the purposeful selection of participants to help the researcher better understand the problem and the research questions.

Miles and Huberman (1994) identify four features important to data collection while interviewing. They include the setting, the participants, the events, and the process (Miles and Huberman, 1994). IPA is rooted in phenomenology, an approach used to understand the human lived experience through personal experiences and perceptions. In the process of IPA, the researcher is an active participant in the interview process (Davidsen, 2013).

The New York State Department of Education defines students who enter ninth grade as high school students. Therefore, for this study, a high school principal was chosen as the leader of a secondary school that serves students in Grades 9-12. Upstate New York rural high school principals who have remained in their principalship for 4 years or more were solicited for an interview using a semi-structured interview process. The length of 4 years or more was selected because the average tenure of a high school principal is 4 years (Irwin et al., 2021). To keep this study manageable, four principals were interviewed. The researcher solicited participants through email (Appendix A and B), BOCES listservs, and professional networks.

The four participants were located in different regions of Upstate New York. One was located in Central New York, one was located in Western New York, and the other two were located in the Finger Lakes. The range of experience varied for the participant pool, as shown in Table 4.1. Individual race and gender were not included in this demographic because those attributes could risk the identification of the participants. Three male participants and one female participant were included in this study. Their genders will not be identified in their individual responses. As previously noted, they will be referred to using the non-gender conforming pronouns ‘they/them/their’ throughout this study. Additionally, three participants are nearing the end of their careers, potentially retiring within the next 3 years. The principal with the shortest

tenure expressed intention to retire from the district currently employed. Each participant also had a longer tenure as a teacher before becoming an administrator.

**Table 4.1**

*Participant Demographics*

Participant	Age Range (in Years)	Years in education	Years as HS Principal (current job)	Years in the same district	Highest Level of Education Attained	Self- reported Location
1	33-44	21	6	6	Certificate of Advanced Study	Finger Lakes
2	45-54	28	18	23	Certificate of Advanced Study	Finger Lakes
3	45-54	29	16	29	Certificate of Advanced Study	Western NY
4	45-54	31	7	7	Certificate of Advanced Study	Central NY

**Instrument Used in Data Collection**

This qualitative research design utilized 60-minute, face-to-face, semi-structured interviews with a purposive sample of Upstate New York rural high school principals. Using this method provided a detailed examination and insight into the personal lived experience of high school principals regarding leadership sustainability. Semi-structured interviews using an interview protocol (Appendix B) were the instrument for data collection because of the in-depth understanding of the lived experience that can be reported through this process. Creswell (2003) recommends one or two central questions with no more than five to seven follow-up open-ended

questions. Questions were prepared in advance for the semi-structured interview. Questions were piloted to determine reliability and validity. Interview questions were tested by two other school administrators not taking place in the study. Adjustments to the questions were based on the feedback before being finalized for the actual interviews.

Participants were informed that a follow-up interview may be needed as part of the informed consent process. Follow-up interviews were not conducted to clarify or fill gaps in understanding the information from the original interviews, as it was not needed. The interview questions were driven by the current data regarding the number of school administrators leaving the profession. Information from the literature review regarding reasons for leaving the role of principal informed the questions asked of the participants.

### **Procedures for Data Collection**

Upon approval from the St. John Fisher University Institutional Review Board, districts in the Upstate New York rural designation, as outlined by the New York State Education Department, were explored via the school websites. Choosing participants from different counties in Upstate New York was attempted. Two participants were from the same county. First, emails with a brief introduction asking for participation were sent to individuals who met the study's criteria (Appendix A). Upon receipt of interested high school principals that meet the criteria of holding the same position for 4 years or more in Upstate New York, contact was made to meet in person at the participant's convenience. Demographics were collected during the interview questioning (Appendix C).

The interview included an introduction with confidentiality information, questions, follow-up questions, and closure thanking the participant for their time (Appendix D). Participants were reminded that the interview would not contain identifying information and

would be confidential. All participants were provided a copy of the letter of consent and confidentiality (Appendix E).

Confidentiality was maintained by assigning each participant a numerical identification, such as “Participant 1.” Interview recordings were conducted via Voice Notes, with permission from the participants. Districts remain confidential using a label, such as “District 1.” Master lists of confidential pseudonyms connecting the participant and the district are in a locked drawer in the researcher’s home. They will be destroyed one year after the defense of the dissertation. Two recording devices were used in case of an error in recording.

Information regarding potential follow-up interviews was also shared. Information shared with the participants was that the follow-up interview would clarify or give more in-depth explanations of the information provided upon initial analysis and coding completion. Follow-up interviews were not necessary for this study. Follow-up interviews would have been administered via telephone or Zoom. Transcription of the interviews utilized a web-based program, Otter.ai, and the transcript was reviewed for accuracy. All recordings are stored securely on a password-protected personal laptop and will be destroyed one year after the defense of the dissertation. All notes and coding are locked in a locked drawer in the researcher’s home for three years after the defense of the dissertation. All interviews were conducted in February 2023. Transcription and coding followed the interview process. After the transcript coding, themes were categorized and analyzed for similarities.

### **Procedures for Data Analysis**

IPA is intended to gain information about the lived experience of the participants. After interviewing the participants, there were three steps to the data analysis process: transcription and multiple readings of the data collected, transforming the notes into emerging themes, and



identifying the relationships and clustering the themes (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2012). Analytic memo writing after each interview also provided insight into the lived experience of the participants.

First, participants were listened to as they were recorded, notes were taken, and the recording was transcribed verbatim using Otter.ai. After reading the transcripts multiple times to understand the information, confirming the transcript's accuracy, and reviewing the notes taken during the interview, including information regarding the setting where the interviews occurred, all data sources were categorized into themes. Inductive coding was used to discover themes in the interviews as they presented themselves. Once the coding was completed for emerging themes, the researcher reviewed the coding looking for clusters and connections in the data. The first level of coding was initial coding. Line-by-line coding was used to connect emerging codes into themes. Analyzing the themes allowed the researcher to look for patterns that allowed for interpretations of the data with a deeper understanding (Christians & Carey, 1989).

## **Summary**

Retention of qualified high school principals has continued to be challenging (Klocko & Wells, 2015). Evidence shows that principal turnover negatively affects staff retention and student achievement (Grissom & Bartanen, 2019; Grissom et al., 2021; Hansen, 2018; Tran et al., 2017). Additionally, significant evidence also shows the positive benefits to principal stability (Burkhauser, 2017; Coelli & Green, 2012; Kearney et al., 2012; Leithwood & Jantzi, 2008; Maponya, 2017; Sebastian & Allensworth, 2012; Sun, 2004; Valentine & Prater, 2011). Research shows that the self-efficacy of the leader implies that the mental health of that individual is a direct attribute to job sustainability and the effects on job performance (Beusaert et al., 2016; Gajda & Militello, 2008; Klocko & Wells, 2015; Lane et al., 2021; Postma & Babo,

2019; Skaalvik, 2020; Steward, 2014). Because of the lack of information about principal longevity and the number of principals leaving their positions, research is needed on the lived experiences of high school principals who remain in their roles. Using IPA and the semi-structured interview process, this research explored and focused on why individuals remain in the principalship and if self-efficacy was a factor in the decision to stay in the role of the high school principal.

Chapter 4 presents the study findings, including quotations from the participants. The fifth chapter discusses the implications of the findings, the recommendations for change in practice, the limitations of the study, and the recommendations for further research.

## Chapter 4: Results

### Introduction

The high school principalship has become an increasingly challenging position within the school environment. The job requirements have made it necessary that the high school principal have working knowledge in many areas while still leading and navigating the faculty, staff, and students through the educational process. The reason these principals choose to rise to the challenge has yet to be reported in detail. Exploring the lived experience of veteran high school principals who choose to remain in the rural principalship will contribute to research on leadership sustainability.

High school principals demonstrate dedication and resilience in their roles. Instead of focusing on only the challenges of the principalship, participants focused on the benefits of working in a rural setting. Rural principals have the opportunity to build relationships in a different way than suburban and urban principals. The ability to personally know their students and families creates a unique learning environment for all stakeholders.

Chapter 4 presents the analysis of the semi-structured interviews. Direct quotes from the participants are included to offer their perspectives and experiences as rural high school principals in their own words. Utilizing the IPA as the research design allows for the lived experience of these professionals to be shared. Four rural high principals were interviewed. The gender of the individuals interviewed is masked to protect their identity; therefore, the pronouns they/them/their will be used as non-gender specific pronouns to present the findings. The participants included three males and one female. All participants were White. All have been in

the position of rural high school principal for at least 4 years in Upstate New York. For this study, rural is defined as “all population, housing, and territory not included within an urbanized area or urban cluster” (Ratcliffe et al., 2016). The interviews presented in this chapter were synthesized using inductive coding to discover themes in the interviews as they presented themselves. Once the coding was completed for emerging themes, the interview coding was analyzed, looking for clusters and connections in the data. The first level of coding was initial coding, which was completed using line-by-line coding so that emerging codes could be connected into themes. Analyzing the themes allowed the researcher to look for patterns that allowed for interpretations of the data with a deeper understanding (Christians & Carey, 1989).

Table 4.2 identifies the themes and subthemes discovered through the data analysis. The subthemes of work environment and work/life balance contribute to the reasons why a rural high school principal would leave the position. The information presented under these subthemes introduces the challenges and barriers that complicate the position of rural high school principals. This information emerges as the theme of “obstacles facing rural principals.” The subthemes of relationships and impact/opportunities present examples of why the participants remain in the position. These subthemes emerge to create the theme of “why they stay.” The information shared provides insight into the reasons that are important to the participants for remaining in their roles. Finally, the subthemes of boundaries and collaboration tell the story of how these professionals remain in their roles. The detail provided shares the motivation and examples of self-efficacy that create how these individuals can remain in their positions. The three themes combined explain the participants' perspective about the sustainability of rural high school principals.

**Table 4.2**

*Research Question Themes and Subthemes*

Theme	Subtheme
1. Obstacles facing rural principals	1a. Work environment 1b. Work/life balance
2. Why they stay	2a. Relationships 2b. Impact/opportunities
3. How they stay	3a. Boundaries 3b. Collaboration

A deeper research analysis allowed the data to be sorted into four distinct categories: internal deterrents, external deterrents, internal incentives, and external incentives. Figure 4.1 details the factors contributing to the decision to remain in the rural high school principalship. These factors directly affect the longevity and sustainability of these leaders. Throughout the interview process, the participants gave examples of incentives and deterrents that contribute to the decision-making process when faced with deciding to stay or go. Internal incentives included the creation of relationships and the creation of a positive culture along with the benefits that contribute to a positive work environment, the reciprocal use of flexibility, the setting of personal boundaries, and the connection to the community. External incentives that contribute to the data include shared leadership, an environment of collaboration and teamwork, self-created mentorship relationships, and the overall “family feel” in the building. As a counterpoint, there were data that presented as deterrents to remaining in the principalship. Internal deterrents included statements identifying the individual's mental health, handling personal attacks, having their integrity questioned, and the uncertainty of their performance. External deterrents identified were: workload, pandemic workload, the impact on their family and personal life, rural culture mindset from the community and families, the lack of formal mentorship and support, the entitlement of stakeholders, and limited positive feedback. The definition of entitlement for this

study is the leveraging of one’s privilege in a situation or interaction. Examples presented in the collected data include personal accounts of stakeholder entitlement. Furthermore, the data collected reveals the reasons supporting each theme in this study.

**Figure 4.1**

<b>Internal Incentives</b>	<b>External Incentives</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Creation of relationships</li> <li>• Creating positive culture</li> <li>• Flexibility</li> <li>• Personal boundaries</li> <li>• Connection to the community</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Shared leadership</li> <li>• Collaboration and teamwork</li> <li>• Self-created mentorship</li> <li>• “Family feel”</li> </ul>
<b>Internal Deterrents</b>	<b>External Deterrents</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Mental health</li> <li>• Handling personal attacks</li> <li>• Integrity questioned</li> <li>• Uncertainty of performance</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Workload</li> <li>• Pandemic workload</li> <li>• Impact on family and personal life</li> <li>• Rural culture mindset</li> <li>• Lack of mentorship and support</li> <li>• Entitlement of stakeholders</li> <li>• Limited positive feedback</li> </ul>

## **Research Questions**

The research questions for this study are to develop an understanding of high school principals' perceptions of career sustainability:

1. What role, if any, does self-efficacy play in the sustainability of rural high school principals to stay in their current positions?
2. In what way do rural high school principals in Upstate New York describe their reasons to remain in their positions?

## **Findings**

### **Theme 1: Obstacles Facing Rural Principals**

Many obstacles hinder the success of high school principals. Each participant expressed challenges that are presented because of the rural setting of their school in addition to the overall

challenges faced as a high school leader. All four participants shared experiences of difficulties that complicate the position. The two subthemes that emerged from the data were work environment and work/life balance. Some of the data collected is shared under both subthemes as the information is interconnected and speaks to each.

### ***Subtheme 1: Work Environment***

**Workload.** Participants indicated the workload of the high school principal has become all-encompassing, and the role has added responsibility. Expectations from individuals outside of education become challenging for the person in the position. According to the data, the characteristics of rural schools and the declining population cause principals to take on multiple roles in the school. In addition to the numerous roles, the data showed that each day for a high school principal is dependent on the needs of the building. Participant 2 compared the job of a high school principal to other careers. “I've always said, take a doctor, an attorney, a businessperson...give them 387 students and 60 staff members, and see how their day runs... then they'll understand the mindset of an administrator.”

One of the challenges that Participant 2 shared was about the partnership with professionals outside of education proving to be difficult because there is a lack of understanding of the role of the principalship. Additionally, Participant 2 reflected on the reactivity of the principalship. Participant 2 shared that they are collaborating with retired businesspeople to provide a new opportunity for the students in the district. Participant 2 shared:

They [outside professionals] said they want all the work done in a month, and it's going to take a year, and it's going to take personnel, and we [high school principals] have a calendar set up every day. There's not one day that goes as planned.

Participant 2 shared that the “students' social emotional mandates, [and] demands of the job” keeps the Participant up at night. Participant 2 shared their thoughts while awake at 3:30 a.m. because they are always thinking about the demands of the job. Participant 2 further discussed the time crunch that accompanies the job: time seems to be an additional pressure for the Participant and requires them to be skilled in prioritizing the workload.

Our work has to be done between 7:30 a.m. and 2:30 p.m. because that's when the students are here and 3:00 p.m. when the teachers are here. Once they're gone, we can't do a lot of our work that needs to get done during the school day because they're [the students and staff] gone, so we have to fit everything into seven and a half hours.

In addition to the typical expectations of the role, Participants shared the experience of being expected to be an expert in all areas. This led to expressing frustration with not being able to focus on the instructional part of the principalship. Participant 3 reported that “the day never goes as planned, and I question my role because of other obligatory duties. The expectation is to be a jack-of-all-trades.” Participant 3 shared the desire to be able to dedicate more time to being the instructional leader instead of being occupied by the other roles a high school principal is tasked with. Participant 3 elaborated on the frustration with not having the time to be able to prioritize instructional vision and movement.

Participant 3 added, “When you're fighting the fires of the day, all day long, and the only time you have to really concentrate on instructional vision and movement is at the end of the day when you're tapped out. It doesn't work.”

Participant 3 reflected that there had been a shift in the role over the years. Participant 3 discussed the fluctuation of roles and how they start off as positions and roles; however, there does not end up being a plan for support and sustainability. Participant 3 stated:



I've been there long enough to see positions, other quasi and administrative roles, come and go through the years because the board supports it, and then the budget can't handle it, so it has kind of fluctuated. I'm hoping we're getting to a point where it's a little bit more stable organizational chart where, you know, I can focus on principal duties.

Additionally, Participant 3 further discussed the lack of clarity in the roles of a high school principal. Participant 3's small rural district has only four to six administrators districtwide at any given time. They shared the need to communicate the job descriptions and responsibilities clearly.

We've kind of lived in them [the jobs] without having a lot of definition to them. I mean, our job descriptions, but we're realizing that we're still tripping over each other and crossing over on things. So, we need to clean that up so that we can be really efficient and really clear about who's going to take different aspects.

Regarding the multiple responsibilities of the high school principal and the current state of safety in schools, Participant 4 shared a story about a suspicious car on the far side of the school property early one morning before student arrival. Participant 4 shared the experience of nervously approaching the car, not knowing the situation surrounding the parked vehicle. Although it ended up being an innocent situation, Participant 4 stated, "Today, this is part of what I have to do." Referencing safety and security as an additional responsibility of the role, Participant 4 added, "Because what we've learned and seen in our world today, says anybody can come and park, and you know [implying danger], you want to talk about, you know, unnerving people. We are more heightened; we are more aware."

**Pandemic Workload.** The COVID-19 pandemic was indicated as another reason for the increased workload. Working in a situation that had not been experienced in education before

resulted in a new approach to educating students. Flexibility was identified as a required trait to succeed in this situation. Additionally, the Participants stated it was the most challenging work without boundaries or support for the principals. Accommodating students and families was a daily challenge for the Participants. Participant 1 spoke of the challenges and prioritization they were required to do to lead.

We had to put everything on the back burner. So now we're trudging along...that was tough, but it's really trying to use the staff to pull those reluctant people, and I told them, you're going to have those 5-10% [of students] that are not going to want to come, but you just keep pushing everybody forward, and they're not going to have a choice.

Participant 3 reflected on the confusion of roles throughout the COVID-19 pandemic. They shared the crossover of roles since this was a situation that the leadership team had not ever experienced. Participant 3 shared:

It is interesting, though, with COVID...everybody started tripping over each other because they're trying to be helpful with each other to try and to take a little off your plate. Before I know it, I'm overstepping into your sandbox...even my superintendent was doing that with things that I should have been handling as a building principal at the time...when you come out of those situations, now the lines are gray. It's muddled, and it's not clear as to what your role is anymore when you operate in these times.

Participant 1 described their mindset and emotion during the COVID-19 pandemic. "I don't even remember half of the stuff that we did. We lived craziness...it was also traumatic."

Participant 1 referenced the workload and schedule that the administration has to keep in their district. Participant 1 shared:

We sat here every Friday afternoon, changing students' schedules; they [students] could choose week to week, whether they were in person or home. So, every Friday afternoon, we sat here and changed students' schedules, and some days we didn't go home 'til 7:00 p.m. because we might have twelve schedules to change at the high school level... It was a challenge.

The participants shared that the work attempted during the pandemic was some of the most demanding work and longest hours they had endured in the principalship. Flexibility was a key attribute demonstrated throughout the COVID-19 pandemic and continues today because of the lasting effects and learning loss due to the pandemic.

**Rural Culture Mindset.** Another barrier presented to rural principals, as indicated by the Participants, is the rural culture mindset. Poverty, specifically generational poverty, is focused in rural areas of the United States (Schaefer et al., 2016). The Participants specifically identified the mindset of families that suffer from generational poverty and lack of motivation for completing high school as a challenge to the principalship. This study found that due to poverty, families rely on the school district to provide many things that the family cannot, including food, warmth, clothing, and many other basic essentials. The school district becomes a provider for these needs, which places additional responsibility and expectations on the principal. Participant 2 called the district "land rich, people poor." Participant 2 tells the story of a company coming into the area that did not help the poverty rate. Participant 2 shared:

About 10 years ago, there was a call center that came down there expecting 500 jobs, but they were minimum wage. So that, to me, contributed to poverty, the cycle of poverty.

We have kids quitting school that go to the [local grocery store] and make \$170 a week,

and that's like, \$2,000 a week to us. They'd never had anything; they're on welfare, and to get... a 16–17-year-old kid that makes \$200 a week...that's a big thing for him.

Participant 2 also shared that there are parents who request that students stay home once they turn 16. When asked the reason, Participant 2 replied that the family members are home, on public assistance, and are lonely. This adds to the cycle of poverty because the mindset is not to aspire to contribute in any way. In the Participants' communities, being unemployed and on assistance is often an acceptable means for the standard of living.

Participant 2 discussed other reasons that some families do not value the completion of the high school diploma and the challenge of motivating the students to set high goals and expectations.

We have parents that want their kids to quit school because they need company at home; they're not going to work. There are very few family-owned farms outside of the Mennonite population. Parents encourage their children to quit... to go to work or just to stay home with them. The challenge is to inspire kids...we don't want our kids being laborers on a construction site. We want them to be supervisors. We want them to own the company.

Participant 4 also identified the challenge of the rural mindset regarding the value of a high school education and the perspective of obtaining a high school diploma. According to Participant 4, many family members did not graduate high school and felt they were “doing just fine.” Because of this, there is less emphasis on completing the high school diploma. Educational completion is not a priority for many of these families. Changing the rural mindset was presented as a challenge for Participant 4.

Participant 4 identified generational poverty specifically as a part of the struggle.

Participant 4 shared:

There's also those pockets of generational poverty, where maybe education just wasn't a value... I [the parent] never graduated, didn't need to... and I [the parent] work for the garage next door, whatever they do, they [feel they]- are doing just fine. The one way to help promote change with that is to have them be involved in the change.

Participant 4 also referenced the challenges of being in a rural community. Participant 4 stated, "There's some generational poverty...[the school] is the hub of their whole community. There's no other business here... no other sporting arena for kids to do things." Participant 4 also discussed the changes in the family demographic and the increase in academic expectations from New York State. Both contribute to the challenges of the principalship. Participant 4 added:

You know, when you and I were growing up, the vast majority of kids had two parents at home; one probably worked, if not both of them at a different time. The other piece is the McKinney-Vento [homeless student act]. How many of our kids are homeless, and we're going to get them to a Regents diploma? They're trying to find food or a roof over their head.

Participant 4 shared an experience of visiting two students who were homeless. Participant 4

recalled the visit and then discussed how the school district provides for students in need.

Participant 4 expressed compassion for the students, and as Participant 4 shared the experience of the visit, they reflected on the importance of these students attending school daily.

There's a house in the front, and then there's an older barn out back. I found two kids living there with tractors, and it's a dirt floor with a couch. The kid was trying to build [it]. Neither of the homes were a good place to be.

Participant 4 added, [Being in school] “they're going to get two meals a day, and it's going to be warm in here, versus what the trailer might be like, or the apartment building might be like.”

Participant 2 also added the significance of the school district providing resources to families.

Participant 2 stated:

The school is the heartbeat of this community, so they bring their problems to the school, and they want the school to fix them. In a small rural, high-poverty district, that's the biggest issue that we're facing is that social-emotional learning and that trauma - the adverse childhood experiences. They know that the school has resources, and they expect the school to fix it, and to help them, and to guide them.

Trying to meet the students' basic needs is a barrier to providing them with the expected education. Participants shared that without meeting those needs, the students are not able to learn subject areas like mathematics or science. The challenge for the Participants is breaking the cycle of rural poverty and the mindset that education is unimportant. This adds another facet to the role of the rural high school principal.

**Limited Mentorship/Inconsistent Support.** Limited mentorship and inconsistent support were identified as challenges in the principalship. Many of the Participants did not have formal mentorship for more than one year. For others, how the mentorship was presented was not conducive to the timing or the principal's needs. Each Participant was able to build mentoring relationships on their own to meet their needs. Some received formal mentoring from a local university. Others formed their own professional relationships with colleagues and other principals to create mentoring opportunities.

Participant 1 spoke of the confusion with the mentorship offered. There was a lack of communication, which took away from the importance of mentorship, as reported by Participant

1. Participant 1 stated, “My first year, I had to pick my own mentor. It’s part of our contract.” Participant 1 added, “My second year, I was assigned a mentor through [local college]...she was just amazing to learn from.” Participant 1 continued, “Then he [the superintendent] signed me up again for this year, but then requested that I have a different one, which I don’t know why... it happened without any conversation.” Participant 1 also identified a professional relationship built with the retired district superintendent as a mentor and the director of curriculum and instruction. The value of the mentorship was lost in the lack of communication and information that was not provided by the superintendent. The inconsistency in the mentorship experience for Participant 1 created another challenge with the amount of support offered.

Participant 2 discussed how they were put into their first principalship. They were moved into the position as an interim because the sitting principal had a medical issue. Participant 2 was reluctant because they did not have the building leadership experience as a principal. Participant 2 shared, “The superintendent, who was an interim, came in and said, “Hey, do you want to be the principal, or do you need me to get somebody to mentor you? I said, ‘I don’t know what the hell I’m doing right now. I need somebody to come in.’ We brought in two retired superintendents.” Those superintendents did not work out according to Participant 2. This school was a difficult urban school, and the other superintendents would not stay in a mentorship role because of the school's difficulties. Participant 2 added that a different retired superintendent “called and stated, ‘I know you’re struggling now, and I know there’s nobody out there. Come over and talk to me.’” This superintendent provided the mentorship that Participant 2 needed.

Participant 2 discussed how the superintendent presented mentorship in his current rural district. How the mentorship was presented was critical to the reception of the idea. Participant 2 shared the scenario in which it was rolled out to the administrative teams:

So for me, there was a lack of mentorship when I took over as principal. We had the opportunity for mentorship through [local university] about 10 years ago, and the superintendent just walked into the administrative meeting and said, “I’ve gotten you all mentors, and it starts next week; no questions asked.

At the time, Participant 2 had been a sitting principal for many years and had only one mentorship experience in another district. Because of the timing and the way the mentorship opportunity was presented, Participant 2 expressed how offended they were by the situation.

Participant 2 added, “I had more experience than everyone sitting at the table combined... I was offended. I refused it... mentorship is huge. You don’t know what you don’t know.”

Participant 3 did not dive into the topic of mentorship as deeply as the other Participants. They stated that there was standard mentorship that one would expect in the situation. Participant 3 said, “I have had several mentoring relationships through the years, some of them the district helped to coordinate, involved our administrators and what you would picture as a typical mentoring type of monthly meeting.”

Participant 4 was not offered mentorship through the local university as the other three were. The relationships forged within the district provided mentorship for Participant 4.

Participant 4 stated:

I was fortunate to have the director of human resources as my mentor for the first three or 4 years and maybe not so much the fifth year. That was critical because I could have a lot of critical high school conversations with him. So that was critical for me.



Mentorship is a crucial element in the principalship, providing information to help guide the principals. The Participants each expressed different experiences with mentorship, which directly impacted their role as principals.

**Stakeholder Entitlement.** The definition of entitlement for this study is the leveraging of one's privilege in a situation or conversation. Stakeholder entitlement emerged as a topic under challenges. Participants identified community members, parents, staff members, and students as entitled at times. This level of entitlement is a more prominent facet of the challenges of the principalship. Although this is something that the Participants have had to deal with before, the level of entitlement and the frequency of the situations involving entitlement has increased. Participant 2 mentioned that the community expectation is because they pay taxes, the principal works for them. Additionally, Participant 1 discussed that parents and students expect their challenge or problem to be the most important when it involves the school. Furthermore, some staff members feel they need information that may not pertain to them.

Participant 2 told of a situation that happened the same morning as the interview for this study. Participant 2 shared the scenario that occurred just before the interviewer arrived for the scheduled appointment. Participant 2 shared:

Just before you arrived, the greeter came down and said, "Your 1:00 appointment is here." So I went out, and I'm like, that's not Raina. It was a community member that wanted to meet with me [without an appointment]. We get a lot of people in a small rural community that say, 'I have access. I pay taxes. I'm going to meet with [Participant 2]. I pay your salary, so you're going to do what I want.'

Entitlement was also introduced by Participant 1 concerning teachers. Participant 1 talked about how many situations must remain confidential, and confidentiality is a huge part of the

principalship. Often, there are staff members or teachers who feel they are entitled to the information regarding a student or a situation, according to Participant 1. Elaborating on the teacher/staff entitlement, Participant 1 stated:

We use the line... “There's more to the story that we can't tell you, and you just need to trust us. There's a reason that we made this decision, and there's more to the story that we can't tell you.” Hopefully, the majority of our teachers trust us that we're making the right choices.

Participant 1 also spoke of the entitlement parents have in the district:

We have parents who call and think that because they called and voiced a concern that there needs to be a change like that and think it'll be changed because they said it needed to be changed. So that's a challenge. Certain parents, if you push back, and even though you explain that maybe it's because of policy or past practice, or whatever the circumstance, they don't like your answer, then they go to the superintendent a lot of times.

The obstacle for the high school principal is tactfully addressing the person and the entitled mindset while maintaining the relationship with the stakeholder. According to the Participants, a clear chain of command would assist with this situation.

**Limited Feedback.** Another challenge to the principalship, as shared by the Participants, is inconsistent feedback and lack of recognition from their supervisors. Outside of the formal evaluation, Participants identified that there is little acknowledgment of successes, and feedback is typically provided only when there is a problem. Each also identified that they do not need verbal compliments because of their own belief in their performance (self-efficacy).

Participant 2 stated:

They observe me in a mid-year checkpoint meeting with a staff member, and then they give me their notes on it... they walk away. They rank me, and then at the end of the year, it's the same thing. There's not a lot of feedback. [For] eight years, I've never received a letter saying hey, congratulations... outstanding job. You might get after a board meeting a "Nice job with your presentation." I've probably had five of those. [If] you look at the success the small buildings had: US News and Weekly top ranking, School Project Lead the Way ... Top 20%, you would think you would get some [acknowledgment]. I don't need that; I've never needed that.

Participant 3 stated, "You've got your standard that comes in the form of annual evaluations and, you know, I'll be honest, most of the time, that's me setting goals...that's what my supervisors have wanted."

Participant 3 added, "I'd like to say I've received more feedback... [Participant 3], you did really well on this, [I] love the way that you like this or did this. I don't. I don't get much with that. I haven't through the years."

Each Participant mentioned throughout the interview process how they take care of others regarding positive feedback and reinforcement to create an environment where the students and faculty/staff can thrive. The Participants mentioned the desire for some feedback that was more positive, but stated that they would not let that affect their motivation to do their jobs well. Although they did not feel they received individual positive feedback, each thought it was important to give positive feedback to stakeholders.

The principals discussed the general workload and feeling stretched too thin. The district's size and number of administrators led to the multiple roles for the principals. The expectation that the principal would fulfill multiple roles within the district left the Participants

feeling that their quality in these roles remained at the surface level. According to Bandura (1997), the self-efficacy of the principal will decrease in a situation such as this, resulting in less success for the principal. In addition to the daily workload, leading through a pandemic presented a different workload, which was difficult for all Participants. Creating a new methodology for learning and trying to meet student needs under strict regulation emerged as a difficulty for all Participants. Although there were some successes in the execution of COVID-19 pandemic leadership, the challenges caused reactive leadership. The participants expressed a lack of boundaries and feeling the need to always be available as the school leader. This non-stop mentality created a level of exhaustion that none of the Participants had experienced before the pandemic. These internal and external deterrents threaten the sustainability of the rural high school principal.

### ***Subtheme 2: Work/Life Balance***

**Impact on the Family and Personal Life.** Each Participant identified a time when the principalship's role directly impacted their family and personal life. Participant responses indicated that the principalship adversely affects the principal's family and personal life. Participant 1 added that the long hours encroach on the time spent with the family. "...the longer nights... there are periods of time that I might go a couple of days with only seeing them in the morning."

When asked to elaborate on the impact on the participant's family, Participant 1 responded, "Our family dynamics have changed; we don't eat dinner together like we used to... I've had to set a day aside on the weekend where I don't do work, which is really hard to do."

Participant 1 added, “The longer days definitely have affected my family. I was the person that took the kids to the doctors and did all the running around for sports and all of those things until I came here.”

Finding the home/life balance has been a challenge for Participant 1. Although Participant 1 has been in the role for over six years, there is still a constant strain between home and work. Participant 1 showed more emotion and was thoughtful as they responded, “I can't just leave [work]. So that has caused some turmoil with my oldest, who feels like I picked my job over her sometimes... I've been here almost six years, and it's still a fight with her.”

Participant 2 shared situations that arose due to their children attending the district as non-resident students. A conflict arose due to the children being related to the principal. It caused conflict in multiple situations, and their children's difficulty right up until graduation left a bad taste in Participant 2's mouth. Participant 2's daughters faced constant conflict with their parent in the role of the high school principal, some of which Participant 2 was not made aware of until after the children graduated. Participant 2 shared that the daughters and Participant 2's spouse chose not to share because they thought it would directly affect how Participant 2 would be able to do their job. This led to Participant 2 explaining why their office walls were bare.

You see nothing on the walls because my daughters graduated here a year and a half ago... and they were treated like [expletive]. You can't imagine... being a principal in your own district... they were always excluded, and they were excluded from the parties because well, they'll rat us out, and your [parent] will suspend us.

Participant 2 described some situations where their daughters were excluded, including photos by the lake for prom, parties, and get-togethers. In this part of the interview, expletives were used about the situation, and the Participant showed emotion that the interviewer interpreted as a

personal attack. The Participant displayed anger at the fact that the children were a target and experienced what they did because their parent was the high school principal. Participant 2 shared that they felt no one was protecting their children, and many knew what was happening. Participant 2 felt as though their trust was broken.

Participant 2 shared a story about their child receiving a scholarship because the child was at the top of the class. Outside complaints and allegations were reported to the superintendent, which were not true. An investigation into the participant was conducted due to the child receiving the outside scholarship, although Participant 2 abstained from selecting scholarships that year. The Participant did not have any ties to the outside scholarship. However, an external investigation was completed looking into the school's selection process, and the Participant was found to have exemplary practice. The lack of support for the Participant damaged the relationship with the district, and as a result, the Participant's office walls are bare. The raw emotion displayed by Participant 2 regarding questioning their integrity was shown through anger and tears. Participant 2 shared that they were emotional because, in their opinion, their role was to take care of everybody, and no one was taking care of them or their daughters.

Participant 2 added, "But there's no pictures of my family that used to be flooded here, really, because of the attacks that occurred. With that, for me, becomes some resentment and anger, so I'm not going to share my family down here anymore." Participant 4's children attend the same district where the Participant is the high school principal. Participant 4 shared that the child struggles with his role in the school and has a negative perception due to his parent being the high school principal. Participant 4 stated:

He [the 15-year-old son] doesn't like me knowing the teachers or knowing when he does something wrong...and we've had some interesting conversations about that. [Son stated]

You don't know what it's like to be the son of the principal... my response to him is you don't know what it's like to be the principal of a kid in the building.

Participant 4 shared the son's discomfort in their (Participant 4's) visits to common areas in the school, such as the school cafeteria. Participant 4 explained that the connections made with students are in places like the cafeteria, and those are the Participant's favorite places to meet with students and get to know them. The Participant's son expressed to the Participant that those visits to the common areas make him feel like he doesn't have his own space in the school without his parent being present.

**Mental Health.** Another emerging factor, as stated by the Participants, was the idea of the mental wellness of the high school principal. Throughout the interview process, the Participants noted that the principal takes care of other stakeholders, but the same attention is not reversed to the principal. Additionally, the Participants mentioned the worry that keeps them up at night.

Participant 3 spoke explicitly about their perspective on the uncertainty that is felt regarding their mental health. Participant 3 was quiet and emotional about how they sometimes feel inadequate for the position, although they have been in the role for a long time. The emotion presented as a nervous insecurity when Participant 3 spoke and shared:

I guess I'm more anxious at this age and stage than I ever thought I would be in school. I don't know if it's because of the unpredictability of people right now [or] what occurs in schools that it has me at that stage... I guess I find myself worried about things a little bit more than I used to be. You would think, after doing this as long as I have, you'd be in a different place, dialed in. You've got it all. I've seen it all. Oh, no, it's so unsettling.

Participant 3 shared the constant reflection on performance as a high school principal and how that can negatively impact the mental health of the principal. These statements were more emotional and reflective in the interview. Additionally, Participant 4 reinforced the same idea.

Participant 4 shared that they often reflect on their personal performance, which weighs on them. Additionally, Participant 4 mentioned that once in a while, they act and then ask for forgiveness later. Participant 4 felt that the responsibility falls on them [the district]. If something significant came up [a decision that is not supported], the district would do what they needed to do [implying disciplinary action]. Participant 4 stated, “I think there's more days that I question what I do. I think things continue to change so much. I don't know if I'm doing the best job the right job.” Participant 4 added that although they do not receive social emotional support from higher up, Participant 4 feels it is their responsibility to provide that support to their staff.

Participant 4 shared how they intentionally provide positive support by stating:

I will often go around two or three times a year and write a note for every teacher put it on their desk; sometimes, it's before school starts; sometimes, it's during Christmas break. Something quick, something simple where I can do it for everybody. Nobody does that for [the assistant principal] and [dean of students]. Me? I do it for [the assistant principal] and [dean of students]. Nobody's doing it for the principals. So...I don't know if I'm doing a good job. I don't know who you would ask... If you're asking me, I'm surviving.

Participant 4 further reinforced the need for a focus on the mental health of the administrators by stating:

I think that's the biggest; it's the mental health...the SEL [social emotional learning]... there's got to be a piece of that for administrators because you're on the hook for everything, and I think it's the piece we overlook.



Participant 4 introduced the prospect of retirement. Participant 4 shared that they are eligible to retire in a couple of years at age 55, but they plan to stay until 57. The reason for staying is that Participant 4's youngest child will graduate that same year. Participant 4 has questioned this tentative plan, however, and shared, "I think more about that retirement aspect. I am looking forward to that, because, man, I'm tired. I am tired. And I never thought I'd ever say that... it's draining, and it is really draining."

According to the data, the mental health of the rural high school principal is a priority. To effectively tackle the responsibilities of the principalship, these leaders need social emotional support similar to what is given to the students and faculty/staff. Having support for mental health would provide the reassurance needed to boost the principals' self-efficacy.

The lack of balance between the principals' personal and professional life continues to be an obstacle for the rural principal. Without an intentional focus on meeting the personal needs of these leaders, these barriers will continue to hinder the ability of the leader to maintain longevity in the rural setting. Changes in the work environment to support the emotional needs of the principals are essential to their sustainability.

## **Theme 2: Why They Stay**

Participants identified the creation of relationships and the impact/opportunities one can have on a school as reasons for longevity. Value was placed in both areas and was discussed throughout the interview process. Human connection and the ability to help others created the environment that entices the Participants to stay committed to their roles.

### ***Subtheme 1: Relationships***

All four Participants cite relationships as the most substantial reason for staying in their current position as a high school principal. Relationships, as presented by their responses,

encompassed students, families, faculty, staff, and community. Creating a culture of partnership, academic expectations, and a family feel was stated by all four Participants. Each Participant recognized that they spend more time with their faculty and staff than with their own families. As a result, all four Participants have fostered family-like relationships with their faculty, staff, and students. Participant 1 emphasized that the most effective strategy utilized is the creation of relationships. Participant 1 stated:

It goes back to the relationships and having that team. If you didn't have that cohesive team, then it's not going to work. So, I think that starts at the top, like with your top leadership, and then works its way down. Luckily, we've most of us had been together for a long time. So, the base of our leadership team has been pretty consistent.

Participant 1 also stated, "I love my admin team, and I've seen different admin teams. I hear about different admin teams, and there's nothing quite like what we have here."

Elaborating on the dynamic of the administrative team, which Participant 1 recognized is different than other administrative teams, Participant 1 stated, "The admin team feels like a family. My faculty feels like a family. I feel like all the students are my kids."

Participant 1 also stated that the community was a significant part of creating a culture in the school. According to Participant 1, many community relationships have been forged that help support the school culture. Participant 1 stated:

We have worked really, really hard to create connections within our community. We're constantly bringing the community in to work with our students, to do presentations, different things like that. We're constantly pushing our students out into the community to do community service or job shadows. The communication between the two is

constant, so I think building those relationships is important because then they're willing to work with us.”

Participant 1 added:

It's the relationships; it really comes down to the relationships. I got into teaching to be with kids... to make a difference in students' lives, and I don't feel like I could make as big of an impact in a bigger school district. I don't think I would get to know as many kids on as deep of a level. I love the family that we've created.

Participant 1 explained the importance of building a culture through relationships in their building. Participant 1 shared specifics about being a leader in a rural school:

I want that connection with the people that I'm spending the majority of my day with. Knowing what they like, what they don't like, what makes them tick, what's going on in their lives outside of school. If you're in a bigger city, school, you don't know those things...you might know about a few kids, but not about the majority. We could walk down the hall, and I could probably tell you a story about 80% of my kids, not all of them, but the majority of them, and that's the piece about... a rural school.

Participant 2 also focused on the benefits and opportunities afforded to small, rural high schools.

The family atmosphere emerged with Participant 2 as the Participant discussed the school environment. Participant 2 presented a unique perspective regarding the culture built in their school by stating that the secret is to know their own students and team of professionals.

Participant 2 stated:

What I'm most proud of is we revise things as needed, get to know our students at a micro and a macro level, so we can do what's best for our cohort in our population...Our research study is our own students, our own staff, and our own administrative and our

own decision-making. So, that's what I think we do best... I wouldn't be able to do it in a [local school] or a [local school]; it's too big.”

Participant 2 also shared that maintaining longevity in the same district had added benefits. Participant 2 stated, “I have [taught] the parents. I’m hiring teachers that used to be my students. So that's what brings that family atmosphere: that trust, that loyalty, that respect... that's what I love the most.”

Participant 2 spoke about creating a positive climate and culture: “I have a 98% teacher retention rate...building that climate and culture here is huge.”

Participant 2 stated,

“The formula’s pretty simple: get to know your clientele, get to know your students...know their home life and what their issues are, their strengths, their positives, and their challenges...We still live by that credo. Get to know your students.”

Participant 2 willingly shared military patches that a former student gave and showed a cabinet with many drawers full of gifts, notes, and tokens of appreciation from former students with a sense of pride. Participant 2 shared a story about each artifact given and became emotional when discussing this as a reason for remaining in the principalship. Participant 2 shared a story about a parent who had always been difficult being diagnosed with cancer, who fell and broke her leg. Participant 2 checked in on the family, although the prior interactions with the parent were angry, and the mother would come in with “guns blazing.” Participant 2 asked what was needed for the family, as this was a single-parent household with limited income. Participant 2 shared that they had some gift cards from the community totaling \$1,000 that they could use for families in need. Participant 2 discovered that a gas card was needed and went to the local gas station to get a \$125 gas card for the family. The relationships that were built, even

with the most difficult people, were a reason given by Participant 2 for staying in the rural principalship. Participant 2 was able to reflect on the impact that they have on the students and adults, as well as the impact the students and adults have on them.

Participant 3 stated, “I do business with people in the [district name] community... I know their kids ...the relationships that you get to build are just amazing that way.” Participant 3 elaborated on the small, rural district where the Participant is employed. “The fact that you can have high school kids go to the elementary and the elementary go to the high school for different reasons. It's an awesome piece of being in a rural small district. People get to know each other.” Participant 3 elaborated that the district is a UPK-12 building, and the ability to be flexible and allow the students in all grades to work together was a positive incentive to work in a small, rural school.

Participant 3, who does not reside in the district of employment, discussed the sense of community experienced from the beginning of the Participant’s career within the district. Participant 3 stated, “I felt like the sense of community that I was brought into from the teachers, the parents, the community; it was just amazing.” Participant 3 added:

I still think we have community-minded people, staff. I think I have people who find the strengths and kids and want to capitalize on those strengths and be in a small school. You might have one teacher a couple of times throughout your high school career, [for] two to three different classes, and I think those are things that can help our kids grow.

Participant 4 is a resident of the community in which they are employed. Participant 4 discussed the connectivity built because of the relationships created as a community member. Participant 4 stated that it is never a bother if school topics are discussed outside the building, especially with students, families, and community members, because it strengthens Participant

4's ties to the community. Participant 4 felt that this helps in the role of the high school principal because it makes tough phone calls home easier. Participant 4 stated regarding the connection with the community:

I know a lot of the kids when they come in. I think that's a huge benefit: the more people [I] know, the more people I see in the community down at the [local park] or at the restaurant [and] to have a conversation with them. It gives people a very community feeling, a very friendly feeling. So whenever I do have to call home for a disciplinary issue, [I] get tend to get a little bit further because they feel like they know [me]. I think that's huge in a rural district. I think those are the two major benefits: the ability to communicate, the ability to be on the same page, to make decisions, and just knowing people. I think easier for me to move somebody along or communicate with somebody when they know who you are.

Participant 4 added that there is added benefit to having the school integrated with the community. To help foster that welcoming relationship, Participant 4 added, "You also just have to be inviting. Come to the football game; come see the new stadium; come be a part of a concert; come be part of a play... Kids are getting experiences that parents appreciate."

Participant 4 reflected personally on the role of the high school principal. According to Participant 4, a human element for the role is important to success in the position. Empathy and the ability to support faculty/staff and families are important facets of the role. Participant 4 shared:

I don't know if my job as an administrator is as important as a human leader, that human connection. Maybe that's why I just keep doing what I'm doing...but I think you have to have a lot of faith when you're in a position like this, and I certainly rely on that.

The Participants expressed excitement when talking about the community culture that each has helped create in their districts. Each told a story about how the students and employees are like family and how creating this atmosphere allowed them to enjoy their role as high school principals in their respective districts.

**Loyalty and Trust.** Participant 2 strongly stated that loyalty and trust were essential to them as a leader. Participant 2 shared, “It is that small atmosphere; it can be a family environment where trust and respect and loyalty is key.” Participant 2 added: “Loyalty, family loyalty, and love. Whether it's your own home or your building, build those three things.”

Participant 2 added:

It's always been family first, and I preached that to my staff, as well. Listen, if you need to leave at 2:30 P.M. to go see your child play in a sporting contest or dance recital, go because I know I'll get that on the back end, during Regents review, or if a kid needs to stay after the BOCES bus gets back after normal contract hours. So, it's a really good give one, get one in that sense of loyalty.

Participant 3 felt committed to the district because of the investment others made in them.

Participant 3 spoke positively and stated: “There's people who've invested. I think the district has invested in me, and different people through the years [have] invested in me. I feel a lot of loyalty to the district for the things that some of my mentors gave to me.”

Participant 4 shared the importance of building trust within the relationships. Building trust helps Participant 4 when they need to make changes. Participant 4 expressed that sometimes it is difficult to make a change in small, rural districts. Being visible and present at night and weekend events allows for creating relationships through trust. Participant 4 shared that by

showing dedication to the school, the principal is seen as committed to the students and their families. Participant 4 stated:

You have to build trust, either with the people you work with or the community, to say, hey, you know, our play was great, the band marching band was great. We have a lot of people at our events. Once people see that, I think it's easier for them to buy into change.

Modeling behaviors and showing vulnerability were key attributes shared by Participant 4. The human component was important for building the culture of the building. Participant 4 stated that owning decisions and admitting fault helped build relationships in the school community. It also modeled the behavior they would expect from their stakeholders. Participant 4 elaborated:

That relationship that you have with adults is the same that you have with the kids if they trust what you're going to do. I think for me, the biggest piece is acknowledging when you make a mistake, or “You know what, I know, last year, something happened right at the end, and I had to make another change.”

Building relationships was identified as the most significant factor in the decision to stay in the rural principalship. Each Participant stressed the importance of solid relationships among all stakeholders. Fostering the collaboration of the community, families, students, faculty, and staff benefits all stakeholders.

### ***Subtheme 2: Impact/Opportunities***

Participants identified the impact and ability to create opportunities in their rural districts as a benefit to the high school principalship. Because of the size of the districts and the unique relationships built with the community, the Participants can offer opportunities that provide real-life benefits to the students. The approach is more personalized and meets the needs of the



students. Participant 2 spoke about their ability to connect with the students who have had a more difficult life. Participant 2 shared:

That's why I've stayed. I want to inspire. I grew up in a small village with a lot of problems, deep-rooted. And when you talk about ACES [adverse childhood experiences]t, I have six of nine. So, I can give a lot. I don't share my experiences because I'm not there and probably never will, and nobody needs to know. But I've had six of nine. They're not pleasant. I've been through it. I don't connect with the rich kids with two parents that have money and they're going to go to college. I connect more with the lower to middle-class kids from poverty that may have been abused, that struggle with putting food on the table, with having clothes. I connect with them more than ever. So that's probably kept me here as much as anything else because I can make a difference with those kids.

Participant 2 gave an example of the significant impact they have in a rural school. Participant 2 stated:

I have a box of clothes out there for a student right now. He comes to school every day in the same dirty clothes. So I said, "You're about my same size. I don't want to offend you. Your clothes are dirty, right? You want to be an athlete, and I know you want to look good. I said I have some extra stuff that doesn't fit me anymore. I don't want to embarrass you, but if you want me to bring it in... [there is] a box right out there...So you know, it's those little things of helping out. That's the benefit of a small rural school.

Regarding academic opportunities, Participant 2 spoke about high expectations and equipping students with the tools to take charge of their futures. By asking students to make

goals and meet expectations, the principal can help break the cycle of poverty and change the rural culture mindset. Participant 2 stated:

We don't want our kids being laborers on a construction site; we want them to be supervisors. We want them to own the company. I don't want a girl or a boy going to cosmetology class at BOCES and wanting to rent a chair and paying half of their fees to the person that owns a salon. We want them to take our business courses and going to [tech center] for their business degree and owning that salon. You know, we want architects. We want people to sound like scientists too, you know, write like writers, build like engineers, and so on.

Participant 3 expressed the benefits of working in a small school district. Participant 3 was proud of the offerings provided to students in their district. In reference to the advantage of being a small rural district, Participant 3 stated:

I fell in love with all the all the opportunities for kids that sometimes I don't think, you know, people talk about in big schools. Lots of opportunities, but big schools come with lots of population, too big [of a] population, and sometimes [students] get pushed out of activities, just because there's not enough room. We've always made an effort to never put up obstacles for kids to get involved in things...there's good and bad with that. The good of that is, your kids could try anything and really get an opportunity to play and or get on the stage or be in that band, or be in that ensemble, or, you know, whatever it is. We remove the barriers of "you can't do this" because you're doing this type of thing. We are very small, so I have athletes who are jumping on the stage with their uniforms for a concert...things like that.

Participant 3 shared some emotion and was choked up when discussing students returning to visit. Participant 3 shared:

I've had kids come to me at graduation, after graduation [those that] have graduated and said some of the greatest things to me... after kids leave. The kids graduate, and parents come up to you. It's really after they've come and gone, and we've gone through all the bumps and the pains, but you know, that's when they see on the street, and they say I appreciate your time. I had a kid say to me last year, "I just want you to know, I don't think people have any idea what kind of job you do, and I just want you to know, I so appreciate having you."

Participant 1 identified the ability to collaborate to create student opportunities as an incentive to the position. The connection with the community significantly contributes to making those opportunities come to fruition. Participant 1 stated:

I think we're creative. We come from a district that has... some wealthy families and some businesses that are willing to donate... We call on them quite often when we want to bring speakers in or different things, like, that cost a couple of thousand dollars that we didn't budget for. We reach out to those people when other districts might be able to pull it out of a pot someplace. So we use those resources, but we were careful how we use them so they're there when we need them; we don't just go to them all the time.

Participant 1 focused on reciprocal service with the community coming into the school and the students pushing into the community agencies and businesses. Participant 1 also highlighted the role of the community in the school for educational opportunities. Participant 1 shared:

We're constantly bringing the community in to work with our students to do presentations, different things like that. We're constantly pushing our students out into the

community to do community service or job shadows or whatever. The communication between the two is constant. I think building those relationships is important because then they're willing to work with us as well.

Creating a partnership with the community and being genuine in building relationships with the families in the district emerged as a benefit to providing unique opportunities to the students. The impact the high school principal can have on the students and other stakeholders emerges as a reason why they remain in the rural setting. Participants' responses reinforce the benefit of leading in a small, rural district.

### **Theme 3: How They Stay**

#### ***Subtheme 1: Boundaries***

Setting boundaries was a key finding in the Participants' responses. Participants attributed their ability to remain in the position to the boundaries each set for their professional and personal lives. Because the position affects their families, the focus on boundaries between work and home emerged as essential to the sustainability of the individual in the position.

Participant 1 shared that setting specific workdays and hours was a boundary that needed to be set for their family to have a balance. Participant 1 stated:

So it depends on the day, depending on what we have going on [at home], which is hard when you have your email on your phone... I really try not to [work outside of school day]. I try to get one day on the weekend with my family and not do any schoolwork.

Participant 2 shared how feeling like the job was around the clock affected their personal well-being. Additionally, Participant 2 felt the need to set a personal boundary so that they could have a better work/life balance. Participant 2 shared:

I would check my email at night, and I would check my email on weekends, and I put it on my phone for about two days. Once I stopped checking my email after I left for the workday and stopped checking it on the weekends, I found peace.

Participant 2 reported having difficulty shutting off their brain once leaving the office and added, “So I still don't sleep well at night, most nights, but I sleep better.” Participant 3 shared that their spouse helped create the boundary for them. Participant 3 also felt the pressure of the job being all hours of the day. Participant 3 stated:

You know, one thing that [spouse] has said to me is the more emails you answer on the weekend, the more emails you're going to generate on the weekend. And it's a lot of truth with that, and people will anticipate you responding to things. I'll be honest. I worked with one superintendent who was 24/7 doing it all. He said, “It's an awful precedent to set for everybody. You should have some working hours.”

By setting boundaries and prioritizing situations, the Participants were able to share the critical elements to establishing the groundwork for longevity and sustainability in the position of rural high school principal. In addition to setting personal boundaries, the Participants also shared their intent to retire from their respective districts. Each set that boundary, which has allowed them to be fully invested in the districts they serve.

Participant 1 stated:

I don't plan on leaving here. I plan on retiring from here...So yes, if I didn't have those long-term plans to stay, I think it might be easier to not push through with the goals, right, and want to see them succeed.

Participant 1 further elaborated on the reason for fully committing to the position with 12 years left until retirement. Participant 1 stated:

I don't plan on leaving, and I have 12 years left, so that's going to be 18 years in this district. If I didn't have those long-term goals...like starting a freshman academy is not a one-year thing, and it's something that once you put it into place if it works, you're not going to get rid of it unless it stops working... So it's not something that you do lightheartedly, and if I wasn't planning on staying, then why bother? Why put it in the time because it's not going to be an easy task, and it's going to upset some people?

Participant 3 has been fully committed to their district for over two decades. Participant 3 told their perspective on longevity in the role of rural high school principal:

I'm pretty motivated to grow in different ways on my own. So, I think that's an intrinsic quality that maybe some other people might not feel like, "Oh, I'm just settling in and doing the job" and I've never been wired that way. What are the goals that we need to focus on and looking at some things and over the last several years, the data on certain things motivates me to say, "How do we pull ourselves out of this gap piece?"

Participant 4 stated that their reason for choosing when to retire is not based on years of service. Instead, Participant 4 plans to retire when their final child graduates from their building. Participant 4 detailed the plan by stating:

I was very upfront with them [the administrative team]. I said this is my last stop. Count the number of years. [AP's] a couple of years behind me, and [Dean of Students] is a couple years behind him...technically next August, I could retire. It'd be 55 and 30 years. But I have a freshman and sophomore, so my plan is to stay three and a half years and go with the second one [child]. So, I'll be 57 with 35 years in the business.

**Flexibility.** Participants expressed the importance of flexibility within their schools.

Having mutual respect and an understanding that employees have personal lives helps create the

community culture that each Participant has been able to help create. Due to the level of flexibility, employees tend to be more likely to volunteer or work more diligently for the principals. Also, the Participants shared that by being flexible, they have been able to make the changes they needed to in their buildings. Most employees reciprocate the level of flexibility when those changes need to be made. Participant 2 stated:

I tell my teachers that I hired them to be a better parent than a teacher or administrator. And I'll be proud of you because the one thing you can't get back is time lost with the family. So, I've missed a couple of occasions, but I've made most of them, 99% of them, and I make darn sure that my staff, secretaries, teachers, and my assistant principal don't miss anything because that's time loss that you'll never get back.

Participant 2 told how the assistant principal considered missing his child's first day of kindergarten. The assistant principal was supposed to attend a superintendent conference day and struggled to prioritize the situation. Participant 2 shared the background of the assistant principal and the story of that day. Participant 2 recalled:

We have an administrator here that work is his hobby... up at two o'clock in the morning, sends us emails, you're out of your mind. He was going to miss his son's first day of kindergarten because we had a conference day. He asked me my opinion... what should I do? I said, "If you miss your son's first day of kindergarten, I'm going to be upset with you. You're never getting that back. There's nothing you need to be here for that we can't cover for you. Don't miss it."

Participant 3's children attended another local district. Graduation dates became an issue for the Participant because their three children graduated every other year. The graduation dates of the Participant's children and the district of employment were the same. Flexibility became a key factor in the solution to the dilemma Participant 3 faced. Participant 3 stated:

Our graduations used to fall on the same day, and when my kids came through, I said, You know what, every other year for the next three years, I won't be leading graduation because I'll be at my children's graduation. So, I said, I'm willing to move that and change this tradition. If you're willing to work with me and have ours on a Thursday and opinions that have actually, you know, things like that. You know, people understand. Yeah, we need to make some adjustments for the people who work here.

Participant 3 added that their philosophy in words and actions is family first. Participant 3 shared:

We've always been a family-first mindset at [school district]. Our administrative staff and I will preach it till the day I die with the young teachers I have, and I will let them go early for this, that, or the other thing because of these things. I think that's just something that's been given to me, too. It's been impressed upon me, too, as a teacher and administrator that, you know, you've got nothing if you're not taking care of your family.

Participant 4 also changed graduation to be more flexible for families. Participant 4 struggled at the beginning of the situation on whether it was a district decision or a building decision to change the date and time of graduation. Many factors were considered. Participant 4 shared:

Changing the day of graduation, like it's really a high school gig, right? It's a district gig, but it's ours. I really wanted to move it, but the superintendent wasn't so much on that. So, I'm glad I asked first.

Participant 4 discussed the flexibility needed when trying to make a change, such as the date and time of graduation, which had been a tradition for decades. Participant 4 shared:



I have different ideas, to which some people would say what's wrong with the ideas that we have? And there you have it, that's where you have to get buy-in to say, you know, I do like this part, but I also want to think about this way. Sometimes it just takes people time. You know, they say not so many changes when you first start. Take it slow, one by one. So now graduation is on Thursday night, 6:30 in the evening.

As a high school leader, setting personal boundaries and clear expectations for those boundaries helps the individual with their decision to stay. Creating a family environment in the school becomes an incentive to remain in the role. Being flexible and showing empathy for the personal lives of all stakeholders created an environment that fosters leadership sustainability.

### ***Subtheme 2: Collaboration***

**Teamwork and Shared Leadership.** Participants cited a collaborative team with shared leadership as essential to the success of a rural high school principal. Demonstrating unconditional support and building on the team's strengths were cited as ways to remain successful in the high school principal position. Participant 1 spoke about the team dynamic, as presented earlier in this study. Participant 1's district was asked to present at a leadership academy about the dynamic and what makes it work. A specific example Participant 1 shared was about how the team led through the COVID-19 pandemic. Participant 1 stated:

We sat together for hours for days and worked so hard. With the common [feeling], we were all agreed that our students needed to be back in the district. We were one of the few that were able to create a plan to bring all of our students back that fall if they wanted to come back. We did have a hybrid model, but it was based on choice. From day one of that September, if kids wanted to be in the building, they could be in the building. And it was hard work, but because we were all in the same mindset and we all work together so

closely, we were able to do it. It was from kindergarten through 12th grade. We created handbooks that were similar, but then varied based on our buildings. We were very careful to make sure that it was as cohesive as possible, but then only changing what needed to change based on the grade levels. I know it didn't happen in a lot of other rural districts.

Participant 3 also spoke about a synchronous team and the work accomplished during the COVID-19 pandemic. Participant 3 stated, "I've always felt confident in myself and our teams to come up with great solutions to things. We did some great things through COVID years; we were able to do things that a lot of districts weren't able to do."

Participant 2 discussed the creation of Career and Technical Education within the district. Collaborating to build programs within a district, instead of solely at a BOCES Technical Center, is unique to rural schools, and not all rural schools can offer such programming. Shared vision, mission, and collaboration contribute to the ability to provide such programming. Participant 2 stated:

It's building programs and inspiring kids, hiring the right teachers, to be in front of students to inspire them. I hire teachers, and I tell every staff member to teach with so much passion that the students want to be like you. So we're fortunate in a small school district that you know, again, land rich, you know, we have about sixty to seventy elective courses: biomedical science, agriculture, engineering, construction systems, business, biomedical sciences, and I may have mentioned, music, theater programs, theater courses. We have a lot to offer our students right here, not even using, like the technical center or anything like that.

Regarding the cohesive team and the norms established with the district leadership team, Participant 4 shared that they believe in the team as a functioning unit focused on what is best for kids. Shared leadership is an important characteristic in their district because of the ability to challenge thinking. Participant 4 stated:

We do have the team approach and I'm not afraid to challenge somebody professionally and say, I really disagree with that thought or go back and forth. We do have the ability to do that. So, I don't know that I would just make a decision because I don't want that phone call that says, "What were you doing?"

Collaborative teams create a constructive environment that can directly impact the morale of the school personnel. Additionally, this type of setting positively affects the students and staff. By identifying critical elements presented through the Participants' lived experiences, school districts can address the escalating shortage of rural high school administrators in the profession.

## **Chapter 5: Discussion**

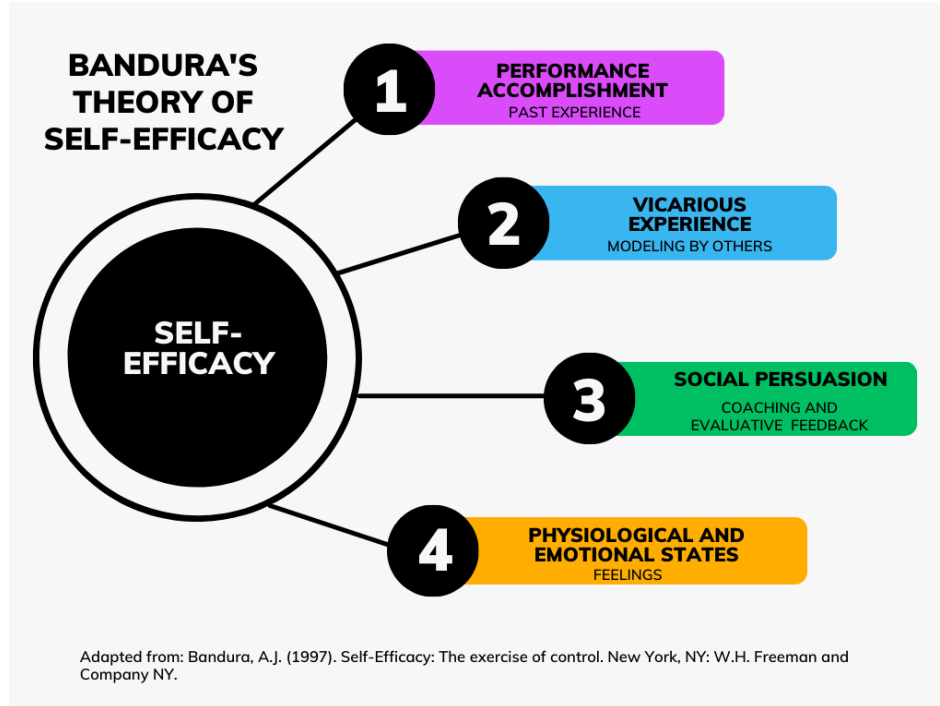
### **Introduction**

Bandura's theory of self-efficacy (1997) states that people can exercise control over their own functioning and events in their life. According to Bandura (1997), each factor of self-efficacy contributes to the motivation to set and complete goals as well as determine the level of commitment and energy put forth in achieving the goal. One's self-efficacy also determines the grit or ability to persist. Yavas (2022) utilized Bandura's (1997) research to help conclude that there is a direct relationship between an administrator's self-efficacy and their success as a leader. An administrator's self-efficacy is a predictor of teacher self-efficacy and student achievement (Yavas, 2020). Within this theory, four principal sources contribute to an individual's self-efficacy. These sources of self-efficacy, as shown in Figure 5.1, can be directly applied to the sustainability of the role of rural high school principals.

A review of existing literature presented information regarding the difficulties of being a school administrator, which has been thoroughly researched. A deeper dive into the literature also uncovered the challenges of leading a school in a rural setting; however, the lack of focus specifically on rural high school principals who remain in the position has exposed a gap in the literature. Although there are some parallels to urban and suburban, the rural setting provides a unique set of challenges and barriers for the high school principal.

Furthermore, research in the educational field regarding retention, attrition, and succession of school leaders has been approached from a negative perspective instead of an

Figure 5.1



asset-based approach. The focus has been primarily on why principals leave their roles and not on why they remain in the position. Taking an asset-based approach in this study reveals first-hand information on the day-to-day experiences of these professionals. The role of the high school principalship presented through the lived experience of four rural Upstate New York principals highlights the importance of leadership sustainability and offers recommendations for future practice.

To develop an understanding of the rural high school principals' perceptions of career sustainability, this study explored the two research questions:

1. What role, if any, does self-efficacy play in the sustainability of rural high school principals to stay in their current position?
2. In what way do rural high school principals in Upstate New York describe their reasons to remain in their positions?

As presented in Chapter 4, three themes emerged from the experiences shared with the interviewer and the observations made during the interview process. The three themes identified were: (a) obstacles facing rural principals, (b) why they stay, and (c) how they stay. Chapter 5 presents the implication of the findings, limitations of the study, recommendations for further research, and a conclusion, which summarizes the study.

### **Implication of Findings**

To address the shortage of school administrators, the focus must be on the incentives that motivate the current professionals in the field to stay. This study identified several implications directly related to the lived experiences of the rural high school principal Participants in Upstate New York. Education policymakers, board of education members, district-level administrators, building-level administrators, and aspiring high school administrators looking to address the predicted shortage of qualified rural high school principals may benefit from these findings. The findings inform the recommendations for future practice.

#### ***Finding 1: Obstacles Facing Rural Principals***

The work environment and the struggle with work/life balance were identified as subthemes that emerged throughout the data analysis. The rural environment presents different challenges than the urban and suburban areas (Bright, 2018).

**Work Environment.** According to the data, components of the work environment complicate the position and overwhelm the principal. Participants identified the need for prioritizing instructional vision. This proves to be difficult because of the number of responsibilities that fall on the rural principal. Because of the size of rural districts in New York State, the high school principal must take on multiple roles that interfere with the ability to prioritize academics. According to this study, professional task management is a stressor for

principals, which coordinates with Klocko and Wells' findings (2015). Examining job responsibilities and creating a clear chain of command can help alleviate the workload for the principal.

Additionally, the data revealed the importance of planned, intentional mentorship opportunities for principals. Support for the principal is essential to build a relationship of trust in the organization. Communicating the intent and sharing the benefits of mentorship for principals with all levels of experience can provide a confidential opportunity for supporting the individual.

Each Participant stated that positive feedback was not needed for each of them, but as their interviews progressed, it became evident that these individuals needed some level of positive reinforcement for their mental well-being. Feedback, validation, and praise allow for positive self-efficacy, as each principal stated that their self-efficacy was a part of their success story.

Numerous factors did not emerge from the data collected. Although the results indicated a lack of positive feedback or regular feedback to the Participants, what was missing was information regarding performance management. Accountability for performance in a rural school may look different than in an urban or suburban school. Additionally, politicking did not emerge from the Participants. The rural high school principal often needs to maneuver the politics of the small rural town they serve. Learning to navigate and balance politics with their roles as high school principal is a challenge that did not emerge in this study.

**Work/Life Balance.** Adverse impact on the individual's family and personal life was a deterrent to the position. Due to these negative encounters, some Participants have changed their boundaries and adjusted how the role is approached. The stressor of an around-the-clock expectation is a cause for concern regarding sustainability as it has directly impacted the mental

health of the principal. Creating flexibility and taking the time to build a trusting relationship with the individual in the role can provide support for the principal.

In alignment with the literature review, the mental health of the principal is a concern. This study finds that the high school principal does not get positive reinforcement regarding job performance. The uncertainty causes mental health stressors such as anxiety and self-doubt. Finding opportunities to recognize the positive contributions of the individual and implementing social emotional support for the high school principal could benefit the organization.

### ***Finding 2: Why They Stay***

The data revealed incentives that persuade rural high school principals to stay in their positions. The principals attribute the relationships created and the ability to create opportunities that directly impact the students as the reason for remaining in their positions.

**Relationships.** The data analysis revealed that a factor in longevity was relationships and creating culture. The most prominent and repeated word throughout the four interviews was “family.” The Participants stated that having a family-like environment at work made it welcoming and easier to return to. Each spoke of the ways the family atmosphere at work was created. Through professional respect, courtesy, and expectations to tend to their personal lives, the family atmosphere was interwoven into most of the interview time with these professionals.

Data indicated fostering positive relationships with community members provided an opportunity for the students. These relationships offer financial support, mentorships, community service, and other experiences that benefit the students. Building a relationship with caretakers also fosters a partnership in the best interest of students. Creating a welcoming culture where students come first is beneficial to all stakeholders. The phrase “students come first” was shared by each Participant.



**Impact/Opportunities.** As supported by the previous research conducted, rural schools typically have a smaller population of students. The data presented in this study identifies that the rural high school principal can impact the students directly. The size of the school allows the principal to know most students and create opportunities unique to the rural setting. Academic programming, in-house career and technical education, and extracurricular activities are ways rural principals are encouraged to think outside of the box to continue providing opportunities that meet the needs of the students.

### ***Finding 3: How They Stay***

Each Participant emphasized the importance of a family-first mindset. Recognizing the importance of the employees' families and the ability to accommodate the family needs is essential for mutual respect. Practicing flexibility and setting boundaries contributes to why the high school rural principals remain in their position.

**Boundaries.** The Participants identified ways to set boundaries to support a healthy work/life balance. Scheduling a family day each week, not bringing work home, and not checking email outside of school hours were examples given that provided some peace of mind to the Participants. Respecting the principal's personal time is imperative to the work/life balance and overall mental health.

**Collaboration.** Shared-decision making is essential to the overall organization. When stakeholders are invested in the collaborative process, change is easier. In addition, having a collaborative approach with shared leadership is essential to the desire to stay. Collaboration with all stakeholders should happen at all levels to move the organization in a positive direction. The team dynamic can create respect and productivity based on the approach. Valuing each team member and recognizing what each person contributes benefits the school district.

Being intentional in the areas identified by the themes allows for positive self-efficacy and allows for these rural high school principals to remain in their positions long-term. To fully answer the research questions presented, all Participants stated that self-efficacy does play a role in their decision to stay in the challenging role of rural high-school principal.

### **Limitations**

Limitations in this research study may provide areas for future research in leadership sustainability. This interpretive phenomenological study explored the lived experience of four rural high school principals from Upstate New York. The first limitation of this study was the sample size. Four rural high school principals participated in 60-minute semi-structured interviews in person. This sample size is appropriate for the IPA; however, having four Participants limits the study results and does not allow for generalizations.

Although the individual gender and race were not identified, both are limitations. Participants included three males and one female. All four Participants were White. This becomes a limitation because the genders are not equally represented, and this study does not give the perspective of any other race or ethnicity.

Another limitation of this study was the location of the Participants. Two of the four Participants were from the same demographic area (Finger Lakes); one was in Central New York, and one was in Western New York. Most of New York State is rural, and the access to specific resources differs for each region. Interviewing rural high school principals from a more diverse region could provide different information regarding retention.

Studying only rural high school principals is a limitation. Investigating suburban and urban high school principals would provide more depth to the study and provide more information about specific challenges to the principalship in each setting.

The final limitation is the experience of the researcher. The researcher is a rural high school principal in Central New York. The researcher was required to bracket her personal experiences as an individual in the same role as the Participants. Analytic memos were used to bracket and remove any bias as the researcher closely related to the inquiry. Careful questioning was executed to not lead any Participants due to the familiarity with the role.

## **Recommendations**

Why rural leaders leave their positions has been widely researched in academia. Why rural high school principals in Upstate New York stay in a challenging environment has been explored in this study. As a result of this IPA study, many recommendations emerged. The Participants each brought a different personal experience to this qualitative, interpretive phenomenological study; however, their collective responses revealed the reasons (a) obstacles facing rural principals, (b) why they stay, and (c) how they stay. The recommendations of this study are generated from their lived experience. To create an environment that promotes the sustainability and longevity of the rural high school principal, recommendations are included for policymakers, district-level administrators, building-level administrators, high school principals, aspiring administrators, and higher education institutions.

It is imperative to recognize that the lack of qualified educators entering the field has already created a hiring shortage (Lieberman, 2021). Levin and Bradley (2019) emphasize the importance of consistent leadership in the principalship role. The turnover of the building leader has a negative impact on the overall organization.

### ***Recommendations for Policymakers***

**Acknowledge and address the employment crisis.** Policymakers must recognize the employment crisis facing the education field. Due to the lack of potential candidates that are

certified and qualified for the role, policymakers should promote teacher and administrative preparatory programs. Offering incentives such as loan forgiveness, increased salaries, accelerated certification programs, and retirement benefits could entice more individuals to pursue the educational leadership track. Without changes in certification requirements and the offering of incentives such as an increase in compensation, rural schools will not receive applicants for the principalships over more affluent districts due to achievement and salary scales. Promoting grow-your-own programs to encourage movement into leadership would help alleviate the shortage of rural high school principals. Quick action is necessary to recruit and retain these leaders moving forward.

### ***Recommendations for District-Level Administrators***

According to the data, district-level administrators must recognize the complexity of the rural high school principalship. Based on the findings of this study, rural high school principals need specific components to build self-efficacy. The Participants identified the ways in which they are able to stay in rural schools.

**Be Flexible.** It is recommended that the flexibility rural high school principals demonstrate in order to create a family culture in their schools be reciprocated. Demonstrating flexibility helps build trust and loyalty with the high school principal. Participant 2 and Participant 3 discussed the importance of dedication and trust being mutually exchanged. Respect for the principal's life outside the work environment incentivizes the principal to stay. An example of flexibility includes allowing the principal to be present at their family events by granting time off or the request to leave early.

**Organizational Structure, Practice, and Policy.** District leaders must revisit and revise policy annually and ensure communication on structure and practice surrounding the updates.

Additionally, a clearly communicated chain of command is necessary for the success of the rural high school principal. A chain of command document would allow each person in the organization to know the roles of each team member, allowing for forward progress as a district. District-level administrators, supported by the board of education, should create a clear chain of command with specific job descriptions to help delegate the workload placed on the principal. By creating a hierarchy for day-to-day problems, the district-level administrator and Board will develop a straightforward approach that allows the high school principal to focus on prioritized needs. Through an organizational chart with specific job duties, the pressure to be a “jack of all trades” would be lifted, allowing the principals to focus on being stronger overall leaders. The administration must consistently communicate policy and procedures with stakeholders for the administrative team to remain cohesive and deliver a universal message.

**Job Descriptions.** The data revealed the inability to implement academic expectations as an instructional leader due to the multiple roles the rural high school principal is expected to fill. Consideration should be given to the principal regarding night obligations and additional non-academic duties that interfere with maintaining a work/life balance.

**Practice Shared Leadership.** According to this study, rural high school principals work best in a productive team. The dynamic of the administrative team can determine the productivity of the principal. Participant 1 specifically talked about their leadership team's dynamic and ability to function through a district-level lens. Working collaboratively allows all parties to share thoughts and ideas while contributing to the decisions in the building and district. It is recommended that norms are created and team building occurs within the administrative team to build trusting relationships, which was indicated as essential by Participant 2.

**Provide Mentorship and Positive Feedback.** District leaders must communicate the intent and share the benefits of mentorship for principals of all levels of experience. Participant 2 spoke of the importance of the superintendent's communication regarding a mentorship program. Funds should be allocated in the budget to support the principals' professional growth and mentorship. Keeping current on educational trends is vital to the growth of the building. Additionally, a system for positive recognition for all school personnel, including administration, should be implemented to increase morale and build self-efficacy. The superintendent and the board of education must universally support this.

**Provide Opportunities for Social-Emotional Health.** It is recommended that specific working hours and a home/life balance are positively reinforced expectations for the rural high school principal. Allowing for appropriate boundaries creates respect for the school leader in the principalship. This will help with the mental health of the high school principal, creating an environment that is accommodating for all stakeholders. Finally, the Participants reported a lack of social emotional support. Care should be given to those who assume a leadership role in a school.

### ***Recommendations for Building-Level Administrators***

**Be an Active Member of the Team.** Building-level administrators should consider the team dynamic. Teamwork is critical for progress to occur in the district. By recognizing the workload for all rural principals, building-level administrators must work collaboratively in the interest of the organization as a whole. Participant 1 shared examples of how the chemistry of the administrative team in their district allowed them to create opportunities not offered in other districts during the COVID-19 pandemic. Participant 1 also discussed the ability to place the needs of another principal above theirs because if they had a need, that principal would offer the

same level of support. A global K-12 partnership amongst the administrative team will benefit all parties and create an environment where others will choose to remain.

### ***Recommendations for High School Principals***

Rural high school principals currently in the role know the difficulties of the job and have first-hand knowledge of how to remain in the position.

**Build Relationships.** This study revealed that the primary reason why rural principals stay in the position is because of the relationships created. Rural high school principals have a unique opportunity to develop relationships that benefit all stakeholders. Participant 4 detailed the connection to families and the community by building relationships. Having an existing relationship made the more difficult tasks of the principalship easier. Building relationships also create opportunities for students to be connected to the community through programs and donations. All four Participants cited relationship building as the key element to sustainability in the rural principalship.

**Set Boundaries.** This study revealed that a clear boundary needs to be set between work and home. Family time and attending important events were a priority for each principal interviewed. As a leader, setting boundaries permits the faculty and staff to follow the example modeled. Being a principal is not a 24/7 job and should not be treated as such. Setting personal boundaries allows for better mental health and control over separating the principal's professional and personal life.

**Participate in Mentorship.** Mentorship is an opportunity to grow as a professional. Seek mentorship relationships if formal ones are not offered. Participant 3 stated that mentorship is important. Mentorship can be formal or informal. Additionally, look for principal groups through

BOCES for additional support as a leader. The Participants stated that this job is unsuccessful if the principal works alone.

**Understand your Students.** Poverty is prominent in rural areas. This presents a different perspective for the rural principal, who is responsible for facilitating a high level of education to the students, as well as being required to meet the students' basic needs. In addition to the students lacking basic essentials, the principal must attempt to break the cycle of poverty with programming and mindset. By orchestrating unique programming, the rural principal can empower the students, build their self-efficacy, and provide a skill set for the workforce. Rural principals must embrace this and look for out-of-the-box approaches to providing opportunities and meeting the students' needs.

### ***Recommendations for Aspiring Administrators***

Aspiring administrators need to experience an authentic internship in their area of interest. Due to its size, the ability to connect and build authentic relationships is more feasible in a rural school. Rural leadership offers opportunities for smaller classes and one-of-a-kind academic programming.

**Understand the Rural Setting.** Rural leadership differs from urban and rural leadership because of the location, limited resources, and other barriers. Challenges that face the rural administrator include poverty and rural culture mindset. Participant 4 spoke about the mindset of parents who do not value the high school diploma. The challenge is to involve the family in the educational process and to show the value of completion.

The school is the primary provider of basic essentials for many students. Participants 2 and 4 state that this includes food, warmth, clothing, hygiene products, mental health care, and



other needs. Participant 4 shared that educating some students is challenging because they are homeless or living in squalor.

Being intentional in the areas identified by the data allows for positive self-efficacy and allows for these rural high school principals to remain in their positions long-term. To fully answer the research questions presented, all Participants stated that self-efficacy does play a role in their decision to stay in the challenging role of rural high-school principal.

### ***Recommendations for Higher Education Institutions***

**Require More Rural-Specific Internship Experiences.** Enhance current Certificate of Advanced Study programs to incorporate more specific internship experiences to include rural settings and rural challenges. Include requirements that expose the candidate to the challenges of the rural education setting.

### ***Recommendations for Future Research***

To expand the scope of this study, additional research is recommended. Due to the limitations of this study, the following are recommendations for further research.

**Expand the Number of Participants.** Although the information provided gave essential information regarding the sustainability of the rural high school principal, only four Participants were included. Expanding the number of Participants may provide different responses or may reinforce this study's findings.

**Include Participants of Different Ethnicity.** The Participants in this study were all white. While the Participants' responses corresponded to much of the research on rural leadership, the perspective of a marginalized race or ethnicity will provide a different perspective on leadership sustainability.

**Add a Questionnaire Regarding Academic Achievement, Population, and Access to Resources.** More information on academic achievement, population status, and access to resources can provide specific data that quantifies the severity of the challenges in the rural setting.

**Conduct a Qualitative Study of High School Principals in Urban or Suburban Areas.** Gaining the perspective of other locales would provide comparison information. A study of this magnitude would provide an opportunity to make more accurate generalizations regarding why high school principals remain in the position.

**Expand the Study to include Rural Principals of All Levels.** The perspective of the building-level administrator at any level contributes to the literature. Rural principals at the elementary and middle school level may have additional information that can inform the results. It is recommended that this research be replicated at the elementary and middle school levels.

**Conduct a Study of Rural Superintendents.** Comparing the findings of this study with that of rural superintendents may yield results that can be used to improve rural New York State districts.

**Conduct a Study Regarding Tenure in Rural Schools.** Comparing the findings of this study with urban and suburban tenure length would provide information specific to rural turnover and tenure length.

## **Conclusion**

Longevity and career sustainability prove to be ongoing problems in education. Rural high school principals are faced with a complex, challenging role. Studies have focused on the barriers and the reasons why rural principals have left the role. Studies have not demonstrated why rural high school principals stay in their challenging positions. By interviewing four Upstate

New York rural high school principals, the lived experience provided perspective on why they stay and what contributes to their longevity.

Research shows that a turnover in the principalship leads to a turnover of teachers and, at times, lower student achievement. In addition to the cost of replacement, there is an educational loss because the new principal has to learn the environment and establish their leadership style. It is shown that the retention of the high school principal positively influences all stakeholders.

Exploring the lived experience of the four rural high school principals who have been in their positions for 4 years or more allowed for insight into what qualities are essential for fostering positive self-efficacy and, in turn, assisting in keeping these leaders in their roles. By examining the research collected, specific recommendations were made for career sustainability in the role of the high school principal.

Based on the findings of this study, rural high school principals need specific components to build self-efficacy. Being intentional in the areas identified by the themes allows for positive self-efficacy and allows for these rural high school principals to remain in their positions long-term. First, the Participants identified the ways in which they are able to stay in rural schools. It is recommended that the flexibility rural high school principals demonstrate in order to create a family culture in their schools be reciprocated. The findings found that in addition to flexibility, school leaders need positive feedback and praise to build positive self-efficacy.

Additionally, rural high school principals need shared leadership, collaboration, and a transparent chain of command. Allowing for appropriate boundaries creates respect for the school leader in the principalship. Finally, it is recommended that set working hours and a home/life balance are positively reinforced expectations for the rural high school principal. This

will help with the mental health of the high school principal, creating an environment that is accommodating for all stakeholders.

This study aimed to identify why rural high school principals remain in their positions and whether self-efficacy played a part in this decision. By exploring this, hiring practices can be reevaluated to include the themes and subthemes that were significant in retaining these individuals. The commonalities of the themes and subthemes may allow for implementing practices that help retain individuals in the principalship role. This study adds to the academic literature as there is limited research on the sustainability of rural high school principals.

The results found in this study are important to consider when evaluating retention and succession plans for these administrators, as the education field as a whole continues to face a decline in the number of qualified, certified applicants. Due to the shortage of educators in the field, continued research on retaining educators may provide insight into hiring practices. This type of research could assist with the turnover of educators in rural schools. This study has determined that self-efficacy does impact the ability of rural high school principals to remain in their positions despite the challenges and barriers encountered daily.



## References

- Alase, A. (2017). The interpretive phenomenological analysis (IPA): A guide to a good qualitative research approach. *International Journal of Education & Literacy Studies*, 5(2), 9-19.
- Bailey, J. P., & Schurz, J. (2020). COVID-19 is creating a personnel crisis. *American Enterprise Institute*. <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED606250.pdf>
- Bandura, A. J. (1977). *Social learning theory*. Prentice Hall.
- Bandura, A. J. (1997). *Self-Efficacy: The exercise of control*. W.H. Freeman and Company.
- Beausaert, S., Froehlich, D. E., Devos, C., & Riley, P. (2016). Effects of support on stress and burnout in school principals. *Educational Research*, 58(4), 347-365.
- Berkowicz, J., & Myers, A. (2015). Principals have a complex job. *Education Week*. <http://edweek.org/leadership/opinion-principals-have-a-complex-job/2015/01>
- Biglan, A. (1987). A behavior-analytic critique of Bandura's self-efficacy theory. *The Behavior Analyst*, 10(1), 1–15. <https://doi.org/10.1007/BF03392402>
- Bottery, M. (2016). Not so simple: The threats to leadership sustainability. *Management in Education*, 30(3), 97-101. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0892020616653059>
- Bright, D. J. (2018). The rural gap: The need for exploration and intervention. *Journal of School Counseling*, 16(21), 1-18.
- Burkhauser, S. (2017). How much do school principals matter when it comes to teacher working conditions? *Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis*, 39(1), 126-145.
- Christians, C. G., & Carey, J. W. (1989). The logic and aims of qualitative research. *Research Methods in Mass Communication*, 48(4), 354-374.
- Cieminski, A. (2018). Practices that support leadership succession and principal retention. *Education Leadership Review*, 19(1), 21-41.

- Coelli, M., & Green, D. A. (2012). Leadership effects: School principals and student outcomes. *Economics of Education Review*, 31, 92-109.
- Cook, J. W. (2014). Sustainable school leadership: The teachers' perspective. *National Council of Professors of Educational Administration*. Retrieved 28 September 2022, from <https://eric.ed.gov/?id=EJ1024112>
- Creswell, J. W. (2012). *Qualitative inquiry & research design: Choosing among five approaches* (4th ed.). Sage.
- Davidson, A. S. (2013). Phenomenological approaches in psychology and health sciences. *Qualitative Research Psychology*, 10(3), 318-339.
- DeJong, D., Grundmeyer, T., & Yankey, J. (2017). Identifying and addressing themes of job dissatisfaction for secondary principals. *School Leadership & Management*, 37(4), 354-371.
- Federici, R. A., & Skaalvik, E. M. (2012). Principal self-efficacy: Relations with burnout, job satisfaction and motivation to quit. *Social Psychology Education*, 15, 295-320.
- Gajda, R., & Militello, M. (2008). Recruiting and retaining school principals: What can we learn from practicing administrators. *AASA Journal of Scholarship and Practice*, 5(2). Retrieved 28 September 2022 from <https://eric.ed.gov/?id=EJ831151>
- Gliner, J. A., Morgan, G. A., & Leech, N. L. (2017). *Research methods in applied settings: An integrated approach to design and analysis*. Routledge.
- Grissom, J. A., & Bartanen, B. (2019). Principal effectiveness and principal turnover. *Association for Education Finance and Policy*, 14(3), 355-382. [https://doi.org/10.1162/edfp\\_a\\_00256](https://doi.org/10.1162/edfp_a_00256)
- Grissom, J. A., Egalite, A. J., & Lindsay, C. A. (2021). How principals affect students and schools: A systematic synthesis of two decades of research. *The Wallace Foundation*. Retrieved 28 September 2022 from <https://www.wallacefoundation.org/knowledge-center/Documents/How-Principals-Affect-Students-and-Schools.pdf>
- Grissom, J. A., & Mitani, H. (2016). Salary, performance, and superintendent turnover. *Educational Administration Quarterly*, 52(3), 351-391. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0013161X15627677>.
- Hansen, C. (2018). Why rural principals leave. *The Rural Educator*, 39(1), 41-53. <https://doi.org/10.35608/ruraled.v39i1.214>

- Huff, T. S., Brockmeier, L. L., Leech, D. W., Martin, E. P., Pate, J. L., & Siegrist, G. (2011). Principal and school-level effects on student achievement. *National Teacher Education Journal*, 4(12), 67-76.
- Irwin, V., Zhang, J., Wang, X., Hein, S., Wang, K., Roberts, A., York, C., Barmer, A., Bullock Mann, F., Dilig, R., & Parker, S. (2021). *Report on the condition of education 2021* (NCES 2021-144). U.S. Department of Education. Washington, DC: National Center for Education Statistics. Retrieved September 25, 2021, from <https://nces.ed.gov/pubsearch/pubinfo.asp?pubid=2021144>
- Kafka, J. (2009). The principalship in historical perspective. *Peabody Journal of Education*, 84, 318-330.
- Kalu, M. E. (2019). How does "subjective I" influence a qualitative research question, theoretical approach and methodologies? *Global Journal of Pure and Applied Sciences*, 25, 97-101.
- Kearney, W. S., Valadez, A., & Garcia, L. (2012). Leadership for the long-haul: The impact of administrator longevity on student achievement. *School Leadership Review*, 7(2).
- Klocko, B. A., & Justis, R. J. (2019). Leadership challenges of the rural school principal. *The Rural Educator*, 40(3), 23-34. <https://doi:10.35608/ruraled.v40i3.571>
- Klocko, B. A., & Wells, C. M. (2015). Workload pressures of principals: A focus on renewal, support, and mindfulness. *NASSP Bulletin*, 99(4).
- Lambersky, J. (2016). Understanding the human side of school leadership: Principals' impact on teachers' morale, self-efficacy, stress, and commitment. *Leadership and Policy in Schools*, 15(4), 379-405.
- Lane, J., Everts, S. S., Hefner, Y., Phillips, R., & Scott, K. (2021). Crises of care: School leaders and narratives of compassion fatigue. *Journal of Organizational Psychology*, 21(1).
- Leithwood, K., & Jantzi, D. (2008). Linking leadership to student learning: The contributions of leader efficacy. *Educational Administration Quarterly*, 44(4), 496-528.
- Levin, S., & Bradley, K. (2019). Understanding and addressing principal turnover: A review of the research. *Learning Policy Institute*. Retrieved 28 September 2022 from <https://learningpolicyinstitute.org/product/nassp-understanding-addressing-principal-turnover-review-research-report>



- Levin, S., Scott, C., Yang, M., Leung, M., & Bradley, K. (2020). Supporting a strong, stable, principal workforce: What matters and what can be done. *National Association of Secondary School Principals & Learning Policy Institute*. Retrieved 28 September 2022 from <https://learningpolicyinstitute.org/product/supporting-strong-stable-principal-workforce-brief>
- Maponya, T. J. (2020). The instructional leadership role of the school principal on learners' academic achievement. *African Educational Research Journal*, 8(2), 183-193.
- Miles, M. B., & Huberman, A. M. (1994). *Qualitative data analysis: An expanded sourcebook*. Sage.
- Mitani, H. (2018). Principals' working conditions, job stress, and turnover behaviors under NCLB accountability pressure. *Educational Administration Quarterly*, 54(5), 822-862.
- National Center for Education Statistics. (2022). *High school graduation rates*. Retrieved 28 September 2022 from <https://nces.ed.gov/fastfacts/display.asp?id=805#:~:text=The%20U.S.%20average%20ACGR%20for,percent%20in%20Iowa%20and%20Alabama>
- New Teacher Center. (2018). *Churn: The high cost of principal turnover*. Retrieved 28 September 2022 from <https://newteachercenter.org/resources/churn-the-high-cost-of-principal-turnover/>
- New York State Department of Education. (n.d.). *New York State graduation data 4 year outcome as of August 2019*. Retrieved 28 September 2022, from <https://data.nysed.gov/gradrate/php>
- New York State Department of Education. (n.d.). *New York State Data report card*. Retrieved 28 September 2022 from <https://data.nysed.gov/profile.php?instid=800000035761>
- Norton, M. S. (2003). Let's keep our quality school principals on the job. *High School Journal*, (86)2, 50-56.
- Papa, Jr., F. (2007). Why do principals change schools? A multivariate analysis of principal retention. *Leadership and Policy in Schools*, 6, 267-290. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15700760701263725>
- Pendola, A., & Fuller, A. (2018). Principal stability and the rural divide. *Journal of Research in Rural Education*, 34(1).

- Postma, K. L., & Babo, G. (2019). The influence of self-efficacy on principal job satisfaction: A study of one northeastern USA state. *ISEA*, 47(1).
- Ruggirello, A. (2022, February 23). New research points to a looming principal shortage. *Wallace Foundation*. Retrieved 28 September 2022 from <https://www.wallacefoundation.org/news-and-media/blog/pages/new-research-points-to-a-looming-principal-shortage.aspx>
- Schaefer, A., Mattingly, M. J., & Johnson, K. M. (2016). Child poverty higher and more persistent in rural America. *The Carsey School of Public Policy at the University of New Hampshire*. <https://doi.org/10.34051/p/2020.256>
- Sebastian J., & Allensworth, E. (2012). The influence of principal leadership on classroom instruction and student learning: A study of mediated pathways to learning. *Educational Administration Quarterly*, 48(4), 626-663.
- Skaalvik, C. (2020). School principal self-efficacy for instructional leadership: Relations with engagement, emotional exhaustion and motivation to quit. *Social Psychology of Education*, 23, 479-498.
- Sparks, S. D. (2016). Principals work 60-hour weeks, study finds. *Education Week*. Retrieved 28 September 2022 from <http://edweek.org/leadership/principals-work-60-hour-weeks-study-finds/2016/11>
- Steward, J. (2014). Sustaining emotional resilience for school leadership. *School Leadership & Management*, 34(1), 52-68. Retrieved 28 September 2022 from <https://doi.org/10.1080/13632434.2013.849686>
- Sun, J. (2004). Understanding the impact of perceived principal leadership style on teacher commitment. *ISEA*, 32(2), 18-31.
- Tekleselassie, A. A., & Villarreal, P. (2011). Career mobility and departure intentions among school principals in the United States: Incentives and disincentives. *Leadership and Policy in Schools*, 10, 251-293.
- Tran, H. (2017). The impact of pay satisfaction and school achievement on high school principals' turnover intentions. *Educational Management Administration & Leadership*, 45(4), 621-638.
- Valentine, J. W., & Prater, M. (2011). Instructional, transformational, and managerial leadership and student achievement: High school principals make a difference. *NASSP Bulletin*, 95(1), 5-30.

- Wertz, F. J., Charmaz, K., McMullen, L. M., Josselson, R., Anderson, R., & McSpladden, E. (2017). *Five Ways of Doing Qualitative Analysis*. The Guilford Press.
- Williams, D. M., & Rhodes, R. E. (2016). The confounded self-efficacy construct: Conceptual analysis and recommendations for future research. *Health Psychology Review, 10*(2), 113-28. doi: 10.1080/17437199.2014.941998
- Woo, A., & Steiner, E. D. (2022). The well-being of secondary school principals one year into the COVID-19 pandemic. *RAND Corporation*. Retrieved 28 September 2022 from [https://www.rand.org/pubs.research\\_reports/RRA827-6/html](https://www.rand.org/pubs.research_reports/RRA827-6/html).
- Wood, J. N., Finch, K., & Mirecki, R. (2013). If we get you, how can we keep you? Problems with recruiting and retaining rural administrators. *Rural Educator, 34*(2). Retrieved 28 September 2022 from <https://doi.org/10.35608/ruraled.v34i2.399>
- Yan, R. (2010). The influence of working conditions on principal turnover in K-12 public schools. *Educational Administration Quarterly, 56*(1), 89-122.

## Appendix A

### Introduction Letter to Participants

Dear Educator:

Thank you for your willingness to participate in my research study. My name is Raina Hinman and I am a doctoral candidate in the St. John Fisher University Ed. D. program in Executive Leadership. As part of my doctoral research, I am conducting a study to understand the perception of rural high school principals regarding career sustainability. The study will focus on the lived experiences of rural secondary high school principals across Upstate New York who have chosen to remain in their positions for four or more years, specifically focusing on self-efficacy.

The study will be conducted as in-person one-on-one interviews. These interviews will last no longer than 60 minutes and will be recorded so that data can be transcribed and used in analysis. To ensure the confidentiality of your interview, I will conduct the interview in a setting of your choice. Your recording will only be transcribed and heard by me and processed by Otter.ai. Otter.ai is a digital transcription service, in which human employees do not access transcripts or recordings without explicit consent or request from me. The recording of the interview will be kept until the full transcription is complete. At that time, the recording will be deleted, and the transcription of the interview will be kept on an encrypted document on a password protected computer. All files and data from this study will be destroyed in three years as required by St. John Fisher University's Institutional Review Board (IRB).

Your participation in this study is completely voluntary and you may terminate your participation at any time without any penalty. Your participation is confidential, and your identity will be protected, as all Participants and correlating districts will be assigned a number. Any identifying information provided about yourself, your district, staff, students, etc. will be anonymized to protect the confidentiality of all.

There is no compensation associated with participation. There is no more than minimal risk for participating in this study.

If you are interested in participating, the informed consent form is attached to this email. Please read through this form, complete the last page, and return this last page to me at this email address: [rrh00063@sjf.edu](mailto:rrh00063@sjf.edu). For further information about the study or any questions you may have, please contact me, Raina Hinman at 315-552-7526 or by emailing [rrh00063@sjf.edu](mailto:rrh00063@sjf.edu). The research study has been reviewed and approved by St. John Fisher University's Institutional Review Board (IRB). Thank you again for your willingness to participate in this voluntary research study.

Sincerely,  
Raina Hinman  
Doctoral Candidate, St. John Fisher University

## Appendix B

### Interest Form Questionnaire (Google Forms)

Thank you for your interest in my study: "Seeking Sustainable Leadership: An Interpretive Phenomenological Study of Why Rural High School Principals Choose to Stay." Please fill out the form below to express your interest. If you are chosen for this study, you will receive an email to set up a time and location convenient for you to participate in a 60-minute face-to-face interview. I appreciate your time and interest.

Email \_\_\_\_\_

Name \_\_\_\_\_

Contact Number \_\_\_\_\_

Position/Title \_\_\_\_\_

How many years have you been in your current position? \_\_\_\_\_

Which Upstate New York area do you work in?

- Central New York
- Western New York
- Capital Region
- North Country
- Mohawk Valley
- Southern Tier
- Finger Lakes

Are you willing to participate in a 60-minute face-to-face interview with the researcher? (The interview will be in January or February 2023.) \_\_\_ Yes \_\_\_ No

Are you willing to participate in a 30-minute Zoom or telephone follow-up interview if necessary? \_\_\_ Yes \_\_\_ No

## Appendix C

### Demographic Interview Questionnaire

1. Age:
  - Under 25 years old
  - 25-34 years old
  - 35-44 years old
  - 45-54 years old
  - 55-59 years old
  - 60-64 years old
  - 65-74 years old
  
2. Educational Level: (please select the highest attained)
  - Masters Degree
  - Certificate of Advanced Study
  - Post-Graduate Degree
  - Doctorate
  
3. Location by area:
  - Western NY
  - Central NY
  - Capital Region
  - North Country
  - Finger Lakes
  - Southern Tier
  - Mohawk Valley

## Appendix D

### Interview Protocol and Questions

#### Interview Protocol:

- Obtain signature for consent prior to the interview
- Introduction of the Study
- Explain my role as the qualitative researcher
- Present overview of IRB protocols and policies, remind the Participant of their rights
- Frame the purpose of the study
- Explain the next steps
  - Receipt of transcript to be reviewed for accuracy
  - Potential follow-up interview via Zoom or phone
- Thank Participant for their contribution to my study
  - Provide contact information again to Participant

#### Interview Questions:

This interview is being conducted to help develop an understanding of rural high school principals' perceptions of career sustainability. The interview questions are by exploring your lived experience as it relates to your tenure as a rural high school principal.

- How long have you been an administrator? What district are you currently employed at and how long have you been in your current position? Have you always worked in a rural setting? Can you please share the reasons why you remain in a rural educational environment?
- How would you describe your experience as a rural high school principal?

- What are some of the benefits to being a rural principal? How do you utilize this to be successful?
- What are some of the challenges you face as a rural principal? How do you use these challenges to promote change?
- Self-efficacy is the inherent belief of one's ability to successfully accomplish a set goal. Do you think self-efficacy plays a role in the longevity and sustainability of a high school principal? If so, can you explain? Can you share an example of a time where self-efficacy was a factor for you in your profession?
- What type of mentorship do you have access to?
- Please share with me what type of feedback you get on your job performance.
- Can you please share with me why you choose to stay as a rural high school principal? Can you tell me of a time where you considered leaving your position? If so, can you describe the circumstances that prompted you to question staying? Can you share any factors that might change your mind about remaining in your position?
- Is there any other information you are interested in providing for this study regarding the reason you choose to stay in your position as a rural high school principal?



## Appendix E

### Statement of Informed Consent for Adult Participants



### St. John Fisher University Institutional Review Board

#### Statement of Informed Consent for Adult Participants

#### Seeking sustainable leadership: An interpretive phenomenological study of why rural high school principals choose to stay

##### SUMMARY OF KEY INFORMATION:

- Voluntary Research: You are being asked to be in a research study of the sustainability of rural high school principals conducted through Saint John Fisher University. As with all research studies, participation is voluntary.
- The purpose of this study is to develop an understanding of rural high school principals' lived experience of self-efficacy in their role and the reasons why they stay in their role.
- Approximately 4-6 people will take part in this study. The results will be used for completion of a doctoral study regarding sustainability of rural high school principals in Upstate New York.
- If you agree to take part in this study, you will be involved in this study for one 60-minute face-to-face interview. If follow-up information is needed, it will be conducted via Zoom for no more than 30 minutes.
- If you choose to participate, the researcher will meet you in a location of your choice to conduct one 60-minute interview. This will be the only interview, unless a follow-up is needed. If a follow-up is needed, the researcher will request a Zoom interview of no more than 30 minutes.
- We believe this study has no more than minimal risk.
- You may not directly benefit from this research; however, we hope that your participation in this study will further the study in order to add to the literature regarding sustainability of secondary high-school principals. Additionally, the information collected will benefit other school organizations in the advancement of knowledge regarding the lived-experience of tenured rural high school principals in Upstate New York.

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

You are being asked to be in a research study of the sustainability of rural high school principals. This study is being conducted at a location chosen by the Participant. This study is being

conducted by: Raina Hinman, (EdD) Doctoral Candidate supervised by Dr. Daniele Lyman-Torres in the EdD program in Executive Leadership at Saint John Fisher University.

You were selected as a possible Participant because of your tenure as an Upstate New York high school principal in the same position for 4 years or more.

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

## **PROCEDURES:**

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

- Confirm that you meet the eligibility criteria:
  - High School Principal (grades 9-12) who has held the same position for 4 or more years
  - Works in one of the regions in Upstate New York (Central, Western, Capital Region, North Country, Mohawk Valley, Southern Tier, Finger Lakes)
- Participate in one 60-minute one-on-one interview in person at the location of the Participant's choice.
  - After returning this consent form, you will receive an email with a link to Calendly to select a date and time that is convenient for you. A location must also be selected.
  - A possible Zoom follow-up may occur within 14 days. This Zoom will take no more than 30-minutes. Confidentiality parameters from the initial interview will remain the same.
  - Interview will take place January 2023-February 2023.
  - Interviews will be audio recorded. Follow-up interviews will be video-recorded. All recordings will be deleted once the transcription process is complete. All research data will remain secure and confidential during the study.

## **COMPENSATION/INCENTIVES:**

You will not receive compensation/incentive for participation in this study.

## **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.

The only exception to maintaining confidentiality would be if you indicate that there is immediate and serious danger to the health or physical safety of yourself or others. In that case, a professional may have to be contacted. We would always talk to you about this first.

Identifiable research records will be stored securely and only the researcher(s) will have access to the records. All data will be kept secure in a locked drawer in the researcher's home. Additionally, all electronic records will be kept on a password-protected computer in a password protected file 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.

Recordings will be accessed by the researcher only. Participants will remain confidential using a numbering system in lieu of a name. Districts associated with the Participant will also remain confidential using a numbering system in lieu of a name. Recordings will be used to gain perspective into the lived experience of the Participant, specifically focusing on self-efficacy. Recordings will be erased after the transcript is checked for accuracy.

The data collected in this study as well as the results of the research can be used for scientific purposes and may be published (in ways that will not reveal who I am). An anonymized version of the data from this study may be made publicly accessible, without obtaining additional written consent. The anonymized data can be used for re-analysis but also for additional analyses, by the same or other researchers. The purpose and scope of this secondary use is not foreseeable. Any personal information that could directly identify an individual will be removed before data and results are made public. Personal information will be protected closely so no one will be able to connect individual responses and any other information that identifies an individual. All personally identifying information collected about an individual will be stored separately from all other data.

#### **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 Saint John Fisher University. 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: Raina Hinman. If you have questions, **you are encouraged** to contact the researcher(s) at 315-552-7526 or rrrh00063@sjf.edu. The supervisor for this study is Dr. Daniele Lyman-Torres. She can be reached at 585-402-9665, and via email at dlyman-torres@sjf.edu.

The Institutional Review Board of Saint John Fisher University 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 SJF IRB administrator by phone during normal business hours at (585) 385-8012 or [irb@sjf.edu](mailto:irb@sjf.edu).

**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 audiorecorded transcribed \_\_\_\_\_ Yes \_\_\_\_\_ No*  
*If no, I understand that the researcher will hand scribe responses.*

*I agree to be videorecorded transcribed if a follow-up interview is necessary. \_\_\_\_\_ Yes*  
*\_\_\_\_\_ No*

*If I do not wish to be videotaped, I will inform the researcher, who will permit the video to be turned off.*

Signature: \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Signature of Investigator: \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

***Please keep a copy of this informed consent for your records.***